
LETTER IN REPLY TO HAZLITT CONCERNING THE MALTHUSIAN DOCTRINE OF POPULATION.

THE LION'S HEAD.*

To the Editor of the London Magazine.

Westmoreland, November 4, 1823.

My dear Sir,—This morning I received your parcel, containing amongst other inclosures, the two last numbers of your journal. In the first of these is printed a little paper of mine on Mr. Malthus; and in the second I observe a letter from Mr. Hazlitt—alleging two passages from the 403rd and 421st pages of his *Political Essays* as substantially anticipating all that I had said. I believe that he *has* anticipated me: in the passage relating to the geometric and arithmetic ratios, it is clear that he has: in the other passage, which objects to Mr. Malthus's use of the term *perfection*, that he has represented it under contradictory predicates, it is not equally clear; for I do not find my own meaning so rigorously expressed as

* This was the heading under which correspondence appeared in *The London Magazine* at that date.—H.

to exclude another * interpretation even now when I know what to look for ; and, without knowing what to

* What other interpretation ? An interpretation which makes Mr. Hazlitt's argument coincide with one frequently urged against Mr. Malthus—viz. 'that in fact he himself relies practically upon *moral restraint* as one great check to Population, though denying that any great revolution in the moral nature of man is practicable.' But so long as Mr. Malthus means, by a *great revolution*, a revolution in the sense which he imputes to Mr. Godwin—to Condorcet, &c. viz. a revolution amounting to absolute perfection, so long there is no logical error in all this : Mr. Malthus may consistently rely upon moral restraint for getting rid, suppose, of ninety cases out of every hundred which at present tend to produce an excessive population, and yet maintain that even this tenth of the former excess would be sufficient, at a certain stage of population, to reproduce famines, &c., *i. e.* to reproduce as much misery and vice as had been got rid of. Here there is an absolute increase of moral restraint, but still insufficient for the purpose of preventing misery, &c. For, as soon as the maximum of population is attained, even one single birth in excess (*i. e.* which does more than replace the existing numbers)—*à fortiori*, then, one-tenth of the present excess (though implying that the other nine-tenths had been got rid of by moral restraint) would yet be sufficient to prevent the attainment of a state of perfection. And, if Mr. Malthus had so shaped his argument, whether wrong or right—he would not have offended in point of *logic* : his logical error lies in supposing a state of perfection already existing and yet as brought to nothing by this excess of births : whereas it is clear that such an excess may operate to prevent, but cannot operate to destroy a state of perfection ; because in such a state no excess could ever arise ; for, though an excess may co-exist with a vast increase of moral restraint, it cannot co-exist with entire and perfect moral restraint ; and nothing less than *that* is involved in the term 'perfection.' A perfect state, which allows the possibility of the excess here spoken of, is already an imperfect state. Now, if Mr. Hazlitt says that this is exactly what he means, I answer that I believe it is ; because I can in no other way explain his sixth sentence—from the words 'but it is shifting the question' to the end of that sentence. Yet again the

look for, I should certainly not have found it: on the whole, however, I am disposed to think that Mr. Hazlitt's meaning is the same as my own. So much for the *matter* of Mr. Hazlitt's communication: as to the *manner*, I am sorry that it is liable to a construction which perhaps was not intended. Mr. Hazlitt says—'I do not wish to bring any charge of plagiarism in this case;' words which are better fitted to express his own forbearance, than to exonerate me from the dishonour of such an act. But I am unwilling to suppose that Mr. Hazlitt has designedly given this negative form to his words. He says also—'as I have been a good deal abused for my scepticism on that subject, I do not feel quite disposed that any one else should run away with the credit of it.' Here again I cannot allow myself to think that Mr. Hazlitt meant deliberately to bring me before the reader's mind under the odious image of a person who was 'running away' with the credit

seventh sentence (the last) is so expressed as to be unintelligible to me. And all that precedes the sixth sentence, though very intelligible, yet seems the precise objection which I have stated above, and which I think untenable. Nay, it is still less tenable in Mr. Hazlitt's way of putting it than as usually put: for to represent Mr. Malthus as saying that, 'if reason should ever get the mastery over all our actions, we shall then be governed *entirely* by our physical appetites' (which are Mr. Hazlitt's words), would be objected to even by an opponent of Mr. Malthus: why '*entirely*?' why more than we are at present? The utmost amount of the objection is this:—That, relying so much upon moral restraint *practically*, Mr. Malthus was bound to have allowed it more weight *speculatively*, but it is unreasonable to say that in his ideal case of perfection Mr. Malthus has allowed no weight at all to moral restraint: even he, who supposes an increased force to be inconsistent with Mr. Malthus's theory, has no reason to insist upon his meaning a diminished force.

