

UNDERSTANDING MALTHUSIAN THOUGHT: RELEVANCE OF MALTHUS'S CATEGORICAL FRAME OF REFERENCE

David Allan Rehorick

University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada

Résumé — Un intérêt retrouvé à la pensée de Malthus fait naître la question de la rélevance et l'application éventuelles de ses idées et catégories aux questions contemporaines de la population. Pour entreprendre une telle discussion il faut d'abord comprendre les buts et la signification des catégories à l'intérieur des oeuvres de Malthus. Certaines discussions récentes n'ont pas précisé le cadre général de référence dans lequel les idées de Malthus prennent leur signification. On appuie sur l'importance de considérer les vues métaphysiques et utilitaires pour l'identification de son cadre général. Ceci entraîne des suggestions pour une traduction de concepts du dix-neuvième siècle en des termes du vingtième siècle.

Abstract — Renewed interest in Malthusian thought raises the question as to how his categories and ideas might be relevant and applicable to contemporary population issues. Such discussion presupposes clarity regarding the meaning and intent of categories within Malthus's writings. Recent discussions have failed to specify the general frame of reference within which Malthus's ideas and categories take on their meaning. The importance of considering Malthus's metaphysical and utilitarian views for identifying his general framework is emphasized. On the basis of this, suggestions are made for an adequate translation of 19th-century concepts into 20th-century terms.

Key Words — Thomas Robert Malthus, William Godwin, population theory, frame of reference.

Mounting pressures associated with the growing gap between current and projected resource and food levels required to supply a world of over four billion people have brought about renewed interest in the principle of population and related ideas formulated by Thomas Robert Malthus. Recent literature has attempted to restate the central ideas of Malthus's position, and to examine the relevance of Malthusian ideas for understanding contemporary population issues (for example, see Nickerson, 1975; Poursin and Dupuy, 1972; Salleron, 1972).

To specify Malthus's ideas, and to relate them to 20th-century problems of overpopulation, can present difficulties. Davis (1955) and Petersen (1961) have suggested that misunderstandings and misrepresentations of Malthus's ideas arise from a failure to locate his ideas within the different frames of reference of his thought. Both Davis and Petersen emphasize the need to distinguish Malthus's moralistic from his scientific reasoning, and his theoretical from his empirical statements. The importance of distinguishing frames of reference is illustrated also by Spengler (1957), who has argued that the implications of Malthus's policy recommendations respecting corn-pricing and the English Corn Laws vary depending upon whether the framework chosen is "Malthus the Malthusian" or "Malthus the Economist."

By frame of reference,¹ we mean the total context within which (1) empirical scientific work "makes sense", and (2) a set of interrelated categories are meaningful and relevant (see Parsons, 1968a:I, 28-31; Davis, 1955:542). To comprehend a category fully, one must

understand its place within a general frame of reference. This implies that meaning is not absolutely embodied in the terms themselves. Any particular term can have multiple and even competing meanings which result from usage within different frames of reference.² To understand the meaning of Malthus's categories, then, one must be able to locate them within the boundaries of Malthus's general frame of reference. At the outset, this requires that one be able to recognize what that framework is.

Spengler (1945a; 1945b) has explored the relation between Malthus's theory of economic progress and the population question in an attempt to identify "Malthus's Total Population Theory." Paralleling Spengler's concern with acquiring a broader look at Malthus's position, Anthony Flew (1957) sought to clarify many misconceptions surrounding Malthus's ideas by identifying the structure of Malthus's population theory. While both Spengler and Flew do specify much of the Malthusian categorical frame of reference, our contention is that both writers have not fully elucidated the meaning of categories within Malthus's broader moral-metaphysical framework. In particular, Flew does not discuss the significance of Malthus's metaphysical ideas for understanding the categories. As well, while Spengler (1945a:84) does consider how Malthus's views on luxury and population growth can serve to illuminate the latter's social philosophy, he does not consider the possibility that prior understanding of Malthus's social philosophy might shed new light on the relation between population and the idea of economic progress. In other words, both Spengler and Flew focused their discussions only on aspects of Malthus's frame of reference, but they have not considered the whole of Malthus's framework. The question, then, is how to identify the essential elements or boundary conditions of Malthus's general frame of reference.

