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A Biological Analysis of Malthusian Law

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A Biological Analysis of Malthusian Law

Known for his work on political economy, Thomas Malthus published *An Essay on the Principle of Population* in 1798. In it, he establishes two fundamental ideas: “Population, when unchecked, increases in a geometrical ratio. Subsistence increases only in an arithmetical ratio” (454). From them, Malthus concludes that because men must eat to survive and reproduction will not end, there must be some natural force that checks the population and prevents man’s extinction (454). His answer is that by natural law suffering, such as misery, disease, and starvation, limits the surplus population (454). Malthus then pursues a moral track and attacks the poor laws of England for working contrary to the hand of nature, reasoning that if government policies do not heed his theory, they will only produce more suffering (455-6). In other words, Malthus champions a policy of non-intervention over social welfare as the way to create the best quality of life.

These ideas reappear in the unintended context of biology when Charles Darwin introduces his principle of natural selection as “the doctrine of Malthus, applied to the whole animal and vegetable kingdoms” (*Origins* 7)—that is to say, Darwin recognizes that he merely expands the natural law of Malthus to all organic species. Viewed from this light, it becomes evident that Darwin requires the validity of Malthus’s ideas for the theory of evolution to be plausible. Without the natural law of Malthus to facilitate natural selection, Darwin has no adequate way to explain “how the innumerable species inhabiting this world have been

modified” (*Origin* 6) or why one inherited variation may be favored over another (*Origin* 7). There has to be a powerful force like suffering to filter out which individuals of a species will reproduce. However, since natural selection is merely an expansion of Malthus’s natural law, it must also apply to man, and this reasoning effectively reduces the human race to an animal species (*Descent* 689). Unsurprisingly, Darwin notes that his theory of evolution “will . . . be highly distasteful to many” (*Descent* 689).

Yet, while Darwin’s ideas in *On the Origins of Species* (1858) and *The Descent of Man* (1871) plunges the scientific world into controversy, Darwin unexpectedly also shifts attention to Malthus. At first glance, it seems that utilitarianism motivates Malthus to attack the poor laws, and despite his harsh claims, he may just be revealing the necessary pains to improve the standards of living. However, it seems contradictory to argue that our quality of life can be improved by following a political doctrine based on the idea that nature ordains suffering as eternal. Worse yet, Darwin’s use of Malthusian law demonstrates that it reduces men to nothing but animals, which strips mankind of its identity as a moral beings. One instinctively questions how this law can benefit man if it dehumanizes him. But when we use Darwin’s two chief works on evolution to test *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, we clarify these paradoxes of Malthusian theory. Although Malthus seems to encourage a better quality of life, Darwin dispels that fantasy of progress when he cites Malthus’s natural law as the bedrock of natural selection. He illuminates that Malthusian theory cannot achieve a moral nor utilitarian end because by reducing man to an animal, the only end that it can achieve is the survival of mankind.

But before we can perceive the issues with Malthus’s theory, we must first understand his political ideology of non-intervention. Since by natural law human suffering checks the population, when the state provides social welfare, it pointlessly resists the way the universe

works (Malthus 455). To justify this assertion, Malthus observes that the English poor laws actually worsen the plight of the poor by allowing them to raise families without the necessary financial ability and by reducing the quantity of resources received by productive workers (455). So if resisting this natural law produces only more suffering, then the best conditions that we can obtain are achieved when state policies do not counter nature. Thus, instead of helping the poor, the government should always view “dependent poverty” (Malthus 456) as undesirable and thereby strengthen “incentives to sobriety . . . industry, and . . . happiness” (Malthus 456). In this way, Malthus advocates a passive government, for regardless of how horrid the quality of life, nature has ordained the situation to check the surplus population. Only by obeying this natural law can the standards of living improve.

