

Malthus and the Theory of Population

Reading worksheet / October 6, 2026

01 HL ch. 4, pp. 65–78

Instructor copy. Suggested answers; accept equivalent explanations.

A1 Life and works

HL pp. 65, 71–72

Thomas Robert Malthus lived from **1766** to **1834**. He held the first British professorship of **political economy** at the East India Company's college at **Haileybury**.

His two major works:

- **1798:** *An Essay on the Principle of Population* — his *first Essay*, written against Condorcet and Godwin. Revised substantially in 1803 (“in reality, a new book”).
- **1820:** *Principles of Political Economy* — his second major work, defending the landlords in the Corn Law struggle and introducing his theory of gluts.

A2 The debate with Condorcet

HL p. 72

Condorcet (1743–1794) was a French mathematician and philosopher of the Enlightenment who argued that human history was moving toward a natural order of **progress** and reason. He proposed two government reforms:

- (a) A public welfare fund for the aged and for widows and orphans.
- (b) Government regulation of credit — restrict it from the powerful, extend it to ordinary workers — to erode capitalist dominance.

Malthus's response, in one sentence:

Reasoned reform cannot escape the natural law of population; any egalitarian gain is quickly undone as population outstrips food.

A3 The debate with Godwin

HL pp. 72–73

Godwin (1756–1836) argued that the defects of the working class come from **corrupt / unjust institutions** not from innate depravity. His remedy was the abolition of **private property** (and of law and government), achieved voluntarily through human reason.

Malthus's response, in one sentence:

The class division between proprietors and laborers would reemerge even in a reformed society, because it is “the inevitable consequence of natural law” (p. 74).

A4 The Corn Laws

HL pp. 70–71

What were they?

Parliamentary tariffs (1815) on imported grain, blocking cheap foreign wheat until the British price reached 80 shillings a quarter — designed to keep domestic agricultural prices (and landlords' rents) high.

Where did Malthus stand?

He defended the landlords and supported protection.

Why?

His later *Principles* (1820) argued that landlords' interests were tied to the general wealth of the nation (p. 79); and his theory of rent treated high rents as the natural sign of prosperity (p. 82).

Keep in view. Malthus's first Essay (1798) answers Enlightenment reformers; his later *Principles* (1820) defends landlords in the Corn Law fight. One writer, two moments.

The population argument

Mechanism, checks, and moral restraint

02 HL pp. 74–76

B1 Name the theory and its home passage

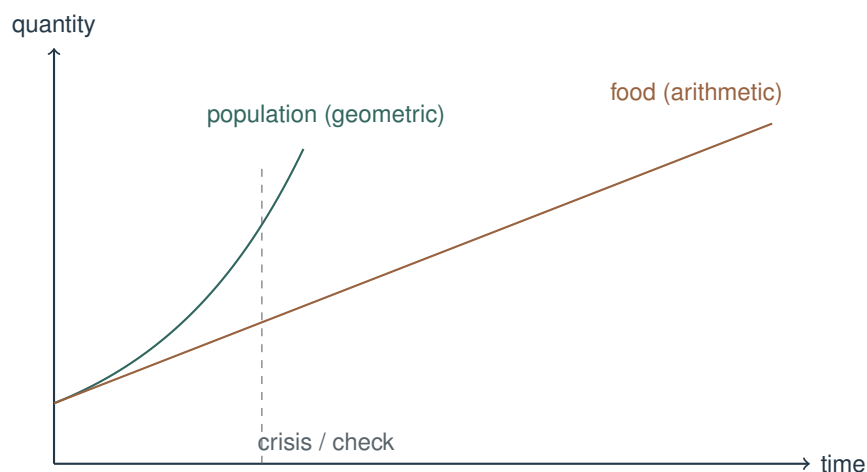
HL p. 74

Malthus's overpopulation argument is laid out in his *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798). The theory's engine is a contrast between two kinds of growth.

B2 The two ratios — draw the picture

HL pp. 74–75

On the axes below, draw two curves: (1) **population growth**, labeled geometric or exponential (“doubles itself every twenty-five years,” p. 74), and (2) **food supply growth**, labeled arithmetic or linear. Mark the point where they intersect.



What happens where the curves cross?

