Chapter 8

Malthus vs. Analogies

ATTEMPTS TO SUPPORT the Malthusian theory with analogies are just as inconclusive as those which use facts.

The strength of the reproductive force in the animal and vegetable kingdoms is constantly cited, from Malthus to current textbooks. For instance, if protected from their natural enemies, a single pair of salmon might fill the entire ocean, or a pair of rabbits overrun a continent. Many plants scatter seeds by the hundreds, and some insects deposit eggs by the thousands. Each species constantly tends to press against the limits of subsistence, and when not limited by its enemies, apparently does so.

These examples attempt to prove that human population also tends to press against subsistence. Unless restrained by other means, this must necessarily result in low wages and poverty. And if that is not enough, then actual starvation will keep it within the limits of subsistence.

But is this analogy valid?

The human food supply is drawn from the animal and vegetable kingdoms. The reproductive force in the vegetable and animal kingdoms is greater than among humans. Hence, this analogy simply proves the power of subsistence to increase faster than population. All of the things that furnish human subsistence have the power to multiply many fold, sometimes a million fold. Meanwhile,

humanity is merely doubling (even according to Malthus). Doesn't this show that even if human beings increase to the full extent of their reproductive power, population can never exceed subsistence?

There is one additional fact. The actual limit to each species lies in the existence of other species: its rivals, its enemies, or its food.

Humans, however, can extend the conditions that normally limit those species giving our sustenance. (In some cases, our mere appearance will accomplish this.) The reproductive forces of these species then begin to work in service of humans. This increase continues at a pace that our own powers of increase cannot rival. If we shoot hawks, birds will increase; if we trap foxes, rabbits will multiply.

This distinction between humans and all other forms of life destroys the analogy. Of all living things, only humans can manipulate reproductive forces stronger than their own to supply themselves with food. Bird, insect, beast, and fish take only what they find. They increase at the expense of their food. But the increase of humans will increase their food. The population of the United States, once small, is now forty-five million. Yet there is much more food per capita.

It is not the increase of food that has caused the increase of humans—rather, the increase of humans has brought about an increase of food. There is more food simply because there are more people. This is the difference: Both humans and hawks eat chickens—but the more hawks, the fewer chickens; while the more humans, the more chickens.

Moreover, human subsistence in any particular place is not bound by the physical limit of that place, but of the

globe. Fifty square miles, using present agricultural practices, will yield subsistence for only a few thousand people. Yet over three million people reside in London—and their subsistence increases as population increases. So far as the limit of subsistence is concerned, London may grow to a hundred million or five hundred million. For it draws upon the whole globe for subsistence. Its limit is the limit of the globe to furnish food for its inhabitants.

But another idea arises that gives Malthus great support: the diminishing productiveness of land. Beyond a certain point, so the argument goes, land yields less and less to additional labor and capital. Otherwise, a growing population would not extend cultivation to additional land. Acknowledging this appears to involve accepting the doctrine that a growing population increases the difficulty of obtaining subsistence.

But if we analyze this proposition, we see that it depends on an implied qualification. It is true in a relative context, but not when taken absolutely. Production and consumption are only relative terms. Speaking absolutely, people neither produce nor consume. They cannot exhaust or lessen the powers of nature. If the whole human race were to work forever, they could not make the Earth one atom heavier or lighter. Nor could they augment or diminish the forces that produce all motion and sustain all life.*

Water taken from the ocean must eventually return to the ocean. So too, the food we take from nature is, from

* George was writing before Einstein showed that matter could be converted into energy. Modern physics speaks of the conservation of matter/energy, which still supports George's point.

the moment we take it, on its way back to those same reservoirs. What we draw from a limited extent of land may temporarily reduce the productiveness of that land. But the return will go to other land.

Life does not use up the forces that maintain life. We come into the material universe bringing nothing; we take nothing away when we depart. The human being, in physical terms, is just a transitory form of matter, a changing mode of motion.

From this, it follows that the limit to population can be only the limit of space—that the human race may not increase its numbers beyond the possibility of finding elbow room. Remote and shadowy as it is, this possibility is what makes Malthus' theory appear self-evident.

But there is still another difference: Humans are the only animals whose desires increase as they are fed—the only animal that is never satisfied. The wants of every other living thing are fixed. The ox of today aspires to no more than the ox that humans first yoked. The only use they can make of additional supplies, or additional opportunities, is to multiply.

But not so humans. No sooner are our animal wants satisfied than new wants arise. The beast never goes further, but humans have just set their foot on the first step of an infinite progression.

Once the demand for quantity is satisfied, we seek quality. As human power to gratify our wants increases, our aspirations grow. At the lower levels of desire, we seek merely to satisfy our senses. Moving to higher forms of desire, humans awaken to other things. We brave the desert and the polar sea, but not for food; we want to know how the earth was formed and how life arose. We toil to satisfy

a hunger no animal has felt, a thirst no beast can know.

Given more food and better conditions, animals and vegetables can only multiply—but humans will develop. In the one case, the expansive force can only extend in greater numbers. In the other, it will tend to extend existence into higher forms and wider powers.

None of this supports Malthus' theory. Facts do not uphold it, and analogy does not support it. It is a pure figment of the imagination, like the preconceptions that kept people from recognizing that the earth was round and moved around the sun.

This theory of population is as unfounded as if we made an assumption about the growth of a baby from the rate of its early months. Say it weighed ten pounds at birth and twenty pounds at eight months. From this, we might calculate a result quite as striking as that of Mr. Malthus. By this logic it would be the size of an elephant at twelve, and at thirty would weigh over a billion tons.

The fact is, there is no more reason to worry about the pressure of population upon subsistence than there is to worry about the rapid growth of a baby. We are no more justified in assuming that overpopulation produces poverty than we are in assuming that gravity must hurl the moon to the earth and the earth into the sun.

Malthus asserted what he called positive and prudential checks. A third check comes into play with the development of intellect and increased standards of living. This is indicated by many well-known facts. The birth rate is lower among classes whose wealth has brought leisure, comfort, and a fuller life. It is higher among the poor who, though in the midst of wealth, are deprived of its advantages, and thus are reduced to an animal exist-

ence. It is also higher in new settlements.*

This shows the real law of population. The tendency to increase is not uniform. It is strong where a larger population would allow greater progress. It is also strong where dangerous conditions threaten the survival of the race. It weakens as higher development becomes possible, and survival is assured. In other words, the law of population conforms with, and is subordinate to, the law of intellectual development.

Any difficulty providing for an increasing population arises not from the laws of nature, but from social maladjustments. These are what condemn people to want in the midst of wealth.

In the last two chapters, we have supported a negative. That is, we have shown that Malthusian theory is not proved by the reasoning set forth to defend it. The next chapter will take the affirmative and show that it is actually disproved by the facts.

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* This insight is referred to today as the "demographic shift," and is extensively documented. In addition to the correlation of improved living standards with lower fertility, modern researchers have found that better-educated women tend to have fewer children, even when their incomes do not actually increase.