To establish support for this political doctrine, Malthus reveals the moral faults of the poor laws, believing that they will compel us to censure the poor laws and accept his ideas. He attacks the poor laws for providing the poor their needs because they do not require a reciprocal contribution to the economy, thereby fomenting a “carelessness, and want of frugality observable among the poor . . . [T]hey seldom think of the future . . . [and] all that is beyond their present necessities goes . . . to the ale-house” (456). By blaming the poor laws for causing vices like laziness and alcoholism, Malthus raps at our consciences to realize the evils created by opposing his natural law. Logically, the moral solution is to force the poor to be self-sufficient by removing them from the complacency enabled by the poor laws (456). Otherwise, they will have no reason to give up their social benefits and will continue to contribute nothing to society. We have cause to advocate Malthusian policies, and from the way he portrays it, enacting them shall revolutionize the standards of living.

Evidently, moral concerns are central to Malthus's ideology, and it may seem that he does not err in applying his natural law to mankind, for his theory seems conducive to material and moral progress. If the state avoids intervention, then nature eliminates the surplus population. As a result, the population achieves equilibrium with the resources that support it. Nature, however, does not kill indiscriminately, for those who observe diligence instead of depravity survive, and under a passive government, people must work productively to satisfy their needs. When all people work in this manner, the quality of life can only rise. Therefore, the end achieved is the best possible one. Or is it? Malthus fails to recognize a significant implication of his ideas, and it is Darwin that clarifies it for us: Malthus's natural law reduces man to a mere animal. As stated previously, Darwin grounds his theory of evolution upon natural selection, which applies to man because natural selection is just Malthus's natural law applied to all organic life. Although our intellect distances us from animals, man cannot hold a special place in nature, for man is subject to the same population checks as animals. But if man is an animal, what happens to his morality?

Traditionally, morality differentiates man from animal, but Darwin undermines this notion when he shows that animals can evolve into beings with the same moral capacity as humans. Darwin theorizes that morality evolved from the "social instincts" (*Descent* 680), which cause members of social species to "take pleasure in one another's company, warn one another of danger . . . [and] aid one another in many ways" (*Descent* 680). In essence, the social instincts help a species to survive. Through memory, language and the instinctive "greatest-happiness principle" (*Descent* 681), man elaborates his social instincts, turning it into morality (*Descent* 680-1). We ought to notice, however, that morality does not progress far from the social instincts. All morality requires is a developed brain with memory to permit reflection, language

to specify the aid desired, and utilitarian ideas to guide conduct (*Descent* 680-1). None of these parameters are major changes from the social instincts, at least not in the degree that distinguishes bird from fish. Animals already possess a memory, vocal chords, and the social instincts to aid each other. Therefore, the present distinction between man's and animal's morality does not eliminate the possibility that an animal can become moral. If natural selection favors the development of a species' brain and social instincts, then, given many millennia, that species can acquire morality. From this perspective, morality is not a defining human characteristic; it is merely an elaboration of the social instincts.

But if morality is only a more complex version of the social instincts, an instrument for survival, then it no longer constitutes the traditional notion of an absolute good and evil. Indeed, natural selection only considers the survival of humanity as moral, and this distinction invalidates the moral justification of Malthusian theory. When Darwin attributes natural selection to Malthus, Darwin explicitly states a detail only implied in Malthus's essay: "[a]s many more individuals . . . are born than can possibly survive . . . consequently, there is a frequently recurring struggle for existence" (*Origin* 7). The indolent do not die because of moral failings; they only die because people compete against each other to survive. Malthus, however, fails to recognize this struggle because he is concerned only with the end result. We see this ignorance when Malthus claims that the poor laws commit a moral error by allowing workers without sufficient income to raise families, thereby creating "an enemy to all his fellow-labourers" (456). But the only reason that makes the dependent pauper an enemy is that he increases the competition in mankind's struggle for existence, not that he extends "unhappiness and dependence" (Malthus 456) to his family. Indeed, if morality derives from the social instincts, then vice only refers to actions that threaten humanity's survival, not actions that create

individual unhappiness (*Descent* 680-1). Even if we consider the creation of unhappiness as immoral, Malthus completely ignores the emotional gratification of family, which can nullify the unhappiness of poverty. Thus, Malthus cannot be justified in applying his natural law to social reform, for none of his moral reasons is legitimate to his natural law. It only considers the continuation of mankind as moral.