Population has outrun food. The gap is closed only by checks — preventive (lowering the birth rate) or positive (raising the death rate).

B3 Positive vs. preventive checks

HL p. 75

Fill in the table below.

Type of check	Mechanism	Examples
Positive	raise death rate	famine, war, plague, starvation, misery
Preventive	lower birth rate	sterility, abstinence, birth control, moral restraint

B4 Moral restraint, vice, and misery

HL p. 75

Malthus writes that *all* checks “are all resolvable into **moral restraint** , **vice** , and **misery** ” (p. 75).

He defines **moral restraint** as:

*“the restraint from **marriage** which is not followed by **irregular gratifications** .”* (p. 75)

B5 Why this matters

HL p. 74

Why does Malthus think the pressure of population on food is a matter of *natural law* rather than *policy*?
One sentence.

Because the physical laws governing man are not essentially different from those governing other animals (p. 74); population pressure is biological, not institutional, and therefore cannot be legislated away.

Keep in view. The two ratios set up the trap. The checks are nature’s response. Moral restraint is the only *virtuous* way out, and (per Malthus) few will take it.

The poor, the body, the ladder

Malthus's moral economy — and ours

03 HL pp. 75–78

C1 Views on the poor — circle T or F

HL pp. 74–77

According to Malthus's position in the Essay, circle TRUE or FALSE.

Claim	T / F
(a) Poverty is caused primarily by unjust social institutions.	F (p. 74)
(b) The English Poor Laws help the poor by raising their standard of living.	F (p. 76)
(c) “Carelessness and want of frugality. . . predominates among the poor.”	T (p. 76)
(d) Raising wages from 18 pence to 5 shillings a day would permanently improve workers' lives.	F (p. 76)
(e) The wealthy proprietors are society's most valuable class.	T (p. 77)
(f) The “ladder” of inequality is what has lifted civilization above the savage state.	T (p. 77)

C2 Sexual behavior and the poor

HL p. 76

In three or four sentences, explain how Malthus connects (a) birth control / “promiscuous intercourse,” (b) the dignity of women, and (c) the behavior of the poor. Where is the virtuous path, in Malthus's view?

Malthus holds that contraception and premarital sex “degrade the female character” and “lower the dignity of human nature” (p. 76). He assumes the poor cannot (or will not) exercise moral restraint, so their numbers grow and their condition worsens. The only virtuous path is moral restraint: delaying marriage, and abstaining from sex outside of marriage. Everyone else must accept misery and poverty as nature's correction.

C3 The notorious “encourage mortality” passage

HL pp. 77–78

Malthus writes:

“To act consistently therefore, we should facilitate, instead of foolishly and vainly endeavouring to impede, the operation of nature in producing this mortality. . . make the streets narrower, crowd more people into the houses, and court the return of the plague.” (pp. 77–78)

What is Malthus arguing, and what does it reveal about where his theory logically leads?

If poverty is the inevitable result of natural law and relief is futile, then efforts to prolong life among the surplus population only prolong misery. The theory’s logical destination is that human intervention against mortality is counterproductive — an extreme form of “any intervention is futile; let nature take its course.”

C4 Reflection — choose ONE

Think forward from the reading

Pick one and write five or six sentences on the back of this sheet.

- (a) **Famine.** Amartya Sen won the Nobel Prize in part for showing that modern famines are usually caused not by absolute food shortage but by failures of *entitlement* — people cannot afford or access the food that already exists. In what way does this challenge Malthus’s framework? What would Malthus have to concede?
- (b) **Welfare today.** Modern debates about work-requirements, the Earned Income Tax Credit, and universal basic income still echo Malthus’s “18 pence to 5 shillings” argument — that income support reduces the incentive to work. State Malthus’s case in modern language, and then make the strongest counter-case you can.
- (c) **Climate and growth.** The “limits to growth” tradition — Ehrlich’s *The Population Bomb* (1968), the Club of Rome’s 1972 report, today’s degrowth debates — is structurally Malthusian: exponential consumption against finite resources. In what way is the argument similar, and where might it depart from Malthus?

Keep in view. Keep in view for next class: Malthus takes the *exchange* vantage point, not the production one. H&L argue this is why he lands on *harmony* where Smith at times saw *conflict*. We pick that up next.