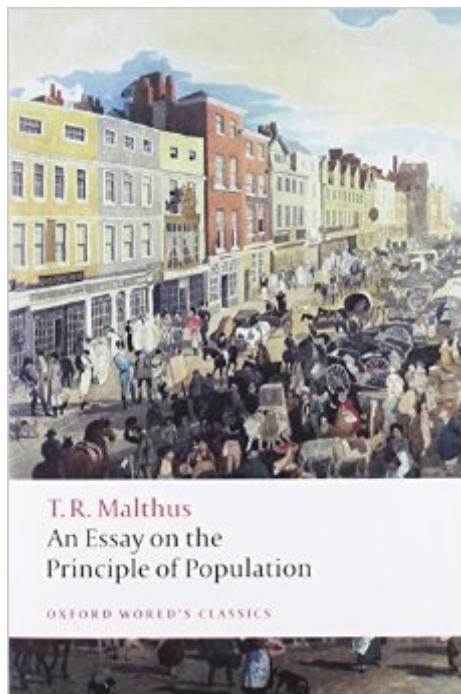


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An Essay On The Principle Of Population (Oxford World's Classics)



Synopsis

As the world's population continues to grow at a frighteningly rapid rate, Malthus's classic warning against overpopulation gains increasing importance. *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) examines the tendency of human numbers to outstrip their resources, and argues that checks in the form of poverty, disease, and starvation are necessary to keep societies from moving beyond their means of subsistence. Malthus's simple but powerful argument was controversial in his time; today his name has become a byword for active concern about humankind's demographic and ecological prospects.

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From the Introduction: "Malthus began with two physiological assumptions: humans must have food, and the sex drive will always be a fundamental part of our make-up. (Both assumptions had been called into question, half-seriously, by Godwin.) His next assertions were less self-evident but crucial to the argument: an unchecked population grows at a 'geometric' rate, as in the series 1, 2, 4, 8, 16, and the means of subsistence can only be increased at an 'arithmetic' rate, as in 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. Because man's powers of reproduction so greatly exceed his powers of food production,

population will always press against the available resources. Thus a substantial portion of society is condemned to live at the ragged edge of subsistence. Any significant rise in general living standards will trigger a period of earlier marriages and lower mortality, bringing faster growth of population than of food supplies. Per capita consumption, having risen temporarily above 'subsistence' level, will be forced back down to that level, or even below it. Almost as famous as this grim analysis, which prompted Thomas Carlyle to dub economics the 'dismal science', is the conceptual apparatus that supports it. Malthus argued that population was held within resource limits by two types of 'checks': positive ones, which raised the death rate, and preventative ones, which lowered the birth rate. The positive checks included hunger, disease, and war; the preventative checks, abortion, birth control, prostitution, postponement of marriage, and celibacy. All of these population retardants, without exception, led mankind into 'misery' or 'vice'.

Don't make the mistake of reading this book as text book for possible consequences of human overpopulation but read it as a remarkable essay based on a Christian sermon given in circa 1790 postulating the future of the world upon the advent of the great quantum leap of human development which was the Industrial Revolution. I think that Malthus' basic self-evident postulate of, "(A) population cannot increase without the means of subsistence", seems so simple as to be moronic but given the real possibility of the human population today as potentially acting as an evasive species upon the entire planet, the ramifications of this simple statement seem as relevant as ever. I don't think Malthus in his wildest imagination could have predicted that the scientific and industrial revolution that began in 1800 would enable the human population to go from just under 1 billion people at the time of the writing of his book to 8 billion people in a span of only a little over 200 years, (Incidentally it would take 300 years for an individual to just count to 8 billion!). So Hey! As someone who has worked on a farm and have also tried to live off of hunting and gathering, I have always been very skeptical of the prospect of the planet Earth NEVER reaching a saturation in terms of its potential for production of calories for human existence. And then one day, while researching the Milankovitch theory for a speech I was going to make on Human Migration, I accidentally find tucked away in some obscure report that the U.N. has indicated that we have reached the peak production of many grains, produce and other plant based foodstuffs and will never be able to increase production.

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