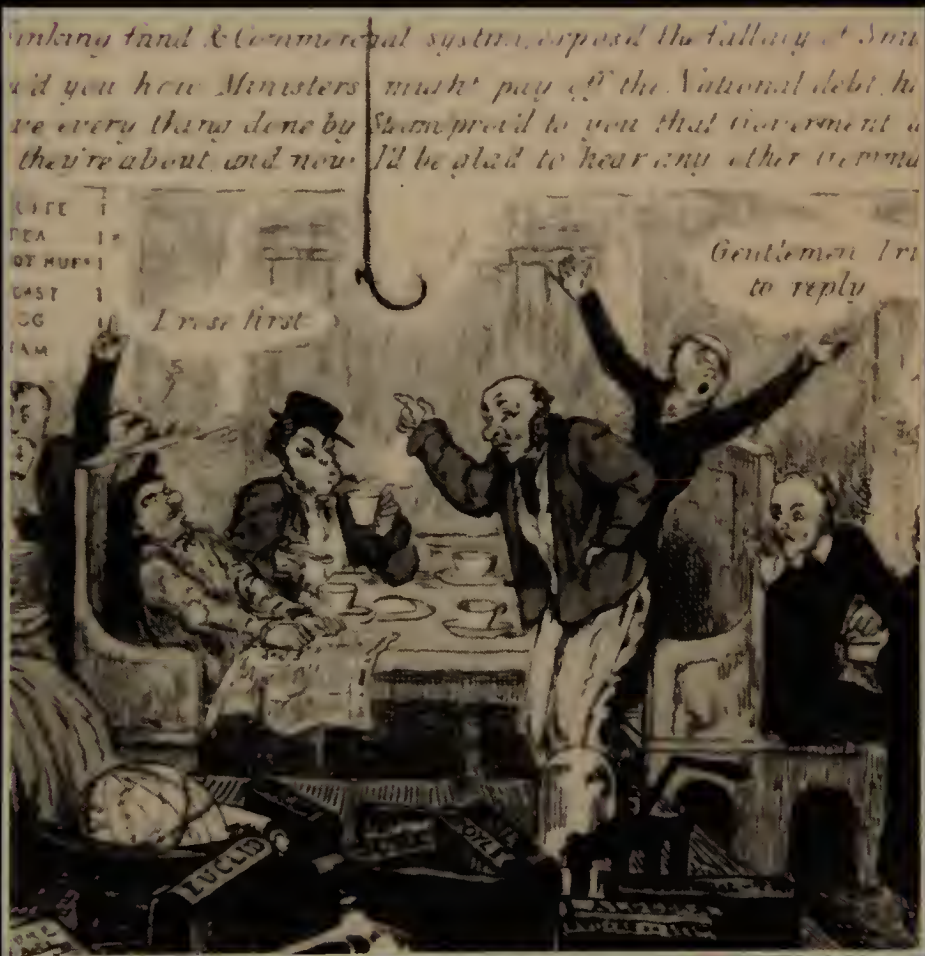


IDEAS IN CONTEXT

Riches AND poverty

AN
INTELLECTUAL
HISTORY OF
POLITICAL
ECONOMY
IN BRITAIN,
1750–1834



DONALD WINCH

RICHES AND POVERTY

*An intellectual history of political economy
in Britain, 1750–1834*

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In *Riches and Poverty*, Donald Winch explores the intellectual history of a relationship that became fundamental to political economy in its widest sense.

Adam Smith's science of the legislator provided a key designed to unlock the 'secret concatenation' linking the fortunes of the rich and poor in commercial societies. By transforming both ancient and modern debates on luxury and inequality, this science furnished a basis on which the American and French revolutions could be assessed by such noted antagonists as Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine. Against this background too, Britain embarked on its career as the first manufacturing nation, with Malthus making his first decisive contributions to a debate on poverty which concluded with the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. Malthus provoked fierce opposition from the Lake poets, thereby opening an intellectual rift that persisted throughout the nineteenth century and continues to influence our perceptions of British cultural history today.

Donald Winch has written a compelling and consistently argued narrative of these developments, which emphasises throughout the moral and political bearings of economic ideas.

Acknowledgments

My debts to institutions and friends are considerable. I was able to complete this book because I was awarded a British Academy Research Readership which allowed me to spend two years away from normal duties at the University of Sussex. My incidental research expenses were met by a grant from the Nuffield Foundation, and I was invited to spend a term as Visiting Fellow at All Souls College, which enabled me to make use of the excellent libraries in Oxford. More recently, Oxford University paid me the honour of asking me to give the Carlyle lectures, which gave me an opportunity to prepare parts of the book for a listening audience. University teachers are now all too familiar with the bureaucratic exercise known as research assessment, but that merely adds to my sense of gratitude to all the above institutions for making the thing itself possible.

Among the friends who have helped me by commenting on earlier versions of parts of the book are John Burrow, Mark Phillips, and John Pullen. But my greatest debt in this respect is to Stefan Collini, who gave me valuable advice on the shape of the enterprise and moral support at a time when spirits and inspiration were low. My wife has also had to bear the burden of the lows and highs of writing, as well as the absences, whether at home or at Oxford. The form of thanks is conventional, but my gratitude is not.

Abbreviations

- Boswell, *Life* *Life of Johnson*, edited by G. B. Hill and revised by L. F. Powell, 6 volumes, Oxford, 1934–50, 2nd edition, 1964.
- Burke, *Corr.* *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, edited by Thomas W. Copeland, 10 volumes, Cambridge, 1958–78.
- WS* *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, edited by Paul K. Langford *et al.*, 5 volumes, Oxford, 1981–.
- Coleridge, *CL* *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, edited by E. L. Griggs, 6 volumes, Oxford, 1956–71.
- CW* *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, general editor, Kathleen Coburn, 16 volumes, Princeton, 1969–93.
- Godwin, *CNM* *Collected Novels and Memoirs of William Godwin*, general editor, Mark Philp, London, 1992.
- PPW* *Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin*, general editor, Mark Philp, 7 volumes, London, 1993.
- Hazlitt, *CW* *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, edited by P. P. Howe, 21 volumes, London, 1930–4.
- Johnson, *Works* *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, edited by W. J. Bate, John M. Bullitt and L. F. Powell, 16 volumes, New Haven, 1960–90.
- Keynes, *CW* *The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes*, 30 volumes, London, 1971–89.
- Malthus, *EPP* *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, edited by Patricia James, 2 volumes, Cambridge, 1989.

<i>FE</i>	The facsimile reprint of the 1798 edition of Malthus's <i>Essay</i> entitled the <i>First Essay on Population</i> , London, 1926.
<i>PPE</i>	<i>Principles of Political Economy</i> , edited by J. M. Pullen, 2 volumes, Cambridge, 1989.
<i>Works</i>	<i>The Works of Thomas Robert Malthus</i> , edited by E. A. Wrigley and D. Souden, 8 volumes, London, 1986.
James Mill, <i>SEW</i>	<i>James Mill; Selected Economic Writings</i> , edited by Donald Winch, Edinburgh, 1966.
John Stuart Mill, <i>CW</i>	<i>The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill</i> , general editor John M. Robson, 31 volumes, Toronto, 1965–91.
Paine, <i>LMW</i>	<i>Life and Major Writings of Thomas Paine</i> , edited by Philip S. Foner, Secaucus, 1948.
Ricardo, <i>Works</i>	<i>The Works and Correspondence of David Ricardo</i> , edited by P. Sraffa, 11 volumes, Cambridge, 1952–73.
Smith, <i>Corr.</i>	<i>Correspondence</i>
<i>ED</i>	<i>Early Draft of WN</i>
<i>EPS</i>	<i>Essays on Philosophical Subjects</i>
<i>Lj</i>	<i>Lectures on Jurisprudence</i> (suffix <i>A</i> , Report of 1762–3; suffix <i>B</i> , Report of 1766)
<i>TMS</i>	<i>Theory of Moral Sentiments</i>
<i>WN</i>	<i>Wealth of Nations</i>

The above works are to be found in *The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith*, 6 volumes, Oxford, 1976–87. For *WN* and *TMS*, references are in the following order, though not all elements appear every time: book, chapter, section, and paragraph.

Southey, <i>NL</i>	<i>New Letters of Robert Southey</i> , edited by K. Curry, 2 volumes, New York and London, 1965.
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After Adam Smith: prologue

If the phrase had not been pre-empted by others, I might have been tempted to use the title of this Prologue for the book as a whole. Since in my case the choice would have involved a pun, I am relieved to have found a more appropriate title. But I have been after Smith in recent years – engaged in a search, like many before me, for the meaning of his intellectual enterprise. I have also been interested in what followed after Smith's death in 1790 when his writings became subject to the inevitable processes of interpretation and misinterpretation by his successors, friendly or otherwise. 'After' could have been supplemented by 'around' and 'beyond' Smith, reflecting the two related preoccupations which unify the different parts of this book: an interest in what Smith was attempting to do in his published writings, and the largely separate question of the fate of his ideas in the hands of some prominent contemporaries and followers. Viewed from this perspective, the shape of the book resolves itself quite simply into its separate parts: Part I concentrates on Smith, Part II on Smith's relationship with Edmund Burke's political and economic ideas, as well as those of some of Burke's radical critics; and Part III on Robert Malthus, treated as a prominent example of a follower who is widely thought to have altered the state of the science and related art that he was cultivating in common with Smith.

The connections between Smith and the other authors considered here are, however, less straightforward than this suggests. Another title that might have gone further towards capturing the complexity of the subject matter, and of the relationships between those engaged in discussing its significance, has been assigned to the second essay in Part I, namely 'secret concatenation'. The phrase derives from one of Samuel Johnson's contributions to the eighteenth-century debate on

luxury and inequality. Johnson was referring to the hidden bonds uniting the fortunes of the rich and poor in commercial societies that were beginning to enjoy the benefits of an extensive division of labour. It was a view of luxury that saw it as a form of social cohesion, in contrast to those who persisted in thinking that ancient anxieties concerning its power to act as a moral and political solvent were still applicable.

Understanding the connections between riches and poverty required a key that would unlock the secret concatenation about which Johnson was writing in 1753. In common with other Augustan moralists, Johnson was aware that Bernard Mandeville, as early as 1714, and more fully after 1723, had provided a scandalously telling set of answers in his *Fable of the Bees*, where the intervening comma in the subtitle, *Private Vices, Public Benefits*, was left to do a great deal of work. Many authors, including Francis Hutcheson and David Hume, Smith's teacher and closest friend respectively, had responded with varying degrees of antagonism to Mandeville's notorious paradoxes. Smith followed in their footsteps when he devoted a section of his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* to Mandeville in 1759 under the heading of 'licentious systems'. It was not until Smith was in a position to publish his *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* in 1776, however, that he could be said to have fashioned a key that promised access to many of the secrets about which Mandeville, Johnson, Hume, and many others had been writing for several decades.