of another. As to 'credit,' Mr. Hazlitt must permit me to smile when I read that word used in that sense: I can assure him that not any abstract consideration of credit, but the abstract idea of a creditor (often putting on a concrete shape, and sometimes the odious concrete of a dun) has for some time past been the animating principle of my labours. Credit therefore, except in the sense of twelve months' credit where now alas! I have only six, is no object of my search: in fact I abhor it: for to be a 'noted' man is the next bad thing to being a 'protested' man. Seriously, however, I sent you this as the first of four notes which I had written on the logical blunders of Mr. Malthus (the other three being taken not from his *Essay on Population*, but from works more expressly within the field of Political Economy): not having met with it elsewhere, I supposed it my own and sent it to complete the series: but the very first sentence, which parodies the words of Chancellor Oxenstiern—('Go and see—how *little* logic is required,' &c.), sufficiently shows that, so far from arrogating any great merit to myself for this discovery, I thought it next to miraculous that it should have escaped any previous reviewer of Mr. Malthus.—I must doubt, by the way, whether Mr. Hazlitt has been 'a good deal abused' for these specific arguments against Mr. Malthus; and my reason for doubting is this: about ten or twelve years ago, happening to be on a visit to Mr. Southey, I remember to have met with a work of Mr. Hazlitt's on this subject—not that which he quotes, but another (*Reply to Malthus*) which he refers to as containing the same opinions (either *totidem verbis*, or in substance). In Mr. Southey's library,

and in competition with Mr. Southey's conversation, a man may be pardoned for not studying any one book exclusively: consequently, though I read a good deal of Mr. Hazlitt's *Reply*, I read it cursorily: but, in all that I *did* read, I remember that the arguments were very different from those which he now alleges; indeed it must be evident that the two logical objections in question are by no means fitted to fill an octavo volume. My inference therefore is—that any 'abuse,' which Mr. Hazlitt may have met with, must have been directed to something else in his *Reply*; and in fact it has happened to myself on several occasions to hear this book of Mr. Hazlitt's treated as unworthy of his talents; but never on account of the two arguments which he now claims. I would not be supposed, in saying this, to insinuate any doubt that these arguments are really to be found in the *Reply*; but simply to suggest that they do not come forward prominently or constitute the main argument of that book: and consequently, instead of being opposed, have been overlooked by those who have opposed him as much as they were by myself.

Finally, Mr. Hazlitt calls the coincidence of my objections with his own 'striking:' and thus (though unintentionally, I dare say) throws the reader's attention upon it as a very surprising case. Now in this there is a misconception which, apart from any personal question between Mr. Hazlitt and myself, is worth a few words on its own account for the sake of placing it in a proper light. I affirm then that, considering its nature, the coincidence is *not* a striking one, if by 'striking' be meant surprising: and I

affirm also that it would not have been the more striking if, instead of two, it had extended to two hundred similar cases. Supposing that a thousand persons were required severally to propose a riddle, no conditions or limitations being expressed as to the terms of the riddle, it would be surprising if any two in the whole thousand should agree: suppose again that the same thousand persons were required to solve a riddle, it would now be surprising if any two in the whole thousand should differ. Why? Because, in the first case, the act of the mind is an act of synthesis; and there we may readily conceive a thousand different roads for any one mind; but, in the second case, it is an analytic act; and there we cannot conceive of more than one road for a thousand minds. In the case between Mr. Hazlitt and myself there was a double ground of coincidence for any possible number of writers: first the object was given; *i. e.* we were not left to an unlimited choice of the propositions we were to attack; but Mr. Malthus had himself, by insisting on two in particular (however erroneously) as the capital propositions of his system, determined our attention to these two as the assailable points: secondly, not only was the object given—*i. e.* not only was it predetermined for us where * the error must lie, if there were an error;

* 'Where the error must lie'—*i. e.* to furnish a sufficient answer *ad hominem*: otherwise it will be seen that I do not regard either of the two propositions as essential to Mr. Malthus's theory: and therefore to overthrow those propositions is not to answer that theory. But still, if an author will insist on representing something as essential to his theory which is not so, and challenges opposition to it,—it is allowable to meet him on his own ground.

but the nature of that error, which happened to be logical, predetermined for us the nature of the solution. Errors which are such *materialiter*, *i. e.* which offend against our *knowing*, may admit of many answers—involving more and less of truth. But errors, which are such logically, *i. e.* which offend against the form (or internal law) of our *thinking*, admit of only one answer. Except by failing of any answer at all, Mr. Hazlitt and I could not *but* coincide: as long as we had the same propositions to examine (which were not of our own choice, but pointed out to us *ab extra*), and as long as we understood those propositions in the same sense, no variety was possible except in the expression and manner of our answers; and to that extent a variety exists. Any other must have arisen from our understanding that proposition in a different sense.