One way of identifying a thinker's categorial framework is by (1) his categorization of objects, (2) the constitutive and individuating (i.e., qualifying) attributes and principles associated with his categorization, and (3) the logic underlying his thinking (Körner, 1970:10). Taken together, these three criteria imply a movement from the particular to the general. In contrast, our procedure is to move from the general to the particular. That is, we aim to identify the essential elements of Malthus's general framework, and then to show how a particular category takes on meaning within that framework. This approach is favoured because our intent is to suspend discussion of the voluminous literature dealing with Malthusian ideas and conceptions. If one might liken a "frame of reference" to a "cigarette," the following discussion is not so much concerned with examining the multitude of brands, types, shapes, sizes, and tastes of cigarettes; rather, the aim is to locate the essential elements constituting the essence of "cigaretteness."

To identify key elements underlying Malthus's patterns of thought, a history of ideas approach is employed (for example, see Bonar, 1969). Like all thinkers, Malthus was influenced not only by the social and political conditions of his times, but also by the ideas and opinions of his predecessors. Therefore, we shall selectively examine and trace ideas which formed the basis for Malthus's thought. In particular, it is relevant to focus on the debate between Malthus and William Godwin. It was Godwin's early thought³ which provided some of the impetus for Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population* (hereafter, *Essay*). Moreover, it was Godwin who emerged as one of the sharper critics of Malthus's work.

Not only important in its own times, the Malthus-Godwin debate is also of interest to contemporary thinkers as well. Recently, Petersen (1971) has contended that it is futile to continue the Malthus-Godwin debate in 19th-century terms, and it is important to translate it into 20th-century terms since many recent analyses have distorted the original ideas. Spengler (1971:10) recognizes that comparing Malthus and Godwin "is

rendered somewhat difficult also by semantic differences, [and] by differences flowing from different universes of discourse." While agreeing with Spengler, and with Petersen, it is contended that both writers, in attempting to step "out of the trees to see the forest", have fallen short of their own goal by paying insufficient attention to the question of locating the boundary conditions of Malthus's and Godwin's frameworks. Clearly, the transportation of ideas from their original context to a 20th-century one should not be taken lightly and uncritically.

In view of the continuing challenge and problems in applying Malthus's ideas, our task is to map out the essential elements which constitute Malthus's general frame of reference. Particular attention will be given to specifying how the metaphysical facets of Godwin's and Malthus's thought shape the meaning of Malthusian categories. Thus, our focus is on elaborating this neglected but essential feature of Malthusian thought.⁴ For the sake of presentation, the paper is divided into six sections. Following this introduction, the purposive sequence is as follows: (I) Metaphysics and Pre-Malthusian Thought, (II) Metaphysical Basis of Godwin's Early Views on Population, (III) Malthus *contra* Godwin: Fate of the Metaphysical Component, (IV) Utilitarian Side of the Malthusian Framework, (V) Comprehending Categories Within Malthus's General Frame of Reference, and (VI) Suggestions for a Reading of Malthus Today.

I. *Metaphysics and Pre-Malthusian Thought*

Broadly speaking, contemporary demography focuses attention on the factual, scientific, and analytical study of population variation and change. But to understand the meaning of population categories and conceptions, one must consider more than the factual basis of thought. At the extremes, a framework has an empirical and a metaphysical referent. While such a statement is far from novel, the obvious is sometimes overlooked when one seeks a full understanding of an idea. Metaphysical referents tend to be ignored or overlooked when the relevance and meaning of population categories are sought.

While numerous historical illustrations could be cited to demonstrate the metaphysical basis of population thinking, a useful departure point is the position of Charles Castel, the Abbé de Saint-Pierre, who developed a conception of progress leading mankind toward social perfection (Spengler, 1942:241-245 *passim*). For the Abbé de Saint-Pierre, the possibility for progress was unlimited. This included the potential for unlimited growth in population. Hence a conception of "infinite progress" supported a population perspective which was clearly metaphysically grounded.

The Marquis de Condorcet extended the highly optimistic metaphysical doctrine of perfectability and social progress to the extreme. Based upon his delineation and study of nine historical epochs, Condorcet's understanding led him to envision mankind entering a tenth stage, surmounting all key barriers hindering progress toward a state of social perfection. This would entail overcoming the barriers of inequality in riches, in education, and in availability of the means of subsistence (Condorcet, 1795:174-175). Speaking of the latter, Condorcet contended that unlimited population growth is good, since the larger the population, the more people available to increase the means of subsistence. Nevertheless, Condorcet conceded that the earth could experience short-term periods during which population growth would surpass the means of subsistence. In the grand movement toward perfection, the moral outlook of individuals would be so altered that child bearing would be self-regulated in order to preserve the fruits of progress.