Smith launched an image and a system that were to have a longer life than Johnson's phrase. The 'hidden chains of events which bind together the seemingly disjointed appearances of nature', about which Smith had written in a 'juvenile' essay on the history of astronomy, became an 'invisible hand' operating according to a 'natural system of perfect liberty and justice' – where system connoted 'an imaginary machine invented to connect together in the fancy those different movements and effects which are already in reality performed'.¹ Smith's bridge between imagination and reality was designed to explain the growth of opulence in commercial societies where 'every man . . . lives by exchanging, or becomes in some measure a merchant', relying on contractual appeals to mutual self-interest to meet his wants.² Prosaically, these wants could be described as necessities, conveniences, and luxuries. More interestingly, they could be seen as

¹ *EPS*, III.I and IV.I9.

² *WN*, I.IV.I.

artificial or natural, wants of the mind as well as body, with the special and potentially dangerous feature of the former being their capacity for endless refinement and openness to the stimulus of social emulation. Smith responded to the challenge posed by such a society as moral philosopher and political economist, producing a system which, when articulated in persuasive detail and applied to the institutions and mercantile policies of late eighteenth-century Europe and North America, supported practical conclusions that all wise legislators anxious to acquire the benefits and minimise the drawbacks associated with commercial opulence were advised to heed.

The first edition of the *Wealth of Nations* was published a few months before the revolt of Britain's North American colonies reached its climax in the Declaration of Independence. During the last stages of composition Smith was 'very zealous in American affairs'.³ He may even have delayed publication in order to complete those parts of his general treatment of colonies that contained his analysis of the underlying causes of the deteriorating American situation and his remedies for dealing with its most likely consequences.⁴ American developments certainly provided an occasion for pressing home what he later described as 'a very violent attack' upon the entire mercantile system of commercial regulations on both of its wings, political as well as economic.⁵ In these respects one could say that the American revolution was one set of *événements* for which Smith's political economy was almost literally tailor-made. Its broad causes and consequences were foreseeable in terms of Smith's system, even if the precise outcome, involving military and political contingencies, could not be predicted.

The French revolution, which began in the final year of Smith's life, however, was far less foreseeable as well as being far more problematic. Even in its initial stages it was unclear whether the train of events that began in 1789 offered a challenge to Smith's principles, or whether, as some of his followers in England and France believed, it marked a step towards realising goals with which his name was becoming firmly associated. Notoriously, Burke reached an early as well as adverse decision on all these matters in 1790 when he published his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Much of Part II is taken up with the intellectual

³ The phrase quoted comes from a letter Hume wrote to Smith on February 8, 1776 in *Corr.*, p. 186.

⁴ For Smith's preoccupations during the immediate pre-publication period, see R. Koebner, *Empire*, Cambridge, 1961, pp. 229-30 and the notes to pp. 357-9.

⁵ For Smith's description of his attack see his letter to Andreas Holt, 26 October 1780 in *Corr.*, p. 251.

reverberations of these two major events occurring in America and France. The essays there are devoted to an examination of what light the debate between Burke and his radical opponents sheds on the nature and fate of Smith's ideas immediately after he had passed from the scene. In undertaking them I have assumed that it makes more than figurative sense to speak of the political economy of revolution.⁶ I am also suggesting that in the course of working out what shapes this political economy could assume in post-revolutionary circumstances we stand to learn something about the way in which considerations of polity and economy could be reconciled with one another.

The French revolution also serves as the initial background to the essays in Part III, beginning with Malthus's entry into the polemical lists with his first *Essay on the Principle of Population* in 1798. For Malthus, a different version of radical ideas associated with the revolution and the movement later known as the Enlightenment was the target: the perfectibilist speculations of William Godwin and the Marquis de Condorcet, with their attendant, though far from unequivocal, echoes of Rousseau. This was to be the foundation for Malthus's subsequent attempts to bring Smith's system up to date, guiding legislators through the largely novel problems associated with the rising proportion of able-bodied labourers on poor relief, the Napoleonic wars, and the early stages of what contemporaries could see as Britain's emergence as the world's first manufacturing nation during the early decades of the nineteenth century.

The controversial nature of Malthus's conclusions aroused fierce opposition – even charges of having revived Mandeville's infamous paradoxes in new form from William Hazlitt and those we now think of as the founders of the 'romantic' movement, with Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey taking the lead.⁷ Each of these figures had experienced disillusionment with the course taken by events in France. Each of them had been attracted for a time to Godwin's attempt to provide a means of coming to terms with this disillusionment by retaining hopes for future fundamental changes in society and human nature. Long after Godwin had ceased to be the focus of these

⁶ In so doing, of course, I am following, for my own purposes, the example set by J. G. A. Pocock; see 'The Political Economy of Burke's Analysis of the French Revolution' in his *Virtue, Commerce and History*, Cambridge, 1987, pp. 193–212.

⁷ The speech marks placed around 'romantic' (for the first and last time) are meant to indicate retrospective coinage, with problems of definition attached; see M. Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries*, Oxford, 1981, Chapter 1. I should also signal that in dealing with some romantics I entertain no ambitions of speaking about the larger issues raised by romanticism.

hopes, Malthus remained anathema to them. Moreover, as part of a series of attacks on Malthus, Southey became one of the first, though by no means the last, to counterpose *moral* economy against *political* economy.⁸

Malthus had no difficulty in appreciating this way of posing the problem: it was one of the ways in which, as a Christian moralist, he consistently posed it himself. For just as corruption and loss of civic virtue provided a way of expressing the threats posed by commercial society for Smith's generation, so Malthus and his romantic critics were confronted by similar anxieties. These involved a gradual transition from a 'landed nation' with a rapidly growing external commerce towards one in which manufacturing, increasingly making use of machinery and newly recruited urban work-forces, provided both a promise of rising living standards and an actual or potential source of moral decline and political instability. One of the ironies of the dispute provoked by Malthus – a theme pursued in some of the essays in Part III – is that neither side managed to grasp how much they had in common by way of fears and even diagnosis.⁹ Was the emerging manufacturing system the solution or merely an expression of a deeper problem? The conventional historiography firmly associates such concerns exclusively with the literature of radical protest, with proto-socialist diagnoses, with 'romantic' attacks on mechanistic ways of thinking and the sins of Mammonism, with 'Tory humanitarianism' rather than with political economy. Yet no account of the new science would be complete if it did not show how profoundly it was involved in attempts to articulate the underlying dilemmas, political and moral, faced by Britain during this period.

Since Malthus played a key part in all this he would have been particularly dismayed to discover that he is now held to be responsible for 'de-moralising' political economy. In using this awkward term, his modern detractors are not so much concerned with the ordinary dictionary meanings – 'to corrupt morals' or 'to lower morale' – as wishing to describe the process by which political economy was

⁸ An entry in Southey's *Common-Place Book* (Fourth Series, edited by John Wood Warter, London, 1851, pp. 694, 702) registers the simple counter-position, but as later essays (numbers 11 and 12) will make clear, this bid for the higher moral ground is implicit in all his, and Coleridge's, criticisms of political economy.

⁹ In this respect I shall be attempting to provide chapter and verse for a perceptive remark made many years ago by Sidney Checkland: 'Surely it is one of the unsung ironies of the nineteenth century that Coleridge should have chosen Malthus as an arch-enemy'; see 'The Propagation of Ricardian Economics in England', *Economica*, 16 (1949), 41.

supposedly divorced from moral considerations and made subordinate to impersonal economic forces. It seems likely, though, that those who employ the term wish to convey some of the more conventional overtones as well.¹⁰

The essays in Part III devoted to the origins and development of this dispute deal with the beginnings of an important schism in British social and cultural history, though it was one that required the intervention of subsequent generations of Victorian sages – notably Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, and William Morris – before it would take the precise form in which it was transmitted to the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Arnold Toynbee, one of the chief agents in the transmission, characterised the dispute tendentiously when he spoke of it as a ‘bitter argument between economists and human beings’. The argument was prolonged as well as bitter: Toynbee, speaking in the early 1880s, believed that it had only recently been settled in favour of the human beings. The judgement was premature as well as tendentious: a good case could be made for thinking that, in one form or another, the dispute has continued well into the twentieth century, defining allegiances and sustaining the stereotypes necessary for that purpose.¹¹ Why this should be so is suggested by the title Toynbee gave to the course of lectures in which he delivered his opinion, *Lectures on the Industrial Revolution of the Eighteenth Century in England*.¹² At one time these lectures were thought to have launched this potent term of interpretative art onto an unsuspecting world. Although Toynbee was among the

¹⁰ The leading twentieth-century exponent of the ‘de-moralising’ thesis has been E. P. Thompson, for whom it was part of a larger story in which a paternalistic ‘moral economy’ was replaced by a political economy ‘disinfested of intrusive moral imperatives’. Thompson did not charge the spokesmen for political economy with immoral intentions or indifference to the public good, but he regarded the intention of authors as ‘a bad measure of ideological interest and of historical consequences’; see ‘The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century’, originally published in 1971, but reprinted with a long reply to his critics in *Customs in Common*, London, 1991, especially pp. 200–7, 275–88. For more recent versions of the demoralisation thesis which excuse Smith and concentrate on Malthus as the main culprit, see G. Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty*, New York, 1984; and M. Dean, *The Constitution of Poverty*, London, 1991. I have addressed these interpretations in ‘Robert Malthus: Christian Moral Scientist, Arch-Demoraliser or Implicit Secular Utilitarian?’, *Utilitas*, 5 (1993), 239–53.

¹¹ As a brief indication of the truth of this statement one could point to Raymond Williams’s *Culture and Society, 1780–1950*, London, 1958 – a work of cultural history that centres on the industrial revolution and its consequence, and was the focus of a great deal of mid-twentieth century debate. The later work of Williams and his pupils has, of course, kept alive the perspective well beyond the mid-century.

¹² Originally delivered at Oxford, published posthumously in 1884, and reprinted on many occasions. The reference to economists versus human beings can be found on p. 137 of the 1923 edition.

first generation of economic historians to associate Smith, Malthus, David Ricardo, and John Stuart Mill with different stages in the evolution of the industrial system in Britain, more careful inquiry has revealed that Toynbee merely supplied the revolution with its capital letters.¹³ It was foreign observers of the British scene who were responsible for the earliest coinages, with Friedrich Engels giving the idea of an industrial revolution wider currency and more dramatic colouring in his *Condition of the Working Classes in England* in 1845, where it referred to the use of steam power and technological innovations in the cotton industry.