My answer to Mr. Hazlitt therefore is—that in substance I think his claim valid; and though it is most true that I was not aware of any claim prior to my own, I now formally forego any claim on my own part to the credit of whatsoever kind which shall ever arise from the two objections to Mr. Malthus's logic in his *Essay on Population*. In saying this, however, and acknowledging therefore a coincidence with Mr. Hazlitt in those two arguments, I must be understood to mean a coincidence only in what really belongs to them; meantime Mr. Hazlitt has used two expressions in his letter to yourself which seem to connect with those propositions other opinions from which I dissent: that I may not therefore be supposed to extend my acquiescence in Mr. Hazlitt's views to these points, I add two short notes upon them: which

however I have detached from this letter—as forming no proper part of its business.—Believe me, my dear Sir, your faithful humble servant. X. Y. Z.

1. Mr. Hazlitt represents Mr. Malthus's error in regard to the different ratios of progression as a *mathematical* error; but the other error he calls *logical*. This may seem to lead to nothing important: it is however not for any purpose of verbal cavil that I object to this distinction, and contend that both errors are logical. For a little consideration will convince the reader that he, who thinks the first error mathematical, will inevitably miss the true point where the error of Mr. Malthus arises; and the consequence of that will be—that he will never understand the Malthusians, nor ever make himself understood by them. Mr. Hazlitt says, 'a bushel of wheat will sow a whole field: the produce of that will sow twenty fields.' Yes: but this is not the point which Mr. Malthus denies: this he will willingly grant: neither will he deny that such a progression goes on by geometrical ratios. If he did, then it is true that his error would be a mathematical one. But all this he will concede. Where then lies his error? Simply in this—that he assumes (I do not mean in words, but it is manifestly latent in all that he says) that the wheat shall be continually resown on the same area of land: he will not allow of Mr. Hazlitt's 'twenty fields:' keep to your original field, he will say. In this lies his error: and the nature of that error is—that he insists upon shaping the case for the wheat in a way which makes it no fair analogy to the case which he has shaped for man. That it is

unfair is evident: for Mr. Malthus does not mean to contend that his men will go on by geometrical progression; or even by arithmetical, upon the *same* quantity of food: no! he will himself say the positive principle of increase must concur with the same sort of increase in the external (negative) condition, which is food. Upon what sort of logic therefore does he demand that his wheat shall be thrown upon the naked power of its positive principle, *not* concurring with the same sort of increase in the negative condition, which in this case is land? It is true that at length we shall come to the end of the land, because that is limited: but this has nothing to do with the race between man and his food, so long as the race is possible. The race is imagined for the sake of trying their several powers: and the terms of the match must be made equal. But there is no equality in the terms as they are supposed by Mr. Malthus. The amount therefore is—that the case which Mr. Malthus everywhere supposes and reasons upon, is a case of false analogy: that is, it is a logical error. But, setting aside the unfairness of the case, Mr. Malthus is perfectly right in his mathematics. If it were fair to demand that the wheat should be constantly confined to the same space of land, it is undeniable that it could never yield a produce advancing by a geometrical progression, but at the utmost by a very slow arithmetical progression. Consequently, taking the case as Mr. Malthus puts it, he is right in calling it a case of arithmetical progression: and his error is in putting that case as a logical counterpart to his other case.

2 Mr. Hazlitt says—‘This, Mr. Editor, is the

writer whom "our full senate call all-in-all sufficient." —And why not? I ask. Mr. Hazlitt's inference is —that, because two propositions in Mr. Malthus's Essay are overthrown, and because these two are propositions to which Mr. Malthus ascribes a false importance, in relation to his theory, therefore that theory is overthrown. But, if an architect, under some fancied weakness of a bridge which is really strong and self-supported, chooses to apply needless props, I shall not injure the bridge by showing these to be rotten props and knocking them away. What is the real strength and the real use of Mr. Malthus's theory of population, cannot well be shown, except in treating of Political Economy. But as to the influence of his logical errors upon that theory, I contend that it is none at all. It is one error to affirm a different law of increase for man and for his food: it is a second error to affirm of a perfect state an attribute of imperfection: but in my judgment it is a third error, as great as either of the others, to suppose that these two errors can at all affect the Malthusian doctrine of Population. Let Mr. Malthus say what he will, the first of those errors is not the true foundation of that doctrine; the second of those errors does not contain its true application.