Condorcet emphasized the importance of education, since Reason was his key to the attainment of unlimited progress (Condorcet, 1795:182-188 *passim*). Throughout history,

improvement in the human mind moved mankind toward truth, happiness, and perfection. Through Reason, excesses in population size could be avoided. This statement is couched within Condorcet's vision of limitless progress and population increase. Thus, the idea of perfectability provided the metaphysical foundations for Condorcet's view of population change. And it was this idea of perfectability that strongly influenced the early thought patterns of William Godwin.

II. *Metaphysical Basis for Godwin's Early Views on Population*

Godwin traces Condorcet's ideas of perfectability and progress back to Platonic thought. It is within this context that Godwin sought clarification and expansion of these two ideas prior to weaving them into the framework of his moral philosophy. The elements of the latter framework include three absolute values and three ethical imperatives (Priestly, 1946:III, 14-27 *passim*). According to Godwin, man values pleasure, sincerity, and individuality. Furthermore, man is capable of altruism; he finds highest pleasure in promoting and contemplating the general good; moreover, the good of the whole is identical with the good of the individual. Man is viewed as part of an ordered moral universe and, desiring the good of the whole, he is ready to subordinate his own immediate pleasures to the collective good. Through the exercise of Reason,⁵ man seeks to find immutable truths, and to act benevolently in accordance with their dictates. This is the skeleton of Godwin's moral philosophy which forms the framework for all his subsequent thought. While the idea of perfectability provided the foundation for Godwin's moral philosophy, the latter, in turn, provided the context for Godwin's political philosophy, an understanding of which is imperative in order fully to comprehend his remarks on population.

To Godwin, politics is essentially a part of morality. Since all institutions affect man's happiness, the aim of political philosophy is to discover what form of social arrangement will enable individuals to achieve "the good life". Like Condorcet, Godwin envisioned a society where voluntary self-regulation for the common good would make institutions redundant (Godwin, 1946:II, 211-212). The development of the faculty of Reason through education is the critical factor in a process of preparing enlightened individuals who, in knowing their duty, will make only a very simple form of government necessary (Godwin, 1946:I, xxiii-xxvii *passim*). However, a simple form of government implies a limit to population growth since simple forms of government operate best when population size is small.

While recognizing that the means of subsistence acts as a check to population growth, Godwin conceived also of a "rational moral check." Through cultivation of mind, sexual desires will become subservient to intellect rather than intellect remaining a pawn of sexual need. Hence, any given society will automatically find a suitable population size so long as individuals act in accordance with enlightenment through Reason. Excluding Condorcet's vision of eternal life, Godwin saw anything as possible if intellect and mind are strong (Godwin, 1946:II, 525-527). Unlimited progress depends solely upon continuous improvement of intellect. Thus, Godwin's early views on population reflect both his 'faith' in the faculty of Reason, and the metaphysical influences of Condorcet's thought. Godwin's and Condorcet's metaphysically grounded optimism was soon to be challenged by Malthus, who saw serious obstacles facing the future development of mankind, in particular immediate problems related to population growth.

III. *Malthus Contra Godwin: Fate of the Metaphysical Component*

The direct impetus for Malthus's *Essay* arose out of a conversation between himself

and "a friend"⁶ over the implications of such optimistic, metaphysically oriented views of Condorcet and Godwin. While the latter saw only progress and perfectability ahead, Malthus saw serious obstacles, especially that of continued population growth. Malthus credits Condorcet with recognizing that an idle class of individuals, in not contributing to the labour force, would result in an insufficient production of subsistence. While Condorcet saw this difficulty as distant, Malthus saw it as immediate (Malthus, 1798:152-153). But Malthus was most astonished by Condorcet's unrealistic vision of indefinite longevity resulting from man's continuous movement toward organic perfectability (Malthus, 1798:155-163 *passim*). While intellect can be harnessed to improve the state and health of mankind, there are clearly limits to what reason can accomplish. To Malthus, the uncritical acceptance of the metaphysical assumption that man and society are infinitely perfectable would result in a superficial and unsupported view of the entire question of population variation and change.

Like Condorcet, Godwin saw mankind moving toward perfectability, indefinite longevity, and complete equality. With respect to the latter, Malthus (1798:203-204) observes that individuals are born into a world already possessed by a select few and hence equality of ownership is little more than a phantom. Moreover, inequality is both codified in law and an institutionalized part of the fabric of society. For Godwin, the problems of vice, misery and inequality were a direct result of bad social institutions. Remove all institutions, and inequality in riches and the means of subsistence would disappear; then, many centuries would pass before increasing population size could ever outstrip the availability of subsistence (Malthus, 1798:176-180 *passim*). According to Malthus, Godwin's unrealistic vision of future equality stems from the erroneous assumption, underlying his moral philosophy, that the common good is identical with the individual good.