In speaking earlier of the novel and unprecedented problems faced by Malthus and other post-Smithian political economists, it might be thought that I wish to invoke the industrial revolution either as *explanans* or as essential background to my account. By the standards of an older historiography it would certainly be a conventional move, permitting me to join all those who have viewed the career of political economy, whether as science or apologetics, as being ineluctably bound up with a rampant industrial form of capitalism that was to become the focus of the attention of Karl Marx and John Stuart Mill in the middle of the nineteenth century and beyond. Apart from the fact that I have chosen, for other reasons, to conclude this book around 1834, the year in which both Malthus and Coleridge died and the Poor Law Amendment Act was passed, there are more substantial grounds for not wishing to take on board what has increasingly come to seem a piece of excess baggage. The concept of an industrial revolution was not one that my protagonists found it necessary to invent. Indeed, they have been roundly condemned for failing to do so.¹⁴ The fact and idea of the British industrial revolution, the first of its kind, continues to preoccupy economic historians, with a current revisionist trend being to question its revolutionary character in the period normally assigned to it, say 1770 to 1835. Since I am not an economic historian, and regard it as unwise for intellectual historians to commit themselves to the view that ideas reflect events, that is not my primary reason for avoiding the term. I am attracted, however, by some of the conclusions reached by E. A. Wrigley, one of the leading revisionists, chiefly because he has

¹³ See the title essay in D. C. Coleman, *Myth, History and the Industrial Revolution*, London, 1992, pp. 1–42.

¹⁴ ‘They lived during the industrial revolution, but scarcely looked out from their libraries to notice the remaking of the world’: Paul Samuelson, ‘The Canonical Classical Model of Classical Political Economy’, *Journal of Economic Literature*, 16 (1978), p. 1428.

made insightful use of the theories of Smith, Malthus, and David Ricardo to interpret what was happening to the British economy.

More interestingly for my purposes, what Wrigley has shown is that the expectations of these authors, so far as continuous improvement in per capita incomes was concerned, were strongly conditioned by *pre*-industrial conditions which made exponential economic growth, as we now understand it, difficult, perhaps even impossible, for them to conceive. The chief constraints on growth in such conditions were posed by a combination of the Malthusian population principle and reliance on a technology for producing food that depended on land, the one fixed factor in the triad of land, labour, and capital, and the ultimate source of all forms of animate energy. Wrigley argues that failure to see how this bottleneck could be overcome provides the basis for understanding what actually happened: 'The very fact that expectation and the event differed so markedly is itself an important clue to the nature of the changes which constituted the industrial revolution.'¹⁵

While this strikes me as a persuasive reason for *not* invoking the concept of an industrial revolution as part of any explanation for the nature of the writings of Smith and his two chief followers, I would question the degree of continuity Wrigley attributes to their position. In arguing with some historians of economic thought, I have maintained that continuities have often been imposed rather than discerned, largely as a result of the teleological expectations that economists often bring to the study of the history of their subject. In considering the continuities and discontinuities here, I shall persist in maintaining that Smith's followers confronted a society and an intellectual world that was different from that envisaged by Smith.¹⁶ They also forged some new tools as well as making different use of Smith's old ones. This helps to explain why there was often as much criticism as praise for what Smith had achieved by those who were happy, in other respects, to accept the *Wealth of Nations* as a common point of departure. What Wrigley attributes to the trio of leading classical political economists, speaking with a 'single voice', I believe

¹⁵ See 'The Classical Economists and the Industrial Revolution' in *People, Cities and Wealth*, Oxford, 1987, p. 35. Wrigley's general interpretation of the industrial revolution can also be found in *Continuity, Chance and Change*, Cambridge, 1988. He has also written insightfully on Malthus as demographer; see his introduction to Malthus, *Works*, 1, pp. 7-39; and 'Elegance and Experience: Malthus at the Bar of History' in D. Coleman and R. Schofield (eds.), *The State of Population Theory*, Oxford, 1986, pp. 46-64.

¹⁶ For an earlier version of the argument about discontinuity, see 'Science and the Legislator: Adam Smith and After', *Economic Journal*, 93 (1983), 501-20.

can be clearly discovered only in Malthus and Ricardo, namely a new emphasis on the possible limits to rising real incomes posed by the combination of population increase and diminishing returns in agriculture. Although Smith was perhaps even less inclined to indulge in long-range predictions than his successors, his account of the processes of growth was more open-ended, more capable of encompassing expansive forces connected with new and enlarging markets, whether domestically or through foreign trade – always provided that they could be made secure against what he described as ‘the ordinary revolutions of war and government’.¹⁷

These differences of emphasis will be considered in what follows. Nevertheless, since the political economists with whom I shall be concerned shared a basic belief that, in drawing attention to what inhibited or might set a limit on the growth and spread of opulence, they were also proposing ways in which the effect on living standards could be minimised, I have made sparing use of the usual optimistic/pessimistic contrast to describe the change of emphasis. When dealing with hostile critics of political economy, it is still necessary, apparently, to state that descriptions of what was likely to happen under given or posited circumstances do not imply approval of the outcome: diagnoses are not remedies.¹⁸ Although ‘optimism’ and ‘pessimism’, therefore, have acquired a customary meaning through repetition, these terms are imprecise, sometimes a reflection of an author’s point of view, but more usually that of the reader, and hence dependent on hindsight and expectations that may bear little relation to those of the author. At best they describe vague moods to which we are all subject in varying degrees when faced with different kinds of evidence; and in this sense Smith could be less optimistic than Malthus and Ricardo on some subjects, more so on others. It is still justifiable, however, to speak of *novel* challenges that separate Smith from his two most influential followers. In so doing, however, I do not feel obliged to resolve the hen-and-egg problems of deciding how far the novelty is one of fact and observation, and how far it can be attributed to perception based either on intellectual innovation or temperament.

¹⁷ *WN*, III.iv.24.

¹⁸ As we shall see, such observations are particularly necessary in the case of some of Malthus’s contemporary critics. That they remained necessary in the twentieth century can be gauged from the defence mounted by Lionel Robbins in *The Theory of Economic Policy in English Classical Political Economy*, London, 1952, especially Lecture III.

II

Johnson's 'secret concatenation' also characterises many of the connections between the various authors whose writings furnish my main theme – where 'secrecy' entails recovery rather than recondite discovery. The connections between the arguments and positions are not so much hidden and obscure as in need of re-examination. This applies even to the works of my three main protagonists: to the connections between the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and the *Wealth of Nations*, to Burke's writings before and after the *Reflections*, and to the various editions of Malthus's *Essay on Population* and his *Principles of Political Economy*. Around the authors of these works there is a large cast whose relationship to them and to each other is equally problematic. In some cases the links can be established through explicit statements of affinity or discord. In others, conjectural or counter-factual questions have to be posed: when an explicit response is lacking, a credible answer can *sometimes* be reconstructed on the basis of less direct testimony. Such reconstructions necessarily play a large part in the essays in Part II of this book; but they are equally important when dealing, for example, with the relationship between Smith, Johnson, Mandeville, and Rousseau in Part I. They figure t

oo when considering why Smith chose *not* to pursue some lines of inquiry into luxury and populousness that excited the interest of his contemporaries, including Montesquieu, Hume, Robert Wallace, and James Steuart. The same can be said for Part III, where Malthus's likely as well as actual responses to Godwin, Condorcet, Paine, and his romantic critics are the object of inquiry.

The affinities between the three main protagonists themselves can also be made to yield new insights, particularly when some persistent stereotypes are laid aside. One of these surrounds the relationship imputed to Smith and Burke, which can be traced back as far as 1800, when Burke's first biographer gave currency to a literary anecdote alleging an almost telepathic closeness between the political economy of both men.¹⁹ In the light of such statements, Burke's *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*, a posthumously published pamphlet attacking the concept of 'labouring poor' and any attempt to intervene in the markets for labour and provisions, was treated as a faithful reflection of the views of his friend, acquiring in the process an ideological significance that went far beyond the meagre content of the pamphlet itself. Thus Karl Marx, making use of those labels he had created to

¹⁹ The anecdote is quoted as one of the epigraphs to Part II, p. 124 below.

accompany his diagnosis of the ideological consequences of capitalism, treated Burke's pamphlet as conclusive proof that Burke was 'an out and out vulgar bourgeois' – a perception of ideological allegiance that continues to set the pattern for Marx's late twentieth-century followers.²⁰ Elie Halévy, writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, and representing a quite different approach to the intellectual history of modern Britain, believed that *Thoughts and Details* showed that Burke was 'chronologically the first to interpret political economy as a pure conservative orthodoxy'.²¹ Burke was thereby launched on two parallel careers, either as Smith's 'bourgeois' disciple or as his 'conservative' interpreter. The former has added a problematic endorsement of 'liberal' capitalist values to Burke's defence of the *ancien régime*, and the latter an equally problematic 'conservative' dimension to Smith's 'liberal' credentials. Hence too the continuing efforts on the part of admirers and critics of what both men have come to represent, to welcome, deny, regret, or explain away this evidence of actual or apparent *mésalliance*.

As so often happens in these cases, what began life as an interpretation associated with the Old Left (and has been continued by the New Left) has been stood on its head by the New Right.²² During the last decades of the twentieth century, the belief that an harmonious relationship can be established between Smithian economic liberalism and Burkean conservatism has been revived and disseminated. By combining the two positions one arrives at a spontaneous economic order that is the unintended outcome of individual choices, and a legal and governmental regime that respects custom and tradition while being protective of those 'little platoons' – the family, the Church, and other voluntary associations – that are thought to be essential to social cohesion and even nationhood. With little exaggeration one could say that this amalgam of Smith and Burke furnished the heady mixture of doctrines that fired the conviction politics of a recent British Prime

²⁰ See *Capital*, Moscow, 1964, I, p. 760n. The leading modern exponent of Marxist interpretations of Burke was C. B. Macpherson; see *Burke*, Oxford, 1981. With individual variations, Macpherson's interpretation also underlies I. Kramnick, *The Rage of Edmund Burke*, New York, 1977; M. Freeman, *Edmund Burke and the Critique of Political Radicalism*, Oxford, 1980; and T. Furniss, *Edmund Burke's Aesthetic Ideology*, Cambridge, 1993. For an earlier commentary on the Macpherson interpretation see my 'The Burke–Smith Problem and Late Eighteenth-Century Political and Economic Thought', *Historical Journal*, 28 (1985), 231–47, parts of which are used in essay number 8.

²¹ *The Growth of Philosophic Radicalism*, originally published in French in three volumes, the first two of which appeared in 1901, the third in 1904. The quotation is taken from the English translation published in Boston, 1955, p. 230.

²² For other examples of this practice in relation to the industrial revolution see Coleman, *Myth, History and the Industrial Revolution*, pp. 34–6.