Two private communications on the paper which refuted Mr. Malthus, both expressed in terms of personal courtesy, for which I am bound to make my best acknowledgments, have reached me through the Editor of the *London Magazine*. One of them refers me 'to the number of the *New Monthly Magazine* for March or April, 1821, for an article on Malthus, in

which the view' taken by myself 'of his doctrine, as an answer to Godwin, seems to have been anticipated.' In reply to this I have only to express my regret that my present situation, which is at a great distance from any town, has not yet allowed me an opportunity for making the reference pointed out.—The other letter disputes the soundness of my arguments—not so much in themselves, as in their application to Mr. Malthus: 'I know not that I am authorised to speak of the author by name: his arguments I presume that I am at liberty to publish: they are as follows:—The first objection appears untenable for this reason: Mr. Malthus treats of the abstract tendency to increase in Man, and in the Food of Man, relatively. Whereas you do not discuss the abstract tendency to increase, but only the *measure* of that increase, which is food. To the second objection I thus answer: Mr. Godwin contends not (I presume) for abstract, essential perfection; but for perfection relating to, and commensurate with, the capabilities of an earthly nature and habitation. All this Mr. Malthus admits *argumenti gratiâ*: and at the same time asserts that Mr. Godwin's estimate in his own terms is incompatible with our state. 8th October, 1823.'—To these answers my rejoinder is this:—The first argument I am not sure that I perfectly understand; and therefore I will not perplex myself or its author by discussing it. To the second argument I reply thus: I am aware that whatsoever Mr. Malthus admits from Mr. Godwin, he admits only *argumenti gratiâ*. But for whatsoever purpose he admits it, he is bound to remember, that he *has* admitted it. Now what is it that he has admitted? A state of per-

fection. This term, under any explanation of it, betrays him into the following dilemma: Either he means *absolute* perfection, perfection which allows of no degrees; or he means (in the sense which my friendly antagonist has supposed) *relative* perfection, *quoad* our present state—*i. e.* a continual approximation to the ideal of absolute perfection, without ever reaching it. If he means the first, then he is exposed to the objection (which I have already insisted on sufficiently) of bringing the idea of perfection under an inconsistent and destructive predicate. If he means the second, then how has he overthrown the doctrine of human perfectibility as he professes to have done? At this moment, though the earth is far from exhausted (and still less its powers), many countries are, according to Mr. Malthus, suffering all the evils which they could suffer if population had reached its maximum: innumerable children are born which the poverty of their parents (no less fatal to them than the limitation of the earth) causes to be thrown back prematurely into the grave. Now this is the precise *kind* of evil which Mr. Malthus anticipates for the human species when it shall have reached its numerical maximum. But in *degree* the evil may then be much less—even upon Mr. Malthus's own showing: for he does not fix any limit to the increase of moral restraint, but only denies that it will ever become absolute and universal. When the principle of population therefore has done its worst, we may be suffering the same kind of evil—but, in proportion to an indefinitely *increasing* moral restraint, an indefinitely *decreasing* degree of that evil: *i. e.* we may continually approximate to the ideal of perfection:

i. e. if the second sense of perfection be Mr. Godwin's sense, then Mr. Malthus has not overthrown Mr. Godwin.

X. Y. Z.

The following admirable letter * seems to refer to the observations on Kant, contained in the Opium Eater's Letters. Perhaps that acute logician may be able to discover its meaning: or if not, he may think it worth preserving as an illustration of Shakspeare's profound knowledge of character displayed in *Ancient Pistol*.

Can Neptune sleep?—Is Willich dead?—Him who wielded the trident of Albion! Is it thus you trample on the ashes of my friend? All the dreadful energies of thought—all the sophistry of fiction and the triumphs of the human intellect are waving o'er his peaceful grave. 'He understood not Kant.' Peace then to the harmless invincible. I have long been thinking of presenting the world with a *Metaphysical Dictionary*—of elucidating Locke's romance.—I await with impatience Kant in English. Give me that! Your letter has awakened me to a sense of your merits. Beware of squabbles; I know the literary infirmities of man. Scott rammed his nose against mortals—he grasped at death for fame to chaunt the victory.

THINK.

How is the Opium Eater?

* This is attached by the Editor of *The London Magazine*.—H.