For our purposes, an important objection by Malthus of Godwin is the conjecture that sexual passion will be reduced in the future as a result of moral enlightenment through Reason. The passion of love is not inconsistent with reason or virtue; moreover, the sensual might well dominate the intellectual. But unless Godwin supposes that passion between the sexes decreases faster than the duration of life increases, the earth would be more encumbered than ever (Malthus, 1798:219). Godwin did recognize that there was a principle by which population is perpetually kept down to the level of the means of subsistence; however, he was satisfied, according to Malthus, to regard the causes as mysterious and occult (Malthus, 1798:176; 1890:312-313).

Malthus was justified in his challenge of the unwarranted metaphysical assertions made by Condorcet and Godwin. Both had overemphasized the importance of Reason in governing human behaviour, and thus in influencing population growth. But rather than balancing reason with other relevant factors, Malthus appears to have slipped into the same kind of intellectual trap which bound those he criticized. The idea of Passion is given too central a role as a force governing human behaviour. As a fundamental Malthusian conception, Passion shapes the nature and direction of Malthus's quest for (1) an ultimate or final principle of population which is the metaphysical basis for (2) an empirical principle of population.⁷

According to the Malthusian thesis, the power of population growth is always greater than the power of the earth to produce subsistence for mankind. The basis for this thesis and his entire position rests with three well-known propositions: (1) that population is necessarily limited by the means of subsistence; (2) that population invariably increases where the means of subsistence increases, unless prevented by some very powerful and obvious checks; and (3) that the checks are all resolvable into moral restraint, vice, and

misery (Malthus, 1890:14).⁸ Lying beneath these three propositions are two fundamental assumptions: (1) that food is necessary for existence, and (2) that Passion between the sexes is necessary (Malthus, 1890:293). Upon these foundations rests Malthus's famous principle of population which holds that while population expands at a geometrical rate, subsistence increases according to an arithmetical progression. If left unchecked, the rate of population growth would eventually so outstrip the rate of food production that a "natural" brake on unlimited growth would occur, resulting in death and extreme misery for millions (Malthus, 1890:537-538). Beyond the empirical principle, Malthus sought to discover the final cause for the principle of population along metaphysical lines.

According to Malthus, Godwin failed to look beneath his assertion that political and social institutions are the causes of misery, vice, and inequality in order to locate the deep-seated causes of evil which result from a collision between the laws of nature and human passions (Malthus, 1798:267-270 *passim*; 1890:307-308). The failure to look deeply into these causes is also reflected in Godwin's treatment of the population question. In part, the disparity between Malthus and Godwin can be accounted for by recognizing their different orientations to the conception of "evil." Both agree that human suffering and misery are an evil; however, Malthus sees evil in relative terms whereas Godwin sees evil only in absolute terms. This point can be illustrated by reference to Malthus's remarks about Godwin's thoughts on the evil of hard toil and labour. While conceding that hard labour is both evil and much too prevalent, Malthus maintains that hard labour is less an evil than the debasing of the mind produced through dependence (Malthus, 1798:292-298). Hence, unless Godwin can suggest a practical plan according to which necessary labour in a society might be equitably divided, Godwin's invectives against labour are unwarranted (Malthus, 1798:299-300). In other words, Malthus distinguishes between degrees of evil, whereas Godwin does not. For Malthus, evil "exists not to create despair but activity" (Malthus, 1798:395, quoted in Bonar, 1924:35). To understand Malthus's answer to this question, a deeper examination of his metaphysics, and particularly of his cosmology, is warranted.

For Malthus, mind and body, as created by God, are unfolding together and the various impressions that man receives throughout life reflect the process by which God forms mind out of matter (Malthus, 1798:355). The necessity of constant exertion to avoid evil and pursue good is the principal spring of these impressions and excitements (Malthus, 1798:394). The first awakeners of mind are the wants of the body which serve as stimuli to exertion. Everyday experience verifies that leisure, while valuable in itself, will produce more evil than good, for if the stimulants that arise from the wants of the body are removed from the mass of mankind, there is more reason to think that man "would be sunk to the level of brutes, from a deficiency of excitements, than [that] they would be raised to the rank of philosophers by the possession of leisure" (Malthus, 1798:358). This is Malthus's account for the existence of natural and moral evil. A partial evil is produced because population growth exceeds food production but this partial evil gives rise to reason and exertion (Malthus, 1798:361-363). While Malthus never claims that all evils can be removed, in striving to overcome them, intellect will be developed and applied to harnessing the infinite variety of nature in the furtherance of the general good, which is consistent with the purpose of Providence (Malthus, 1798:378-379).