Minister and her closest intellectual advisers.²³ Whether the Marxian derivatives or this new amalgam have any historical basis, therefore, now forms part of the background, if not motivation, for writing the essays in Part II.

Burke and Malthus have frequently been linked together as fellow anti-jacobins, both enjoying the celebrity that came from exploiting the post-French revolutionary mood of reaction in Britain. Hazlitt regarded Malthus's principle of population as 'one of the poisonous ingredients thrown into the cauldron of Legitimacy "to make it thick and slab"'.²⁴ Marx followed suit when he said of Malthus's *Essay* that: 'The great sensation this pamphlet caused, was due solely to party interest. The French revolution had found passionate defenders in the United Kingdom; the "principle of population" . . . was greeted with jubilation by the English oligarchy as the great destroyer of all hankerings after human development.'²⁵ Marx reached equally negative conclusions on the import of Malthus's political economy: it was the work of a 'bought advocate' for the landowning classes. It is certainly true that Burke and Malthus bequeathed powerful arguments in favour of the existing social and political order to their successors. Indeed, in his quieter fashion, Malthus has often been held responsible for providing a far less defensive argument for the status quo than Burke: a fixed law of nature was being invoked to prove why no remodelling of social and political institutions could alter the basic human condition. How far such interpretations can be sustained on the basis of evidence rather than ideological imputation is considered in Part III.

One of the implications of Malthus's position that will *not* be developed there, however, deserves brief mention here. Malthus's confrontation with Godwin, and with other egalitarian and communitarian-minded radicals such as Condorcet, Paine, and Robert Owen, involved issues that became fundamental to later discussions of socialist alternatives to the capitalist system. Although Marx was not the most sympathetic of Malthus's readers, his instinctual protest contains an

²³ F. A. Hayek has been the most influential exponent of this view, with Hume serving as a common ancestor to both Smith and Burke; see, for example, *Studies in Philosophy, Politics and Economics*, London, 1967, p. 111. Explicit statements of Mrs (now Lady) Thatcher's credo have to be sought in more ephemeral places: see a letter to *The Times* on Smith, 18 July 1977, and a BBC interview with James Naughtie, 'On the Record', 15 July 1990. A marriage of Smith and Burke now seems to be a standard way of defining modern British conservatism: D. Willetts, *Modern Conservatism*, London, 1992, pp. 96–9.

²⁴ See Hazlitt, *CW*, XI, p. 112.

²⁵ *Capital*, I, p. 616n.

important insight into what seemed so threatening about Malthus's vision to reformers and revolutionists alike:

If [Malthus's] theory is correct, then again I cannot abolish the [iron law of wages] even if I abolish wage labour a hundred times over, because the law then governs not only the system of wage labour but *every* social system. Basing themselves directly on this, the economists have been proving for fifty years ago and more that socialism cannot abolish destitution, which has its base in nature, but only make it general, distribute it simultaneously over the whole surface of society.²⁶

John Stuart Mill, the first orthodox follower of Ricardo to give a sympathetic hearing to some non-Marxian forms of socialism, could reconcile these sympathies with his wholehearted acceptance of the Malthusian principle only by becoming a fervent *neo*-Malthusian. Birth control within marriage, reinforced by the collective pressure of public opinion against irresponsible parenthood, provided one answer to the anxiety that underlies Marx's remark. For reasons that *will* be considered in Part III, however, Malthus could not accept neo-Malthusianism, which meant that he had to look elsewhere for remedies and a basis for his hopes concerning the future shape of society.

Returning to the continuities and discontinuities that link or divide Smith from Malthus, it might be thought that little secrecy now surrounds them. Although for some commentators, including the romantics, these two exponents of political economy became almost indistinguishable as examples of a way of thinking about society that had to be humanised if not destroyed, a stronger line of argument has been that Smith and Malthus respectively embody – and here I call on the customary meanings – Enlightenment optimism and post-Enlightenment pessimism. As noted already, Malthus has been assigned the role of giving the science of political economy a grim and fatalistic cast, even of subverting Smith's position by divorcing it from moral philosophy. Malthus admitted that his principle of population imparted 'a melancholy hue' to his original speculations; and this provided some justification for Carlyle's coinage of the term 'dismal science' to describe post-Smithian political economy. For reasons mentioned earlier and defended at greater length later, however, I believe that many interpretations based on the contrast between Smithian optimism, Burkean conservatism, and Malthusian naturalistic fatalism need to be overhauled: they often merely repeat the antagonisms and

²⁶ *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1875) in *Karl Marx/Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, London, 1974–, xxiv, p. 91.

misunderstandings of the original protagonists with a garnish of self-righteousness added for good measure.²⁷

In using 'liberalism' and 'conservatism' as labels to describe features of the thinking of Smith and Burke, I am simply borrowing the anachronisms that are most commonly used to characterise these figures when they are being treated emblematically. By speaking of emblems I mean the way in which we engage with their *presumed* legacy, and the part this plays in defining the traditions by which we classify them and construct our own identities and allegiances. As a matter of plain historical fact, however, Smith, Burke, and Malthus thought of themselves as differentiated species of that large category of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century political animals belonging to the Whig genus. The genus came under increasing competitive pressure from a new breed of philosophic radicals of John Stuart Mill's stamp in the 1820s and 30s, and later gave way to something called Liberalism – though a few healthy Whig specimens could still be found later in the century.²⁸

The anachronistic labels may nevertheless be capable of serving an historical purpose if they help to focus on what it means to describe a viewpoint as liberal, conservative, or, for that matter, radical, during and after the American and French revolutions. More interestingly still, perhaps, historians have begun to make us more aware of the wide variety of political and religious opinions that can be found *within* the Whig and Tory categories.²⁹ Placing Smith and Burke centre stage also sheds indirect light on the opposition between Malthus and his romantic critics. It helps, for example, to raise such intriguing questions as the following: why were Southey, Coleridge, and Wordsworth so attracted to Burke's position when faced with challenges to the British constitution, even British nationality, in the post-Napoleonic war period, while condemning a science – that of political economy – which Burke was proud to espouse? For Burke, a knowledge of this science comprised one of the main qualifications for any statesman who

²⁷ Earlier treatments of the Malthusian controversy that made no secret of their adversarial position can be found in K. Smith, *The Malthusian Controversy*, London, 1951; and Harold A. Boner, *Hungry Generations: The Nineteenth-Century Case against Malthusianism*, New York, 1955. As Boner made clear, he regarded the history of the controversy as one of dramatic struggle to expose Malthus's theory 'as an invidious and fallacious instrument for concealing exploitation and economic injustice'.

²⁸ For an account of the complex relationship between the two see J. W. Burrow, *Whigs and Liberals; Continuity and Change in English Political Thought*, Oxford, 1988.

²⁹ See for example P. Mandler, *Aristocratic Government in the Age of Reform*, Oxford, 1990; and James J. Sack, *From Jacobite to Conservative*, Cambridge, 1993.

had pretensions to legislate for modern commercial societies. By contrast, one of the fears of Southey and Coleridge was that the world would soon be ruled by 'a contemptible democratical oligarchy of glib economists, compared to which the worst form of aristocracy would be a blessing'.³⁰ Southey was an ultra-Tory and Coleridge was firmly labelled a 'speculative Tory' and later a Conservative by John Stuart Mill – a label that Coleridge would have been proud to accept, capital letter and all. What this suggests is that the confrontations I shall be considering coincide with, if they do not mark the beginnings of, the history of some potent terms of political art during a critical period in the social and political history of Britain, with the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, and the Catholic Relief and First Reform Bills providing one, albeit temporary, ending point, and the Poor Law Amendment Act yet another.

By using the indefinite article in the subtitle to this book to describe the intellectual history pursued here, and by speaking throughout of 'essays' as the mode in which the pursuit is carried out, I disclaim any pretension to exhaustiveness or finality. Other intellectual histories of political economy in this period could be, indeed have been, written.³¹ Moreover, while I have written a brief Epilogue, conclusions are spread throughout rather than being collected into a bundle at the end. I am following some leading themes in the writings of my protagonists, chiefly those centring on riches and poverty, its causes and consequences, under changing conditions which they were often the first to perceive and analyse. Moreover, since I am not writing a doctrinal history of political economy during this period I have not felt under any obligation to provide comprehensive coverage of all the significant figures and theoretical issues which united or divided them. Ricardo, Malthus's friend and opponent within the orthodox political economy community formed during the first decades of the nineteenth century, makes an appearance as the defender of Malthus's position in one of the essays (number 10), and features more prominently as the exponent of the alternative version of the science in another (number 13), while still being treated largely as a foil to Malthus. John Stuart Mill, still in his twenties when Malthus and Coleridge died, figures only briefly: his

³⁰ First cited in T. Allsop, *Letters, Conversations and Recollections of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, London, 1836 in 2 volumes, 1, pp. 136–7; and then in *Table Talk*, edited by H. N. Coleridge, London, 1838, p. 318.

³¹ See, for example, Jean-Claude Perrot, *Une histoire intellectuelle de l'économie politique, xvii–xviiième siècle*, Paris, 1992.

chief contribution to political economy, like that of Marx, belongs to the mid-century and beyond. Those who allied themselves with Malthus in the attempt to create a Christian alternative to the heathen version of political economy – John Bird Sumner, Edward Coplestone, Richard Whately, Thomas Chalmers, and Richard Jones – are also not accorded detailed treatment. If reasons beyond those inherent in the material are needed to justify these priorities, I would draw attention to the abundance of doctrinal histories of classical economics that are available.³² Christian political economy has also become the subject of a number of distinguished studies written by scholars whose understanding of the nuances of theological debate, and of the associated religious and political alignments, exceeds anything I could hope to achieve.³³

III

Since this is not the first occasion on which I have written about Smith and Malthus, this return to the scene of previous crimes may require some justification. In its most egotistical form my defence could not be more simple: I have not so far said all I wish to say about these figures in a manner that satisfies me. Bringing them together here allows me to discuss the issues which their writings raise in a broader and, I hope, richer way than has been possible so far. It also provides an opportunity to repair various shortcomings in my earlier work. For example, critics of my book on *Adam Smith's Politics*, in which I attempted to substitute an eighteenth-century political context for the predominantly nineteenth- and twentieth-century economic perspectives within which Smith is normally viewed, complained that in turning Smith to face his contemporaries I had severed the connections which must exist between any influential author and his progeny; that in locating Smith on an eighteenth-century map I had failed to show how that map was used, as it plainly was, by his successors.

To that charge I would plead guilty, largely because I believe that confusion is the most likely result of treating Smith's aims as interchangeable with the fate of his work in the hands of later generations of readers. I accept, however, that an obligation of some kind is placed on those who emphasise authorial intention as an antidote to anachronism

³² For example, see D. P. O'Brien, *The Classical Economists*, Oxford, 1974; and W. Eltis, *The Classical Theory of Economic Growth*, London, 1984.

