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ON THE PRINCIPLE  
OF POPULATION · BY  
T. R. MALTHUS INTRODUCTON  
BY W. T. LAYTON · VOL. Ä

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HOW  
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AN ESSAY  
ON  
POPULATION  
BY THE REV.  
T. R. MALTHUS  
VOLUME ONE



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## INTRODUCTION

It has been justly remarked that few writers have been so much discussed as Malthus by persons who have never read his works; few men have been so violently abused both by his own and by subsequent generations; and few, needless to say, have been so hopelessly misrepresented. No one, among classical writers, therefore, has a better claim to speak for himself through the pages of the Everyman Library.

Malthus's *Essay on Population*, which was first published anonymously in 1798, arose out of a discussion with his father on the social philosophy expounded by Godwin in *Political Justice* and in the pages of the *Enquirer*. Godwin appears to have been influenced by Rousseau and other French writers of the Revolutionary era, and strongly believed in the power of human reason to bring humanity to a state of perfection. Like his more famous successor, Robert Owen, he maintained that the evils of society were due to human institutions, and in particular to the existence of private property. In a society free from these hindrances there would be an abundance for everybody, and all reasonable needs would be satisfied if every one worked half an hour a day. In his system of communistic anarchy, where each would receive according to his needs, vice and misery, which flourish on selfishness and greed, would disappear.

But to Malthus this very idealistic theory ignored some of the most fundamental traits in human nature; and, in particular, would inevitably come to grief by reason of what he called the "principle" of population. The doctrine that will for ever be associated with his name declares that there is a universal tendency for population to outrun the means of subsistence. In the state of society imagined by Godwin, the removal of the restraints of marriage and the abolition of the necessity for parents to make provision for their own children would cause so rapid an increase of numbers that the society would soon be reduced to starvation. The theory as it first presented itself to Malthus's mind is most clearly enunciated in the opening chapters of the first edition. "I

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think," he says, "I may fairly make two postulata. First, That food is necessary to the existence of man. Secondly, That the passion between the sexes is necessary, and will remain nearly in its present state." The former need has never been questioned, and though Godwin conjectured that the passion between the sexes might in time be extinguished, there was no evidence that any progress had or was likely to be made in this direction. "Assuming, then, my postulata as granted, I say, that the power of population is indefinitely greater than the power of the earth to produce subsistence for man." The argument is then amplified by an appeal to numbers. "Population, when unchecked, increases in a geometrical ratio. Subsistence only increases in an arithmetical ratio. A slight acquaintance with numbers will show the immensity of the first power in comparison with the second." This illustration, which will be found more fully elaborated on page 10, has been justly criticised on the ground that the seed of animals and plants is also capable of increase in geometrical ratio under favourable circumstances, and obviously there is no fundamental difference in this respect between man, animals, and plants.

But the argument does not rest for its validity on this question of ratios. Animals and plants are prevented from attaining their full potential increase, the latter by lack of space, the former by lack of food. "The race of plants and the race of animals shrink under this great restrictive law. And the race of man cannot, by any efforts of reason, escape from it. Among plants and animals its effects are waste of seed, sickness, and premature death. Among mankind misery and vice." These checks to population were subsequently analysed in detail; those which prevent an increase of births being distinguished from those positive forces, such as war, famine, and pestilence, which reduce the numbers of the already existing population. The exposition concludes with these emphatic propositions:—"That population cannot increase without the means of subsistence is a proposition so evident that it needs no illustration. *That population does invariably increase where there are the means of subsistence, the history of every people that ever existed will abundantly prove.*"

I have italicised this last sentence because it is the point around which controversy turns. Malthus here asserts as a fact that population always increases up to the limits of the means of subsistence. The important question is whether it