NIALL O' FLAHERTY

(King's College London)

Malthus and 'the Doctrine of Utility'

The Author

Niall O' Flaherty is Lecturer in the History of European Political Thought at King's College London. His research explores the changing relationships between theology, science and social thought in Britain in the long eighteenth century, as well as questions relating to the secularisation of social discourse in the period. He completed a doctoral thesis entitled 'The Theology and Social Thought of William Paley (1743-1805)' at King's College, Cambridge in 2008. Probably the most influential thinker in England at the end of the eighteenth century and during the opening decades of the nineteenth, it was Paley, and not Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), whom most contemporaries recognised as the chief exponent of utilitarian ethics. Frequently cited in the House of Commons, his *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* (1785) ran into numerous editions as a Cambridge textbook and remained compulsory reading for undergraduates (including Malthus) into the 1830s. *Evidences of Christianity* (1794), Paley's defence of Christian miracles, followed the *Principles* onto the Cambridge syllabus. Equally, his *Natural Theology* (1802), with its famous watchmaker analogy, was viewed by many as the definitive statement of the argument from design in the period.

The central claim of the thesis is that Paley's system represented the apotheosis of a remarkably worldly tradition of religious thought. If this sounds like a contradiction in terms, it is only because it goes against our preconceived notions of holiness, which is generally taken to consist in what are essentially the features of God-centred religion: pietistic devotion, mystical doctrine and scripturalism. Paley's primary objective when writing the *Principles* was to establish a particularly anthropocentric theology on the Cambridge syllabus, one that sanctified secular advancement. At its heart was the so-called 'doctrine of motives' which, stated crudely, held that all intentional human action was motivated by the pursuit of pleasure or the avoidance of pain. Accordingly, ethics and religion were largely concerned with the rational regulation of the passions. Where traditionally the Christian had pitted his spiritual energy against fleshly wants, Paley's ethics were about choosing to satisfy some wants over others. Unsurprisingly, his definition of a morally good action as one that was motivated by a concern for heavenly rewards was castigated by evangelicals and romantics, who unanimously adopted Joseph Butler's dictum that deeds performed with prizes in mind were devoid of moral content.

This description of religious orthodoxy as worldly takes us beyond the bipolar debate about whether mainstream intellectual culture in the period was religious or secular: it was clearly religious; the question is: what kind of religion? It also raises doubts about the view that England was somehow isolated from so-called enlightenment currents of thought that were thriving elsewhere on the continent. The 'science of man', far from being the sole preserve of Scottish and continental thinkers, also provided the basis for moral thought in eighteenth-century England.

Niall is currently in the final stages of completing a book entitled *The Doctrine of Utility in the Eighteenth Century*. The work offers a genealogy of Lockean moral thought in England, situating Paley's philosophy in relation to that of his predecessors in the theological utilitarian tradition: John Gay, Edmund Law and Abraham Tucker, while also reflecting on its afterlife at the start of the nineteenth century, and particularly the contribution of Thomas Robert Malthus.

The Paper

Niall's paper explores Malthus' social and religious thought in the context of the philosophical/theological traditions codified by William Paley. Like Paley, Malthus was a favourite whipping boy of radicals and romantics at the beginning of the nineteenth century. For Wordsworth, Coleridge and Carlyle, Malthusian political economy was the 'dismal science' which sought to reduce moral and political questions to calculations of cost-benefit. Galvanised in the novels of Charles Dickens, the view of political economy as an inhumanely unsentimental science, and Malthus' reputation as its implacable high priest, survived well into the twentieth century. In more recent decades, however, a scholarly consensus has formed around the view that Malthusian economics cannot be understood apart from the moral convictions underpinning it. Donald Winch and A. M. C. Waterman have shown that Malthus' thought was deeply rooted in both the 'natural theological' and 'theological utilitarian' traditions systematized by Paley. The aim of Niall's paper is to add chapter and verse to this account by viewing the *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) as an episode in the long history of these two strains of thought.

In doing so, he brings to light some important ways in which Malthus' thought represented a critical disjuncture in these mainstream traditions. In the first place, it was Malthus' intention to inaugurate a more rigorously 'empirical' version of natural theology, one that represented a profound challenge to the epistemological underpinnings of Anglican cosmology. Moreover, partly due to these methodological commitments, Malthus' first *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) – which called for the abolition of the poor laws – undermined the primary goal of the Anglican utilitarian tradition: the cultivation of charitable impulses, while also challenging the grand historical narrative underlying Paleyan thought, which had portrayed the poor laws as the institutional embodiment of Christian enlightenment. Although a key aim of the far more influential second edition of the *Essay* of 1803 was to reconcile his practical recommendations for the amelioration of hardship with Paleyan ethics, the remodelled doctrine that emerged subverted the spirit of 'expediency' as a practical philosophy. Niall concludes that a proper historical account of Malthus' intentions in the second *Essay* should help to dispel Malthus' reputation as a 'reactionary' thinker, for the author himself saw the book as an exercise in myth-busting and public education in the best traditions of Anglican enlightenment. Not only was he attacking the shibboleths of social and economic thought, but also one of the core dogmas of practical morals in Britain, the unbounded trust in so-called 'irresistible compassion'.

Preparatory Reading

D. L. LeMahieu, 'Malthus and the Theology of Scarcity', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, XL (1979), 467-474.

Niall O' Flaherty, 'William Paley's Moral Philosophy and the Challenge of Hume: An Enlightenment Debate?', *Modern Intellectual History*, 7, 1 (April 2010), 1-31.

Isabel Rivers, *Reason Grace, and Sentiment: A Study of the Language of Religion and Ethics in England 1660-1780*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 2000), II, ch. 1.

A. M. C. Waterman, *Revolution, Economics and Religion: Christian Political Economy, 1798-1833* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 1-170.

Donald Winch, *Riches and Poverty: an Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain, 1750-1833* (Cambridge, 1996) pp. 1-31, 221-422