³³ For references to the literature on Christian political economy see n. 51 below.

to pursue studies of the way in which seminal works make their way in the world and are transmuted in the process. Other critics maintained that I had paid insufficient attention to Smith's moral philosophy; and that in bringing Smith's politics to the fore I had obscured those economic propositions for which he is still best known. On all these fronts I would like to think I have made efforts in subsequent work to repair these defects.³⁴

The essays centring on Smith in Part 1 incorporate some of that work and take it further in the same direction. As an answer to the charge of making Smith less visible against the eighteenth-century contextual wall-paper, I have paid more attention to those respects in which Smith's vision was distinctive by showing how it transformed rather than merely reflected contemporary debate. This was achieved not by any single innovation, but by a series of shifts of emphasis, the origins of which can be traced to his contributions to the science of morals and jurisprudence as it was developing in the second half of the eighteenth century in Scotland. When carried over into the *Wealth of Nations* these shifts of emphasis enabled Smith as moral philosopher to repossess and reposition existing economic ideas, opinions, and systems, including the 'mercantile system', a pejorative term Smith employed to describe the anti-type of his own system. They also differentiate him from the more 'enlightened' economic ideas of François Quesnay and the French advocates of the 'agricultural system', where Smith has often been thought of as student as well as master.

In my earlier book on Smith, and in common with most students of eighteenth-century political thought, I was happy to acknowledge how much I had learned from the work of John Pocock on the continuing influence on Anglo-American thinking of 'civic humanist' or 'classical republican' tropes and models.³⁵ I was equally happy to record my debts to Duncan Forbes for all that he has written over the years on Hume and Smith, and on the kind of 'sceptical Whiggism' which they share.³⁶ Since then, Pocock has extended his work in numerous

³⁴ See 'Adam Smith's Politics Revisited', *Quaderni di Storia dell'Economia Politica*, 9 (1991), 3–27; and 'Adam Smith: Scottish Moral Philosopher as Political Economist', *Historical Journal*, 35 (1992), 91–113.

³⁵ From a large *œuvre* see especially *The Machiavellian Moment; Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*, Princeton, 1975; and *Virtue, Commerce and History*.

³⁶ See 'Sceptical Whiggism, Commerce and Liberty' in A. S. Skinner and T. Wilson (eds.), *Essays on Adam Smith*, Oxford, 1976, pp. 179–201; and *Hume's Philosophical Politics*, Cambridge, 1975.

directions, and has found it necessary to answer criticisms arising out of a revival of interest in 'liberal' interpretations of the origins of American national identity in which what he has usefully diagnosed as the *ideologia americana* continues to exert a strong gravitational pull.³⁷ The invocation of Smith's authority as licensing agent for all things connected with 'liberalism', and 'bourgeois' or 'possessive individualism', once emboldened me to make a brief incursion into this debate.³⁸ Apart from some concluding remarks to the essay (number 6) comparing Smith's remedies for the American revolt with those advanced by Burke, Paine, and Price, I have decided not to repeat this act of trespass here, though there is clearly scope for a parallel treatment of American applications of Smithian political economy during the period of early nationhood.³⁹

Pocock's influence has also been crucial in stimulating much of the most interesting work that has been done recently by social and cultural historians of the phenomenon now known as the Scottish Enlightenment. This has focussed on the pervasiveness of 'civic moralist' themes in the writings of educated Scots during the eighteenth century. Earlier social histories of ideas that dealt with the efflorescence of types of inquiry closely associated with Scotland -- for example, stadial versions of the history of civil society stressing its materialist underpinnings -- treated them as a response to an emergent or hoped-for capitalism, as anticipations of Marx's materialist version of historical development.⁴⁰ In the newer literature we are still invited to see such preoccupations as part of a provincial debate provoked by the problems of Scotland's relative economic backwardness, but the cultural and political dimension is given greater prominence, with more emphasis being placed on the problems posed by the loss of national political institutions after the Act of Union in 1707. How far the economic and cultural improvement associated with commercial society -- the prospect opened up by the Union -- was compatible with, or could serve as a substitute for, those participatory qualities

³⁷ See 'Republicanism and *Ideologia Americana*', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 48 (1987), 325-46.

³⁸ See 'Economic Liberalism as Ideology: The Appleby Version', *Economic History Review*, 38 (1985), 287-97.

³⁹ One of the best studies along these lines is Drew R. McCoy's *The Elusive Republic; Political Economy in Jeffersonian America*, New York, 1980. Since beginning this book, another interesting work has appeared that covers many of the issues; see John E. Crowley, *The Privileges of Independence; Neomercantilism and the American Revolution*, Baltimore, 1993.

⁴⁰ Ronald Meek was the most distinguished spokesman for this position; see 'The Scottish Contribution to Marxist Sociology' in *Economics and Ideology and Other Essays*, London, 1967, pp. 34-50; and *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage*, Cambridge, 1976.

prized by classical ideals of active citizenship became a major preoccupation in such a setting. Recent writing on this subject has certainly provided a richer ideological context within which to situate the work of those members of the Scottish literati who articulated positions on the moral and civic questions raised by an expanding economy based on commerce. It has allowed Smith to be treated, problematically, either as an illustration of these themes, or as just about to escape from them.⁴¹

Although I have learned a great deal from this work, I have also expressed reservations about the extension of purely Scottish perspectives to Smith (or, for that matter, Hume). While I acknowledge that they help us to understand some persistent themes in learned and popular debate in eighteenth-century Scotland, I prefer a perspective that treats Hume and Smith as being more responsive to European problems and audiences, and recognises the ways in which they consciously differentiated themselves from many of the figures who are considered to make up the Scottish Enlightenment.⁴² One of the chief difficulties in accommodating Smith within a provincial context is the sheer pre-eminence of the *Wealth of Nations*, whose broad comparative and cosmopolitan ambitions are signalled in the plural form of the title. There was more than conventional flattery in Adam Ferguson's remark to Smith after publication of the book that: 'You are surely to reign *alone* on these subjects, to form the opinions, and I hope to govern at least the coming generations.'⁴³ It also has to be noted that Smith was not particularly generous in acknowledging shared aims and achievements with his Scottish *confères* – a subject that has a distinct bearing on the question of Smith's originality and will therefore be tackled more fully later.

The differences between those who are interested in the social and cultural history of eighteenth-century Scotland and those, like myself,

⁴¹ See, for example, N. Phillipson, 'Culture and Society in the Eighteenth-Century Province', in L. Stone (ed.), *The University in Society*, Princeton, 1974, 2 volumes, II, pp. 407–48; the contributions by Phillipson and John Robertson to Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff (eds.), *Wealth and Virtue; The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment*, Cambridge, 1983; J. Robertson, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the Militia Issue*, Edinburgh, 1985; and R. B. Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment*, Princeton, 1985.

⁴² Here too I follow the example set by Duncan Forbes; see 'The European or Cosmopolitan Dimension in Hume's Science of Politics', *British Journal of Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 1 (1977), 57–60. See my 'Adam Smith's "Enduring Particular Result": A Political and Cosmopolitan Perspective', in Hont and Ignatieff (eds.), *Wealth and Virtue*, pp. 253–69; and 'Scottish Political Economy' in R. Wokler and M. Goldie (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Political Thought*, Cambridge, forthcoming.

⁴³ Letter to Smith, 18 April 1776 in *Corr.*, p. 193 (emphasis added).

who are mainly consumers of such history, may simply be attributed to focus and method. I would disclaim any intention of writing a *social* history of ideas, especially that form of social history which treats the intellectual identity of ideas as subordinate to ideological import, perhaps even as a smokescreen designed, consciously or unconsciously, to obscure that import. Expressed in crude programmatic terms, my work proceeds *from* individual authors and their texts *to* those intellectual and cultural contexts that promise most by way of understanding what those authors were attempting to do. In general, though not of course invariably, the social historian of ideas moves in the opposite direction by treating texts as evidence for and illustrations of collective preoccupations. My way of doing things does not satisfy those social and cultural historians who feel that it involves a mixture of textual pedantry with inadequate attention to the social contexts from which the texts have emerged. Those who are more sympathetic respond by complaining that the alternatives on offer frequently over-aggregate by treating the texts as instances rather than by facing up to their quiddity. With normal goodwill, and in the absence of an outbreak of tribal rivalry, however, it should be possible to continue the process of learning from one another.

'Scottish political economy' has emerged from the work of those scholars who are concerned with the collective characteristics of the Scottish Enlightenment as a sophisticated term of interpretative art. It encompasses far more than those economic ideas of Hume, Steuart, and Smith which have become the preserve of historians of economic thought. It extends, quite properly, to cover moral and political themes considered to be part of the science of man, as well as that other form of inquiry to which many Scottish philosophers contributed: the pursuit of the origins and development of civil society from 'rudeness to refinement' by means of a form of history in which universal psychological principles and socio-economic circumstances played twin illuminating roles. Although for reasons already mentioned, I do not find the *Scottish* political economy label informative when dealing with Hume and Smith, I am equally anxious not to accept the restricted perspective that still rules much of the work done by that tribe in which I served my own apprenticeship – the historians of economics, some of whom continue to treat it as an autonomous discipline, actual or in the making, relentlessly moving towards present enlightenment. Since I have consistently opposed the teleological assumptions that underlie this position elsewhere, I would rather assume than labour the basic

point in the essays that follow. To make this possible, however, some further explanation of what I understand by political economy may be needed here.

Smith was sparing in his use of the term, partly because he saw political economy merely as part of the larger inquiries on which he was engaged, and partly perhaps because Steuart had used *Inquiry into the Principles of Political Oeconomy* as the title of his rival work published nearly a decade before the *Wealth of Nations*. Smith mostly uses the term when discussing the policy implications of the mercantile and agricultural systems, thereby emphasising the connections with the art of legislation. Treated thus, his definition of the practical objectives of political economy is fairly conventional by eighteenth-century standards: it was 'to provide a plentiful revenue or subsistence for the people, or more properly to enable them to provide such a revenue or subsistence for themselves; and secondly to supply the state or commonwealth with a revenue sufficient for the publick services'. At the same time, Smith defined political economy as 'a branch of the science of a statesman or legislator', reminding us that the *Wealth of Nations* began life as those parts of Smith's lectures on natural jurisprudence that dealt with the subordinate questions of 'police, revenue and arms'.⁴⁴ Although he failed to complete his original plan to write an account of the 'theory and History of Law and Government' of the kind promised in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, there are good grounds for taking the project seriously when interpreting the *Wealth of Nations*.⁴⁵

Apart from the 'advertisement' added to the final edition in 1790, there are no explicit cross-references to the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* in the *Wealth of Nations*, or vice versa. Nevertheless, the student notes on Smith's lectures on jurisprudence give us some idea of how and where bridges between the two works can be constructed. In addition to those pervasive questions of motivation and morals which appear in both works, there are clear links between the *theory* of justice in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, the *history* of law and government in the lectures, and the application of both theory and history to the institutions and policies provided in the *Wealth of Nations*. In this manner the lectures (where there *are* some cross-references to the writings published or about to be published) help to explain why considerations of justice are

⁴⁴ *WN*, IV.1 (emphasis added).