One means of striving to improve intellect is through the constant attempt to dispel the darkness and obscurity surrounding metaphysical questions which furnish endless excitements, exertion, and stimulus to intellectual activity (Malthus, 1798:380).⁹ Although man can never reach final answers, the pursuit of metaphysics greatly contributes to the growth of intellect. If a heavenly revelation were to dispel all mists hanging

over metaphysical subjects, Malthus (1798:384) maintained that future mental exertion would be repressed.

Having criticized and supposedly dispelled Godwin's unwarranted metaphysical assumptions, Malthus appears to have offered little more than an alternate metaphysical basis. While Godwin's enigma was an overemphasis on Reason, Malthus's is an overconcern with Passion. Malthus would have the development of intellect through reason as directly contingent upon the need to stay one step ahead of suffering. The latter is brought on by excessive population growth, itself a result of evil spurred on by Passion. It is this idea which supports the Malthusian viewpoint. It is this idea which is carried, at least implicitly, through all editions of the *Essay*. And it is this idea which influences the meaning of categories within the Malthusian framework, and will affect attempts to apply Malthus's categories to 20th-century population questions.

IV. *The Utilitarian Side of the Malthusian Framework*

In addition to the metaphysical component, Malthus's general frame of reference was heavily influenced by the philosophy and principle of utility.¹⁰ Apart from Scripture, the idea of utility provided Malthus with the only other guide for human conduct (Bonar, 1924:319). While the initial focus of utilitarianism was on the process of action and teleological behaviour calculated to satisfy specific wants of individuals, the frame of reference of the utilitarian doctrine was extended by some writers to include a determination of the rightness or wrongness of actions by reference to the goodness and badness of their consequences for society as a whole.

For Malthus, the happiness of the whole was contingent upon the happiness of the individual. The utilitarian basis of Malthus's thought patterns is clearly revealed in his opinions on the relevance of the system of English Poor Laws. As a mode of public support, the Poor Laws provided supplementary parish allowances to insure that everyone had sufficient funds to purchase basic staples. By the time that Malthus was writing, most intellectuals and politicians agreed that, both in conception and administration, the Poor Laws were a failure.

While most thinking focused on ways to improve the system of poor relief, Malthus criticized the entire system on a fundamental level. First, Malthus contended that the Poor Laws served to increase the quantity of provisions consumed in workhouses, thus diminishing the share consumed by the industrious members of society. This tended to force more people to become dependent. Secondly, the Poor Laws tended to contribute to an increase in population without a corresponding increase in the food supply since the poor marry but have no prospects for supporting a family (Malthus, 1890:342). Thus Malthus strongly believed that it is one's duty not to bring beings into the world unless one can provide proper support. In utilitarian terms, it is in the self-interest of the poor to abstain from marriage and procreation; moreover, it is the failure to abstain that contributes to the continuation of poverty. As for the role that the Poor Laws played in maintaining poverty, Malthus states:

I feel persuaded that if the poor-laws had never existed in this country, though there might have been a few more instances of very severe distress, the aggregate mass of happiness among the common people would have been much greater than it is at present (1890:344-345).

Consequently, Malthus advocated a very gradual abolition of the English system of Poor Laws. A man who marries without the means of supporting children is doing a disservice not only to himself, but also to his neighbours since such an action tends to diminish directly the general happiness.

The doctrine of utility also had methodological relevance in the Malthusian framework. Man cannot reason from God to nature, but man can reason from nature toward God, thus glimpsing the ways in which He works (Malthus, 1798:350). In commenting on Malthus, Bonar (1924:326) has stated aptly: "What on God's side is teleology, on man's is utility. . . ." For Malthus, the "method of coming at the will of God from the light of nature is, to inquire into the tendency of the action to promote or diminish the general happiness" (Malthus, 1890:454). Although Malthus claims that utility is a means of reasoning from nature toward God, it is apparent that Malthus also reasons "from God" toward nature. Otherwise, one could not account for his ontology of evil and its role in explaining the operation of the principle of population. Thus both utilitarian and metaphysical components must be considered in order to grasp the general Malthusian frame of reference.

Having specified the essential components of the general framework, the task now is to show how Malthusian categories take on their meaning relative to the framework. This demonstration focuses on the meaning of Malthus's "means-of-subsistence" category within the general framework.¹¹

V. Comprehending Categories Within Malthus's General Frame of Reference

A major focus for discussion and debate has been the relevance and validity of the so-called "Malthusian ratios". Since the means of subsistence category arises in conjunction with the ratios, it is useful to outline them briefly.

