

Questions for Wednesday's Reading:

"An Essay on the Principle of Population," Thomas Robert Malthus.

"Big" Question:

Malthus is writing in 1798, over 200 years ago. On page 15 he states that "the great question that is now at issue" is "whether man shall henceforth start forwards with accelerated velocity towards illimitable, and hitherto unconceived improvement, or be condemned to a perpetual oscillation between happiness and misery." What was Malthus's answer to this question? Was he correct? Over the past 200 years has there been real progress in the human condition?

Specific Questions:

Malthus bases his theory of population on what two "fixed laws of nature"?

Does Malthus's contention (bottom of p. 17) -- "that the power of population is indefinitely greater than the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man" -- follow from these two fixed laws?

What is a "geometrical ratio"?

What is an "arithmetical ratio"?

On p. 18 (first large paragraph) Malthus contends that "Nature" generously produces the "seeds of life" but is stingy in providing nourishment. What does Malthus contend are the consequences of this imbalance for "plants and animals"? What are the consequences for mankind? Do you agree?

Top of page 19. When Malthus talks about "society" is it always one composed of different classes? Are there different "checks" on the reproduction of different classes?

On p. 19 Malthus discusses the United States. What lesson does Malthus draw from the US experience?

P. 20, bottom. Malthus sees plants and animals being driven to reproduce by "a powerful instinct." In man, this instinct can be tempered by "reason." If a man can't provide for offspring, he might hesitate to form an "early attachment to one woman." Why does Malthus think such a hesitation to marry almost always "produces vice"? What do think Malthus is referring to when he says that "vicious customs" arise when early marriage does not take place?

Top of p. 21. Does he think that reason ever is strong enough to really contain population growth?

Middle of p. 21. Malthus argues that an "oscillation" in the condition of the average man has long existed in all "old states." What is he talking about?

Bottom of p. 21. Malthus lists the measures that we would need to chart the condition of the average man. Have we actually been collecting these measures for some time? For the past 200 years do they show "oscillation" or "progress"?

Page 22, middle. According to Malthus, why is equality in a society worse than inequality?

Top, p. 23; bottom of p. 24. Is population pressing on the means of subsistence right **now**? Or is this a future problem according to Malthus?

Top p. 24. Is a threat of poverty/starvation needed to "goad" the majority to work hard?

Top, p. 25. Is Condorcet really arguing that rational individuals will use "promiscuous concubinage" or "something else as unnatural" to control their family size? (See bottom of p. 7, top of p. 8 in the Condorcet reading.)

Bottom of p. 25. Has there been no increase in the natural duration of the human life?

P. 27. Have advances in plant/animal breeding, gene mapping, the Human Genome Project, etc. weakened in any degree Malthus's observations about the extent of biological change that man might be able to induce?

Pp. 29 - 32. Is "moral evil" necessary for the production of "moral excellence"? Do miracles take away man's free will? Does evil -- disease, starvation, conflict -- exist to spur man to "activity"? Is the goal of human perfectibility, then, a bad one?