⁴⁵ For the statement of the plan see the advertisement to *TMS* and a letter to Rochefoucauld, 1 November 1785 in *Corr.*, p. 287.

so frequently invoked alongside judgements based on economic expediency in the *Wealth of Nations*, and why the terminology of natural rights has such a prominent part to play in defining the injuries that it is possible for legislators to inflict on citizens and citizens to inflict on one another. Far from being an atavistic survival from an uncompleted plan, therefore, Smith's science of the legislator, with its natural jurisprudential underpinnings, serves as a means of understanding the shape and purpose of the enterprise as a whole.⁴⁶

Such considerations also shed light on Smith's confidence in the essential novelty of the accumulated shifts of focus that he had accomplished by 1776; they explain why he was so anxious to lay claim to independent discovery of the system of natural liberty in lectures that go back as far as 1748 and the early 1750s. (Hence, incidentally, the rough starting date in my subtitle.) Questions of novelty with regard to *content* aside, however, Smith's use of political economy to describe a branch of a broader inquiry into jurisprudence and forms of government, with the whole edifice being underpinned by treatments of morals, metaphysics, or psychology, conforms with a general eighteenth-century practice that continued into the early part of the nineteenth century.⁴⁷ While the success of a work such as the *Wealth of Nations* may have aided the process by which the science that became economics separated itself from politics and moral philosophy, *absorption* seems a more accurate brief description of what Smith himself was actually doing when he embarked on his ambitious attempt to provide the anatomy and physiology of commercial society, together with related excursions into its history and pathology. As long as these larger commitments are borne in mind, it is also possible to employ political economy as synecdoche, as a form of shorthand in which the part is used to describe the whole, as in the subtitle of this book.

There is likely to be more disposition to accept the above view of how Smith's political economy fits into a larger plan than is the case with Malthus. The latter is normally treated as belonging to 'classical' or, in Marx's terminology, 'vulgar' political economy, as someone whose doctrines may have strayed from orthodoxy, as represented by Ricardo's ideas, but whose basic approach to the post-Smithian science

⁴⁶ I should like to acknowledge the general influence which Knud Haakonssen's work has had on my understanding of this aspect of Smith's thinking; see especially *The Science of a Legislator: The Natural Jurisprudence of David Hume and Adam Smith*, Cambridge, 1981; and the essays collected in *Natural Law and Moral Philosophy from Grotius to the Scottish Enlightenment*, New York, forthcoming.

⁴⁷ See L. J. Hume, *Bentham and Bureaucracy*, Cambridge, 1981, pp. 32–6.

was identical with that of his secular utilitarian contemporaries. Yet Malthus too, in his arguments with Ricardo, held that ‘the science of political economy bears a nearer resemblance to the science of morals and politics than to that of mathematics’.⁴⁸ Unpacking that remark, including its most puzzling aspect, namely that it was Malthus rather than Ricardo who was the Cambridge-trained mathematician, has proved fruitful. Ricardo was frequently bemused by Malthus’s attempts to combine moral and economic questions; and this bemusement has been echoed by modern economists who wish to stress the ‘positive’ credentials of their discipline. It was even echoed by John Maynard Keynes – who was not strongly wedded to the positivist conception of economics and has proved to be one of Malthus’s most sympathetic admirers – when he described the trajectory of Malthus’s career as follows: ‘... from being a caterpillar of a moral scientist and chrysalis of an historian, he could at last spread the wings of his thought and survey the world as an economist’.⁴⁹ Since I believe that what distinguishes Malthus most as a political economist from his secular contemporaries is his life-long commitment to a Christian version of the science of morals and politics, the essays in Part III can be seen as an attempt to stand Keynes’s judgement right side up.⁵⁰ More generally, it can be taken as a response to another tendency in the history of economic and social theorising that merits the term premature secularisation. As the history of the natural sciences, from Newton up to Darwin, amply demonstrates, natural theology provided a fruitful setting within which both natural and moral sciences could shelter. ‘Parson’ Malthus, as William Cobbett and Marx called him, with disobliging intent, was not Ricardo or John Stuart Mill wearing a dog collar merely for fashion or convenience.

As mentioned already in passing, there is now a distinguished body of writing devoted to Christian political economy that makes it easier to sustain what ought not to have been such a surprising conclusion in the first place when dealing with an age in which religion and science, let alone religion and politics, were usually inseparable. One of the most ambitious and insightful contributions to this body of literature has been Boyd Hilton’s studies of ‘evangelical economics’. These have

⁴⁸ See *PPE*, I, p. 2.

⁴⁹ *Essays in Biography* in Keynes, *CW*, x, p. 107.

⁵⁰ For my earlier treatments of Malthus see Stefan Collini, Donald Winch, and John Burrow, *That Noble Science of Politics: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Intellectual History*, Cambridge, 1983, pp. 63–89; *Malthus*, Oxford, 1987; and the introduction to *An Essay on the Principle of Population* in the Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought series, 1992.

revealed the presence and pervasive influence of a Christian – often a ‘liberal Tory’ – vision of *laissez-faire* and free trade that Hilton summarises as ‘static (or cyclical), nationalist, retributive, and purgative, employing competition as a means to education rather than to growth. Its psychological premiss was not self-interest but the supremacy of economic conscience, the latter innate in man yet needing to be nurtured into a habitude through the mechanism of the free market, with its constant operation of temptation, trial, and exemplary suffering.’⁵¹ Malthus undoubtedly played a key role in making this vision possible, though it is more completely illustrated by others, especially by the preachings of Thomas Chalmers, often treated as Malthus’s only as well as his most faithful disciple.

One of the strengths of the ‘evangelical’ reinterpretation lies in its ability to show how similar conclusions in political economy could often be supported by different, more theologically based views of the limits and possibilities of human action within a divinely inspired scheme. Another merit of these studies showing the vigour of political economy in its liberal Tory guise is that they have opened up a wider spectrum on the political affiliations of political economy during the first third of the nineteenth century. It is no longer possible to think of the science as having only Whig or Benthamite credentials; and when dealing with such landmarks as the Poor Law Amendment Act, the debate cannot be confined, as it often has been in the past, to a dispute between the claims of Malthus and Bentham on one side, and a more or less differentiated body of thinking operating under some such label as ‘paternalism’ or ‘Tory humanitarianism’ on the other.⁵² Those who still seek an intellectual fairy-godfather or evil genius to account for this and other important pieces of nineteenth-century social and economic legislation will no doubt continue to stress the emblematic status of Malthus or Bentham, even to urge detailed claims to paternity.⁵³ That kind of inquiry into priority and influence will not be pursued in what

⁵¹ See Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement; The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795–1865*, Oxford, 1988, pp. 69–70. This work builds on an earlier study, *Corn, Cash, Commerce; The Economic Policies of the Tory Governments, 1815–1830*, Oxford, 1977. R. A. Soloway’s *Prelates and People; Ecclesiastical Thought in England, 1783–1852*, London, 1969 remains a valuable source. For a major recent study of the subject as a whole see A. M. C. Waterman on *Revolution, Economics and Religion; Christian Political Economy*, Cambridge, 1991.

⁵² The most detailed and insightful treatment of the whole debate on the Poor Laws, and Malthus’s part within it, is still that of J. R. Poynter, *Society and Pauperism: English Ideas on Poor Relief, 1795–1834*, London, 1969.

⁵³ For a recent attempt to argue that the Act was attributable to Malthus see Dean, *The Constitution of Poverty*, pp. 100–5.

follows. The serious study of ideas in relation to practice, as opposed to the attribution of iconographic status to past thinkers, is best left to those prepared to work on the entire range of evidence, local and national, individual and corporate, required by any inquiry into administrative practices, legislative processes, and political alignments. Some recent literature on the Poor Law Amendment Act has undertaken such research, with the result that 1834 no longer seems to be quite the unprecedented watershed in the history of a centralised welfare state it was once thought to be.⁵⁴ There has also been some interesting work by Peter Mandler on the role played by those Christian and liberal Tory thinkers who acted as intermediaries between the political economy of Malthus and those élite representatives of the landowning classes who were faced with both the need and responsibility for reforming Poor Law administration.⁵⁵ Apart from registering sympathy for any work that succeeds in attributing genuine content to the ideas of the ruling classes (or any other classes for that matter), the political history of social policy lies beyond my competence. The perspective I have attempted to sustain here is one that sees the issues through Malthus's eyes during the final decade of his life. For this reason alone I have ventured some comments on where and how comfortably my portrait of Malthus fits within the new evangelical and liberal Tory perspectives in one of the essays in Part III (number 13).

The same essay also questions the hardness of another binary distinction that both Marx and Keynes, in their different ways, helped to create when they contrasted Ricardian and Malthusian political economy. Whereas Ricardo, in Marx's eyes, possessed the quality of 'ruthless objectivity' characteristic of the best examples of the 'bourgeois' version of the science of political economy – before overt class warfare forced its devotees to choose an ideological allegiance, for or against Capital – Malthus was merely someone who had sought to defend a landed aristocracy threatened by the inexorable forces of capitalist development. Accordingly, Malthus became a representative of those who desire 'bourgeois production as long as it is not

⁵⁴ See, for example, A. Brundage, *The Making of the New Poor Law*, London, 1978; and P. Dunkley, *The Crisis of the Old Poor Law in England, 1795–1834*, New York, 1982. For a recent survey of the literature see D. Eastwood, 'Rethinking the Debates on the Poor Law in Early Nineteenth-Century England', *Utilitas*, 6 (1994), 97–116.