The mathematical expression of the relations between population and subsistence had been presented by earlier writers (such as Robert Wallace, William Petty, and the Marquis de Condorcet), but Malthus was the first to project these ratios indefinitely into the future. That is, while the means of subsistence tends to increase arithmetically (1, 2, 3, 4, 5 . . .), population growth tends to occur geometrically (1, 2, 4, 8, 16 . . .). The geometrical series rests on Malthus's assumption that passion between the sexes is necessary. This assumption, taken as a self-evident truth, demands a universal sex pressure producing, or tending to produce, progeny with machine-like regularity. The arithmetical ratio must be examined in relation to the geometrical ratio since the former has no meaning independent of the latter. The arithmetical ratio has no basis in fact, and serves only as a device to represent an outside limit (Smith, 1951). However, critics of the ratios suggest that their captivating effect on the mind of the readers shifted the focus away from actual causes of population growth to a discussion of the mathematical properties of an infinite geometrical series (see McCleary, 1953). Assuming that this criticism is valid, Smith (1951:238) maintains that, independent of the ratios, the critical issue between Malthus and his antagonists is given by the question: "Is subsistence the effective cause of population, or is population the effective cause of subsistence?"

To this "chicken-or-egg" type of question, Malthus opted for the former since the principle of population states that population growth always outstrips food production; a lack of subsistence is always the ultimate check to population increase unless some powerful and obvious voluntary checks intervene. Thus, at times, Malthus interprets "means-of-subsistence" as the actual food on hand, but at other times Malthus admits that population growth is checked before it reaches the limit of food. In other words, "means-of-subsistence" can be taken as a positive check since lack of subsistence may cause people to die from starvation, or it can be considered a preventive check since fear of a lack of subsistence may cause people voluntarily to limit births. Whatever the cause of this ambiguity, it is clear that "means-of-subsistence" acts as the final (or what Davis calls the "master check") check in the entire scheme of checks generated by Malthus.

Davis (1955:545) differentiates among three main causes of subsistence within the Malthusian framework: (1) the supply and quantity of land, (2) the industry and social organization of the people, and (3) the state of the arts. On the other hand, Eversley (1959), while recognizing Davis's contribution, goes further by proposing that the ambiguities surrounding Malthus's "means-of-subsistence" category arose because of his failure to separate out clearly the economic from social aspects. In discussing whether or not Malthus's views are operating within a different frame of reference from earlier or later writers, Eversley states:

The economists are more concerned with the physical production of the means of subsistence, and with the demand for labour, whereas the sociologists take this economic environment as given and concentrate on the individual's reactions to the pressure set up by the system of production and distribution (1959:240).

That is, sociologists and economists place different research emphasis on the "means of subsistence" category. In more general terms, Eversley recognizes that to understand the meaning of such categories as "means-of-subsistence," moral restraint, vice, and misery, and the relation among them, requires that one examine them within two analytically distinct but overlapping frameworks — one social and one economic.

What Eversley and Davis do not seem to recognize is that the social and economic elements of Malthus's patterns of thought both originate in and take on their meaning within his broader frame of reference. Malthus's moral preconceptions are not really elements *within* his frame of reference, but rather it is his moral philosophy which provides part of the broader framework within which his categories take on their meaning. Thus, Eversley's (1959) attempt to isolate social from economic elements of Malthus's thought could be read as an attempt to distinguish two "sub-frameworks" — one social and one economic — within a more general frame of reference which is bounded by Malthus's moral and metaphysical views. Let us consider how Malthus's framework shapes the meaning and intent of (1) means-of-subsistence taken as a positive check, and (2) means-of-subsistence taken as a preventive check.

The principle of population always shows population growth outstripping food production; moreover, this is an essential requirement in the Malthusian system since in striving to overcome the suffering produced through the action of the principle, intellect is aroused, developed, and harnessed. In other words, the intent of the principle of population is understandable only in relation to Malthus's metaphysical conception of evil, which is viewed as a necessary spur to human, intellectual advancement. It is within this context that the "means-of-subsistence" category takes on its meaning as a positive check to population growth. Insofar as the principle of population ensures that population growth *must* always exceed the generation of food to sustain a given population size, then the positive checks must eventually come into play. These positive checks are what Malthus referred to as "misery", including such things as wars, disease, epidemics, starvation, plague, famine and poverty. If the operation of the positive checks to population growth are to be avoided or at least minimized, then it is necessary to lower reproduction through a voluntary substitution of preventive for positive checks.

