

Malthus: A Very Short Introduction

By Donald Winch

Questions for Thought and Discussion

- What is the difference between 'positive' and 'preventive' checks to population growth and why are some societies more likely to experience the former?
- How might 'preventive' checks be a cause of 'vice and misery'?
- What were 'moral' and 'prudential restraint' and how did they operate to help reduce the rate of population increase?
- Why did Malthus oppose birth control within marriage?
- What was the 'Malthusian trap' and how did Western nations escape from it? Can other nations find the same way out?
- Is there a world population problem today or in the near future and how might it be cured or its effects mitigated?
- Why is Malthus considered to be an anti-utopian thinker?
- What information would you need to judge the *optimal* rate of growth of population in any society?
- Are there any similarities between Malthus's criticisms of Poor Law administration in his day and the idea that today's 'benefit culture' creates dependency on the state?
- Why did Malthus advocate long-term abolition of the Poor Laws as a remedy for pauperism and why did he settle for something less than this?
- Why is Malthus regarded as a social theorist who powerfully reinforced the role of Nature versus Culture in human affairs?
- What aspects of Malthus's population theory did Darwin find suggestive for his own work on the theory of evolution via natural selection?
- Why did Keynes regard Malthus as a better foundation for his own economic thinking on unemployment than Ricardo?
- Why do questions involving population size and growth appear to be inherently controversial? Does this account for Malthus's unpopularity in some circles?
- How did Malthus reconcile the findings of his population theory with his belief in a beneficent Deity?

Other works by Donald Winch

Adam Smith's Politics (Cambridge University Press, 1978)

Riches and Poverty (Cambridge University Press, 1996)

The Political Economy of British Historical Experience (Ed. with P. K. O'Brien) (Oxford University Press, 2002)

Wealth and Life (Cambridge University Press, 2009)

Further Reading

Patricia James, *Population Malthus* (Routledge, 1979)

John Maynard Keynes, *Essays in Biography* [contains essay on Malthus]

J.R. Poynter, *Society and Pauperism: English Ideas on Poor Relief 1795-1834* (Routledge, 1969)

David Coleman and Roger Schofield (eds.), *The State of Population Theory* (Wiley-Blackwell, 1986)

Gareth Stedman-Jones, *An End to Poverty?: A Historical Debate* (Profile Books, 2004)