⁵⁵ See 'The Making of the New Poor Law *Redivivus*', *Past and Present*, 117 (1987), 131–57; 'Tories and Paupers: Christian Political Economy and the Making of the New Poor Law', *Historical Journal*, 33 (1990), 81–103; the debate with Brundage and Eastwood in *Past and Present*, 127 (1990), 183–201.

revolutionary, constitutes no historical factor of development but merely creates a broader and more comfortable material basis for the "old" society'.⁵⁶ Residues of this interpretation can still be found outside the Marxian tradition proper, with Malthus being held responsible for upholding a static, perhaps even backward-looking or quasi-physiocratic vision as an alternative to Ricardo's more dynamic belief in industrial progress and free trade.⁵⁷

While he was writing the *General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* at least, Keynes was less concerned with the long-term dynamism of the capitalist economic system than with its short-term inability to sustain full employment. For this purpose, what attracted him to Malthus was his valiant if unsuccessful attempt to counter that aspect of Ricardian orthodoxy which centred on Jean-Baptiste Say's Law of Markets – a set of propositions supporting the conclusion that unemployment resulting from *general* over-production was impossible. It led Keynes to register an extraordinary lament for a history of political economy that might have been: 'If only Malthus, instead of Ricardo, had been the parent stem from which nineteenth-century economics proceeded, what a much wiser and richer place the world would be today!'⁵⁸ Keynes had set the scene for a new binary line to be drawn within doctrinal histories of the subject: between 'classical' (in another sense) economists who assumed full employment as a natural equilibrium state, and those predecessors of Keynes who argued, sometimes only intuitively, the contrary. Keynes's intervention undoubtedly led to a useful re-examination of an 'underground' tradition of which Malthus was merely the best-known British representative during the early part of the nineteenth century. In this respect Keynes began the business of rescuing Malthus from the shadow of Ricardo – the position to which he had been assigned by the patronising judgements of two very different kinds of Ricardian, Marx and John Stuart Mill, and a long line of doctrinal historians following in their footsteps. The results

⁵⁶ See *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy; Theories of Surplus Value* in *Karl Marx/Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, xxxii, p. 244. For a compendium of Marxian criticisms of Malthus see R. L. Meek (ed.), *Marx and Engels on Malthus*, London, 1953.

⁵⁷ The most thorough-going modern treatment of Malthus as an atavistic neo-physiocrat can be found in B. Semmel, *The Rise of Free Trade Imperialism*, Cambridge, 1970, especially Chapter 3 on 'The Agrarian Critique'. Echoes of this appear in Hilton, *Age of Atonement*, pp. 37–8, 70, 119; and in Poynter's *Society and Pauperism*, pp. 239–45.

⁵⁸ See Keynes, *CW*, x, pp. 100–1. This essay was an expanded and heavily modified version of an earlier tribute to Malthus written in 1926: the changes can be related to Keynes's readings of the Malthus–Ricardo correspondence at a time when he was in the course of developing his own attack on 'classical economics' in the *General Theory*.

of the re-examination, however, were often an exaggeration of the division between Malthus and Ricardo and a Keynesianised Malthus that ignored Malthus's own concern with long-term growth prospects *as well as* short-term adjustment problems.

Once this is recognised, some of the undoubted contrasts between Ricardo and Malthus, whether as conceived by Marx, Keynes, or even by Malthus's fellow-Christian economists, appear in a different light. Instead of being treated as an ideologically motivated opponent of Ricardian verities, Malthus re-emerges, less dramatically and far less pathetically, as a persistent seeker after the golden mean who continued to act as an intermediary between the secular and Christian versions of political economy that existed after Ricardo's death in 1823. Strangely enough, while taking some comfort from his Christian supporters, the role of mediator often required Malthus to defend many of those ideas which he held in common with his friend and sparring partner – ideas that established their credentials for having advanced beyond the original Smithian legacy. Expressed somewhat differently, it was not a case of Ricardo and a vigorous group of his disciples vanquishing a muddled and lonely Malthus, or even of Ricardian economics undergoing rapid decline not long after the master's death, both of which can be documented. It was more a matter of both Ricardo and Malthus finding the themes that preoccupied them as the first generation of post-Smithian political economists being treated as less relevant, even highly questionable, by the immediately succeeding generation.

IV

The world is currently well supplied with different modalities for writing intellectual history: the study of *mentalités*, the archaeology of discursive practices, *Ideologiekritik*, cultural materialism, the new historicism, and deconstructionism are some of the methodological labels in current use. It seems necessary, therefore, to say a few words about what is on offer here. Since I am not *advocating* the exclusive use of the approach that I find comes most naturally, the words can afford to be few. On this, as on other matters, Smith provided a useful distinction when he likened codes of morality to matters of stylistic taste in order to contrast them with the more precise grammar entailed in what he regarded as universal rules of natural justice.⁵⁹ While it is clearly the

⁵⁹ *TMS*, III.6.II.

duty of intellectual historians to be attentive to the language used by their subjects, the choice between modes of writing history belongs more to the realm of morals and style than grammar. It therefore seems an act of supererogation to mount an elaborate defence of my own particular style.

Although I have been engaged in writing some kind of intellectual history most of my professional life, my interests have shifted as I have learned more about my craft. I have also learned a good deal about how such history might be written from two friends who are, sadly, no longer my colleagues, John Burrow and Stefan Collini. The learning was most intense during the period of collaboration that preceded publication of our joint work on *That Noble Science of Politics* in 1983. In a happy expression which I am glad to appropriate, John Burrow has likened the kind of history we write to 'eavesdropping on the conversations of the past'.⁶⁰ In their own work over the years, my ex-collaborators have shown admirable acuteness of hearing and sensitivity to tones of voice.⁶¹ Although they too have been interested in the reconstruction of political arguments, in partial contrast with them, and possibly reflecting both subject matter and temperament, my own work may more often seem to be dealing with formal debates and quarrels than conversations. Nevertheless, I would still like to think that the debates often resemble conversations in having more than two sides; in allowing the speakers to change sides; and in permitting them sometimes to occupy all positions according to occasion and mood. That accounts too for the liberal use of epigraphs and lengthy quotations in what follows: they are designed to enable the reader to capture the tone of voice being employed. The analogy with conversation also explains why I would like to register a mild and probably vain protest against the tendency in intellectual history to arrange the various teams in terms of exhaustive binary choices. It was to escape the tyranny of the Tory/Whig dualism that Duncan Forbes invented the idea of 'sceptical Whiggism'. Among the dualisms currently being applied to eighteenth-century political thinking that are in danger of becoming tyrannical are the following: natural jurisprudence versus civic humanism, liberalism versus classical republicanism, *homo oecono-*

⁶⁰ See J. W. Burrow, 'The Languages of the Past and the Language of the Historian: The History of Ideas in Theory and Practice', John Coffin Memorial Lecture, 1987.

⁶¹ See J. W. Burrow, *A Liberal Descent; Victorian Historians and the English Past*, Cambridge, 1981; and *Whigs and Liberals*. For Stefan Collini's most recent work, see *Arnold*, Oxford, 1988; and *Public Moralists; Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain, 1850-1930*, Oxford, 1991.

micus versus *homo civicus*. In what follows, with the exception of a brief contrast between ‘commercial’ and ‘republican’ ideas of liberty, I have either avoided these terms or used them non-exhaustively. The essays in Part III, as may be clear from what has already been said about Malthus and his critics, are also indirectly concerned with questioning some equally coercive dualisms that have been applied to that controversy.

My earlier remarks about texts and contexts will reveal that I subscribe to a humanist position which believes in the existence of authors as well as texts and discursive practices – authors who were capable of forming and sometimes succeeding in carrying out their intentions when writing.⁶² They did so with more or less success because, like ourselves, their language and logic was more or less adequate to the tasks they undertook. In most cases, their contemporaries, especially their adversaries, will have pointed out the failures and partialities; but since these arguments and their consequences may not have been resolved in our day, we too can join in the act of judging success. Whether we do so and the extent to which we do so is a matter of temperament rather than an obligation, and it is always best to follow a policy of honesty in acknowledging that one is doing so.

It follows too that the difficulties in establishing intention, though by no means negligible, are treated as capable of being surmounted in what follows. The essays in this book have been written on the assumption that we can reconstruct what past speakers were trying to express without losing our own capacity to talk about the same subjects in the process. While the conversations overheard here require historical imagination on the part of writer and reader, I hope they are not arbitrary or playful inventions which substitute my own concerns for those of my protagonists. Indeed, unless we are prepared to mount a conscientious effort to avoid this pitfall, I see little point in making them part of our own conversations. It also follows that I make no use of the gratuitous doctrine known as ‘esoterism’ which substitutes an interpretation of what authors *really* meant for what they actually, and however imperfectly, wrote.

Many of the practitioners of alternative ways of writing intellectual history clearly feel they are engaged in resolving the weightier moral and political dilemmas of today, deploying sophisticated ‘theory’ and

⁶² The influence of Quentin Skinner on such matters is gratefully acknowledged here as on previous occasions; see J. Tully (ed.), *Meaning and Context; Quentin Skinner and his Critics*, Oxford, 1988.

suitably technical apparatuses for the purpose. My inability to follow their example by making similar claims could be the result of an earlier professional deformation resulting from being educated originally as an economist, and from living most of my academic life with social scientists of one kind or another. Whatever else it may be, economics can hardly be described as antagonistic to explicit theorising. Familiarity with the habits of economists and other social scientists, however, has not convinced me that I am under any obligation to ape them when writing intellectual history. There are other, equally important things to do, and they rarely require the use of theories borrowed from other pursuits for the purpose of achieving historical understanding. I would confess, however, to following a fairly simple rule of thumb in such matters: past authors should be treated as one would wish one's own writings and beliefs to be treated, should the positions, by some amazing twist of fate, be reversed. The moral I draw from this is that we should not regard our subjects as helpless victims of *their* circumstances and *our* theoretical or ideological categories.

The puritanism of this aim can still be defended when dealing with the more playful forms of deconstruction as well as grosser cases of anachronism arising from teleological assumptions, but it needs to be qualified to avoid another kind of misunderstanding. Eavesdropping is not quite as easy as the word may suggest. At the very least it requires sharp ears, and even its original meaning entailed the uncomfortable business of lurking unseen between houses, the places where the eaves dripped or dropped. Moreover, we are never *merely* eavesdroppers, anxious only to recapture as faithfully as possible what our interlocutors were saying and how they were doing so. We are engaged in conversations of our own, and we select, edit, and translate according to priorities dictated by our own curiosity and the possible interest and knowledge of those to whom we are speaking. We also possess hindsight and ways of looking and listening that enable us to discern features of the landscape that were not perceived by past interlocutors.

Switching metaphors from listening to travelling, we can be concerned with how the natives saw and did things while sustaining our own interest in patterns that either did not interest them or would not have been available to them. If this were not an integral part of our inquiry, we could simply rely on the evidence assembled by previous visitors, thereby avoiding the time and trouble, but also enjoyment and enlightenment, involved in travelling ourselves. Like any safety-conscious traveller to places that are new to me, I have read the work of

the many *ciceroni* who have explored the territory before me. My footnotes record my debts to these sources and occasionally my opinions on those I have found less reliable as guides. As the term 'secondary sources' implies, however, none of them can ever be a satisfactory substitute for the real thing. For this reason they will not be mentioned in the text from this point onwards.