To understand the meaning of the preventive checks (namely, vice and moral restraint), it is relevant to recall that Malthus's frame of reference is not only bounded by metaphysics, but also by utilitarianism. Not only should an individual seek his own happiness, but since the happiness of the whole is contingent upon the happiness of the individual, it is the duty of every man not to marry until he can adequately provide support for a wife and children. Since Malthus could not accept any of the specific checks

associated with the category of "vice", the voluntary practice of moral restraint was the only check left if mankind was to substitute preventive for positive checks.¹² Given his fundamental assumption that passion between the sexes is necessary and inevitable, Malthus was forced to draw pessimistic conclusions as to the probable ability of man to control fertility voluntarily. Nevertheless, Malthus's extreme emphasis on moral restraint as the only viable check becomes more understandable and meaningful when one considers the strong place that utility was given in the Malthusian system. It is the individual who is responsible and morally bound to act in a manner which is conducive to the happiness and welfare of the whole.

VI. *Suggestions for a Reading of Malthus Today*

It has been argued that a thorough understanding of the meaning and intent of Malthus's categories requires that they be located within his broader metaphysical and utilitarian-based frame of reference. Assuming, then, that one has successfully grasped Malthus's ideas, what would be the requirements for a translation of these categories into terms applicable and relevant to 20th-century demography? And how could such a translation be accomplished?

One possible approach is to identify and locate the essential components of the frame of reference into which Malthusian ideas and categories will be inserted. Particular emphasis should be placed on identifying metaphysical- and utilitarian-type components in the selected 20th-century framework. Then, one would consider the extent to which a particular Malthusian category is directly transferable, and the extent to which elements might be either lost or gained in translation. Such an approach might appear to assume that Malthusian concepts are static, and absolute in meaning. On the contrary, we are assuming that categories take on varying meanings and intentions depending upon their situation within a given framework. For instance, we have depicted a *direct* influence between the Malthusian conception of evil and the means of subsistence category. Evil appears as a necessary cause for the operation of the principle of population. The suffering produced by the operation of the principle of population is a necessary evil which acts as a spur to arouse mind and intellect. The latter is needed to overcome and avoid the suffering which would accompany insufficient means of subsistence.

Another example is the *direct* influence between the Malthusian conception of utility and category of moral restraint. The view that the good of the whole is contingent upon the good of the individual is reflected in Malthus's placement of the burden of "responsible parenthood" on the individual. Within Malthus's scheme of population checks, individual moral restraint emerges as the viable preventive check, which if practised would enhance the collective good. Yet, both these examples could be read as *indirect* influences. Evil is also indirectly related to moral restraint which is a necessary consequence if suffering is to be minimized. Moreover, utility indirectly influences the means of subsistence category since the good of the individual, and thus good of the whole, is contingent upon "adequate" means of subsistence.

The broader methodological implication for those who would attempt to "modernize" early population concepts is that the meaning of the categories is (1) contingent upon the initial framework identified, and (2) relative to the scope and nature of the "modern" framework which will receive these concepts.¹³ One could argue that the breadth and scope of the Malthusian framework surpasses 20th-century frameworks insofar as emphasis is given to metaphysical and moral ideas. Yet, many contemporary frames of reference surpass the Malthusian one in terms of empirical scope and factual diversity. But the narrow, analytical, and statistical orientation of more recent population perspectives

may make translation of early concepts difficult since they may not fit logically into a more focused framework. Moreover, it is readily apparent that facts change; it is less obvious that frameworks within which facts and ideas are organized into meaningful patterns also change.

Problems of “making sense” of early categories in contemporary terms are to be expected. Thinkers of the 18th and the early 19th centuries such as Godwin and Malthus were visionary world-view seekers. Malthus’s quest to find an ultimate and final principle of population is no less idealistic than Godwin’s utopian views on perfectability. By contrast, 20th-century population thinkers are more guarded and less willing to venture outside the empirical realm. In part, the rapid and extensive production of knowledge and information in contemporary times discourages attempts to generate encompassing world-views. Despite obstacles, the task of “modernizing” early population categories should be pursued. That varying frames of reference will yield varying meanings and interpretations of categories should be greeted with enthusiasm. Thought itself feeds on possibilities.