Since Malthus cannot justify the reasons to adopt his political program as moral, the only way left to justify his theory is to achieve a positive end. Even then, however, Darwin reveals that Malthus does not promise a better quality of life; instead, Malthus prescribes a violent atmosphere of social conflict. When Darwin explains natural selection, Darwin merely articulates a mechanism of nature with no moral application. All that is entailed is a cold struggle for existence in which only some will continue their species (*Origin* 51). Thus, “[n]atural selection will not necessarily produce absolute perfection” (*Origin* 154), nor will it ever improve anything else but the likelihood of survival, for evolution has no end but the perpetuation of a species. Herein lays the problem for Malthus. Darwin recognizes his analysis of natural phenomena is only an explanation, but Malthus contorts his natural law into producing a supposedly moral end. Population checks, however, engender a struggle for existence that involves all organic species (*Origin* 51). In essence, this struggle is a war of “either one individual with another of the same species, or with the individuals of distinct species” (*Origin* 51). This revelation undermines Malthus’s claim that giving the poor no help will improve the quality of life because doing so entails a war that pits every man against every man, and such a state cannot be moral in the traditional sense or conducive to a better society. Furthermore, if we leave the poor as they are in their misery, it will accentuate economic differences between them and the upper classes. Social strife, violence, or even civil war may develop. Malthusian theory

can only avoid sparking social conflict by reducing the lower classes to mindless, animalistic behavior, which, however, will still produce immorality and crime, a result that is again undesirable. There is just simply no moral agenda to be taken from this natural law. Whatever end that Malthus can generate will not improve the quality of life. Only conflict results.

The social strife that Malthus creates does not end here, however, but is even more perverse. When we view Darwin's analysis of climate as a response to the government's power over population, we realize that Malthusian policies actually produce the mass destruction of the poor for the benefit of the wealthy. Although Darwin believes climate "to be the most effective of all checks" (*Origin* 55), he points out that climate is not a direct check because it only creates an environment that affects the struggle for existence (*Origin* 55). He reminds us that every species is still "constantly suffering enormous destruction at some period of its life . . . [and] climate acts in main part indirectly by favouring other species" (*Origin* 55-6). Thus, no matter what climate it lives in, a species always experiences a war for survival, and this parallels the state's inability to eliminate the poor's struggle for existence altogether. This war for survival, however, is not merely a person-to-person conflict. Just as climate checks a population by "favouring other species", government does the same with social classes. In other words, this Darwinian view of climate clarifies what Malthus advocates in his political program, demonstrating that it is nothing less than creating a "climate" that will benefit the wealthy by killing off the poor. From this perspective, we understand that the natural law of Malthus does not illuminate how we can improve the quality of man's condition. Instead, it ordains humanity to forever suffer from a war for survival, whether it is between man and man or rich and poor.

All of these revelations about morality and social conflict in Malthusian theory derive from the fact that natural selection is virtually the natural law of Malthus. Thus, by reducing man

to an animal, Darwin punctures the utilitarian reverie that Malthus indulges and demonstrates that nothing but an endless social conflict results from a political ideology of non-intervention. Indeed, how could anything agreeable emerge from a theory that renders survival as the determinant of morality? What Malthus should have done with his natural law is leave it as a descriptive statement, for there is no question of obedience to it. By definition, it will always hold true that human suffering checks the population, regardless of what men do. So if Malthus's approach is wrong, and we cannot change this law of nature, then the moral way forward is to combat the agents of human suffering. In other words, if we want to improve the quality of life, we ought to abolish the sources of conflict between individuals in mankind's struggle for existence. In nature, food is a major cause for conflict. In civilization, the parallel of food is private property, for the contest to acquire property pits men against each other in an economic struggle that determines who will eat and who will go hungry. When we eliminate this point of contention, we reduce the war between man and man and subsequently reduce the misery of all men. It is in this train of thought that we see the nascence of socialism.

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