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Footnotes

- 1 For purposes of this paper, the terms “frame of reference” and “framework” (whether or not prefaced by “categorical” or “general”) are to be considered synonymous.
- 2 The problem of seeing and interpreting the intended meaning of ideas is explored by hermeneutics. An excellent introduction to the area is provided by Palmer (1969).
- 3 The distinction between Godwin’s “early” and “later” ideas, while arbitrary, provides a convenient way of distinguishing Malthus’s reactions to Godwin’s thought. By Godwin’s early ideas is meant those expressed in *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, and *The Enquirer*. His later ideas are given in many works, notably *Thoughts on Man*, and *Of Population*. Malthus (1798:279) supports the contention that the ideas of *The Enquirer* are a further development of those set down in the *Political Justice*.
- 4 Discussion of metaphysical ideas is explicit in the first edition of the *Essay*. In subsequent editions, Malthus moved away from metaphysics in response to his critics. Later editions were concerned with empirically grounding the basic principles of population. However, it is our contention that Malthus’s metaphysics still play a crucial albeit implicit and latent role in determining the meaning of Malthusian thought after the first edition.
- 5 Pre-Godwinian thinkers debated whether the basis for morals was “reason” or “feeling.” Most recent and past literature commonly describes Godwin as a champion of Reason. Yet, Monro (1953:36) contends that Godwin really vacillated between reason and feeling, having recognized that revisions to his early works would require that a more balanced analysis be achieved. As well, Monro (1953:181) maintains that Godwin never sought to polarize reason and primal, brute forces in human nature; but rather, to explore how such forces can be made to cooperate with reason. In addition, Godwin reads “Reason” in upper case letters, whereas Malthus uses the lower-case sense of “reason.”
- 6 Bonar (1924:6-8) notes that the “friend” was Malthus’s father. Their discussion of Godwin’s essay “On Avarice and Profusion” in *The Enquirer* (1797) stimulated Malthus to generate the *Essay*.
- 7 This argument follows from Bonar (1924:47-50) who suggests that Godwin’s overemphasis on Reason was matched by Malthus’s overrating of Passion. I capitalize “Passion” to emphasize the contrast with Godwin, and to point out that this concept must be considered in broader terms than passion as the sex act *per se*. Publication of the first edition of the *Essay* (1798) opened up a large debate as to whether or not Malthus’s views directly contradicted the original command of the Creator “to increase and multiply and replenish the earth.” To refute his critics, Malthus argued that the necessity of food for survival requires that reasoning

'creatures' inquire into the laws established by the Creator regarding multiplication of the species. Speculative and empirical evidence both supports Malthus's contention that the "power of population to increase" (i.e., Passion) is much greater than the power to ensure sufficient food (Malthus, 1890:xxviii-xxix). In this sense, Passion is a fundamental conception to the Malthusian position.

- 8 Malthus (1798:8) admits that his main arguments were not new, but have partly been treated by Hume, Wallace, and Adam Smith. Kenneth Smith (1951:17-18) goes so far as to suggest that Hume's works contain all the ingredients of Malthusian theory.
- 9 Bonar (1924:39) notes that there is no indication that Malthus was a metaphysical genius, and likely his research into heavier German literature did not extend much further than views of Johann Peter Süssmilch. Moreover, the metaphysical discussions as to the ultimate principle of population are not developed further after the first edition of the *Essay*. Interestingly enough, the metaphysical bases for the principal given by Malthus are explored in considerable depth by John Bird Sumner (1818).
- 10 While the foundations of utilitarianism are usually linked to the writings of John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, Adam Smith, and Jeremy Bentham, Halévy (1955:246) notes that Malthus drew his conception of utility from the writings of the English moral philosopher, William Paley.
- 11 While the thrust of this paper is the influence of Godwin's on Malthus's thought patterns, it would be inappropriate to compare and contrast Godwin's and Malthus's conceptions of "means-of-subsistence" here since this is extensively discussed by the *later* as opposed to *early* Godwin. That is, Godwin's *Of Population* (1820:Book V), while relevant, lies outside the scope of this paper. In addition, it is important at the outset to note that Malthus refers to "actual" as opposed to "potential" subsistence. For that matter, major criticism surrounds Malthus's alleged failure to consider the potential future subsistence resulting from technological development.
- 12 Malthus's categorization of birth control and abortion as "vices," hence unacceptable checks, is explained often by the fact that he had close ties to the Church, having been appointed Rector of Walesby in 1803. While a contributing factor, one should be cautious in using biographical information to explain Malthus's thought patterns.
- 13 Two avenues for further inquiry are proposed. First, it would be interesting to explore whether or not the boundary conditions of Malthus's frame of reference changed in response to critical assessment of his readers, for example, the "later" Godwin as represented through *Of Population* (1820). Secondly, a preliminary translation of Malthusian categories could start within contemporary frameworks which resemble and capture "the Malthusian spirit." Here, writings of the so-called alarmists come to mind (see Davis, 1967; Ehrlich, 1971; Ehrlich and Ehrlich, 1974; among others).

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