PART I

Adam Smith's science of the legislator

An excessive solicitude for posthumous reputation

I

Strangers to Smith's biography may find it odd, particularly in a book that purports to be interested in Smith's intentions, that so little of a systematic nature is said here about Smith's life outside those highly polished writings which remain his chief monument and the main challenge to our understanding. Discerning connections, contradictions, and changes of emphasis within these works has always been central to scholarly interpretation, with each generation entertaining versions of what German scholars in the late nineteenth century dubbed as *Das Adam Smith Problem* – the problem of establishing consonance, if it exists, between his writings as moral philosopher and political economist. Smith left us with few personal or programmatic statements to guide us on such matters. He has also been criticised for culpable niggardliness in acknowledging his intellectual debts, leading to doubts about his originality when sources of influence have been discovered or, more usually, imputed.¹ Smith's firm sense of his own subjective originality may account for the parsimonious treatment he accorded to some of his predecessors and closest contemporaries. These problems will be encountered throughout what follows, but an early appreciation of Smith's deficiencies as a subject for biographical treatment may, paradoxically, help towards understanding the man as well as the problems of relating his life and work.

For if behind those publications to which he attached his name, Smith often appears private and aloof, that is how he wished it to be.

¹ The *locus classicus* of the opinion that Smith merely synthesised and rarely surpassed the best work of his predecessors remains J. A. Schumpeter, *History of Economic Analysis*, New York, 1954; see pp. 183–94, 361, 367, 557–8. For a more recent treatment of the same problem, minus Schumpeter's condescension, see T. W. Hutchison, *Before Adam Smith: The Emergence of Political Economy, 1662–1776*. Oxford, 1988.

Any attempt to penetrate the screen he erected to protect his privacy does well to begin from this observation. It is also worth bearing in mind the limits of legitimate inference from the more obvious kinds of biographical material. Considerable effort over the years has been required to establish even the most basic facts about some of the more or less public phases of Smith's career, whether as student at Oxford, Edinburgh lecturer, Glasgow professor, university administrator, tutor to the Duke of Buccleuch, member of various clubs, Commissioner of Customs, and adviser to statesmen. Less success has attended efforts to portray his personality, moral and political preferences, and his private sentiments. Indeed, most of these efforts have entailed the use of sources – letters and student notes – that Smith would undoubtedly have destroyed if he had been in a position to do so. As it was, he burned the sixteen manuscript volumes of unfinished work that he did not wish to see published, an act which Dugald Stewart, his first biographer, described as an 'irreparable injury to letters' which 'proceeded, in some degree, from an excessive solicitude in the author about his posthumous reputation'.²

The keenness of this solicitude was manifested in Smith's involvement in similar proceedings when his closest friend, David Hume, died. The opinions he expressed, openly and covertly, on that occasion allow us to be as certain as it is possible to be about his views on these matters. William Strahan, Hume's publisher, with the support of Edward Gibbon, another friend, proposed to add a selection of Hume's letters to the brief memoir of his life Hume had written for addition to posthumous editions of his works. Smith responded to the proposal as follows:

I am sensible that many of Mr Humes letters would do him great honour, and that you would publish none but such as would. But what in this case ought principally to be considered is the will of the Dead. Mr Humes constant injunction was to burn all his Papers except the *Dialogues* [*Concerning Natural Religion*] and the account of his own life. This injunction was even inserted in the body of his will. I know he always disliked the thought of his letters ever being published. He had been in long and intimate correspondence with a relation of his own who dyed a few years ago. When that Gentlemans health began to decline he was extremely anxious to get back his letters, least the heir should think of publishing them. They were accordingly returned and burnt as soon as returned. If a collection of Mr Humes letters, besides, was to receive the public approbation, as yours certainly would, the Curls of the

² 'Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith' in *EPS*, p. 327.

times would immediately set about rummaging the cabinets of all those who had ever received a scrap of paper from him. Many things would be published not fit to see the light, to the great mortification of all those who wish well to his memory.³

As we know from his lectures on jurisprudence, Smith regarded testamentary succession as a late development in legal history, requiring a special exercise in imaginative sympathy with the last injunctions of the dead.⁴ For this very reason he also recognised that such sympathy was likely to be short-lived, thereby reinforcing the obligation placed on all those close to the person and the event. Offering to return or destroy letters to a close friend at the end of a period of intimacy was not uncommon in the eighteenth century. Its rationale as a courtesy is caught by Hume's remark that in order to safeguard future conviviality, a friend ought not be reminded of any indiscretions committed when last he was drunk.⁵ The main concern of all those who wished well to the memory of a dead friend should be to protect from unnecessary hazards a reputation built up over a lifetime.

Hume's death placed Smith in a peculiarly difficult position. Respect for his friend's wishes conflicted with regard for reputation – his own as well as Hume's. He showed marked reluctance to carry out Hume's original wish that he should oversee the publication of the *Dialogues on Natural Religion*. Faced with Smith's scruples, Hume first agreed to leave him discretion to publish when he saw fit, 'or whether you will publish it at all'.⁶ Several weeks later, however, Hume wanted greater assurance that the *Dialogues* would be published. After considering whether he should publish them himself, he made other arrangements that effectively released Smith from what was clearly a burden on his conscience.

Smith did agree to oversee the publication of Hume's brief autobiography; he also obtained Hume's agreement that he should add to it an account of Hume's composure during the final stages of his illness. These additions, in which Smith described his friend 'as approaching as nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man, as perhaps the nature of

³ Letter to William Strahan, 2 December 1776 in *Corr.*, p. 223. The reference to 'the Curls of the times' is to Edmund Curll, a notorious London publisher attacked by Pope in the *Dunciad*, who specialised in publishing literary correspondence and biographical gossip. It was said of Curll that his biographies gave a new terror to death.

⁴ See *LJB*, pp. 466–7 and *TMS*, I.i.1.13.

⁵ See *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd edition by P. H. Nidditch, Oxford, 1975, p. 209.

⁶ Letter from Hume, 3 May 1776 in *Corr.*, p. 196.

human frailty will admit', as Smith later testified, 'brought upon me ten times more abuse than the very violent attack I had made upon the whole commercial system of Great Britain'.⁷ The scandal to some Christian consciences aroused by Smith's praise for the manner in which his unbelieving friend approached death confirms Smith's prediction about the likely outbreak of unwelcome publicity that would have accompanied publication of Hume's letters at this time.

Some detective work is necessary when private and public faces are turned in different directions. The most convincing piece of detection practised on this episode sheds a light that might not otherwise have been available on Smith's own position on religion during the latter part of his life.⁸ Two sentences in a private letter written by Smith at this time carry a good deal of weight when seen against this background:

Poor David Hume is dying very fast, but with great cheerfulness and good humour and with more real resignation to the necessary course of things, than any Whining Christian ever dyed with pretended resignation to the will of God. . . . Since we must lose our friend the most agreeable thing that can happen is that he dyes [as] a man of sense ought to do.⁹

How much more abuse would there have been if Smith had expressed himself in like fashion in his public obituary! As the modern editors of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* have pointed out, however, it is not without significance that 'whining and melancholy moralists' and the 'whining tone of some modern systems' is the description Smith gives to sentimental and Christian-inspired ideas when contrasted with the 'spirit and manhood' of the Stoics.¹⁰ A more open avowal of such opinions on the occasion of Hume's death would have added extra spice to the speculations of Samuel Johnson and Edmund Burke, both of whom, in response to James Boswell's morbid fascination with the subject, recorded their views as believers on how Hume's death and Smith's account of it should be interpreted. Johnson took the view that Hume combined vanity with a lie when he claimed not to be concerned by the prospect of annihilation.¹¹ He did not respond, however, to

⁷ Letter to Andreas Holt, 26 October 1780 in *Corr.*, p. 251.

⁸ See D. D. Raphael, 'Adam Smith and "The Infection of David Hume's Society"', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 30 (1969), 225-48. I have also benefited from reading another talk on this subject by Professor Raphael, 'Hume and Adam Smith on Religion', Open University series on the Enlightenment, BBC, September 1980.

⁹ Letter to Alexander Wedderburn, 14 August 1776 in *Corr.*, pp. 203-4.

¹⁰ See *TMS*, vii.ii.1.29 and iii.3.9.

¹¹ James Boswell, *Boswell in Extremes, 1776-78*, edited by C. M. Weiss and Frank Pottle, New Haven, 1971, p. 155.

Boswell's invitation to 'knock Hume's and Smith's heads together, and make vain and ostentatious infidelity exceedingly ridiculous'. George Horne, the Bishop of Norwich, was about to perform this task in *A Letter to Adam Smith on the Life, Death and Philosophy of his Friend David Hume* which appeared in 1777, and was regularly reprinted by the Christian Gospel Society well into the nineteenth century as a warning against infidelity. Johnson clearly did not share Boswell's opinion that Smith's encomium provided an opportunity to 'crush such noxious weeds in the moral garden'.¹²

Smith's careful choice of his public words concealed some of his feelings and opinions without forgoing the opportunity to suggest his own position. Hence Boswell's charge of 'ostentatious infidelity' and some lingering doubt as to whether Smith had a genuine right to be surprised by the reaction. Burke saw this when he tried to soothe Boswell by saying that Smith's account of his friend's death was 'said for the credit of their church', adding that 'the members of no church use more art for its credit'.¹³ When taken in conjunction with the excision of a passage from the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* mentioning the doctrine of atonement, the episode reveals that Smith was not so much an active sceptic on religious matters in the Humean vein as either indifferent or calmly undecided.¹⁴ This is consistent with the deathbed jokes Hume used to entertain his friends, and with the gentle jibes against Christians which he could not resist making in his last personal testament. It is also consistent with the way in which he answered Boswell's prurient inquiries during their last conversation.¹⁵

If Boswell had sought to interview Smith under similar circumstances it seems reasonable to suppose that he would have been told that his inquiries were not only impertinent but irrelevant. Smith's main anxiety as death approached was to ensure that his executors destroyed most of his unfinished work. He permitted them to publish only a

¹² Letter from Boswell to Johnson, 9 June 1777 in *Letters of James Boswell*, edited by C. B. Tinker, Oxford, 1924, 2 volumes, 1, p. 204. Boswell's antipathy to Smith, his former teacher, was also connected with Smith's criticisms of Oxford in *WN*: 'Since his absurd eulogium on Hume and his ignorant and ungrateful attack on the English university education, I have had no desire to be much with him.' See *The Private Papers of James Boswell*, edited by G. Scott and F. A. Pottle, New York, 1928–34, XIII, pp. 286–7.

¹³ See *Boswell in Extremes*, p. 270.

¹⁴ Hence D. D. Raphael's conclusion that: 'To worry about the truth of religion is, in a very real sense, the mark of a religious man, and in that sense one can say, however paradoxically, that Hume was a more religious man than Adam Smith'; see BBC talk cited in n. 8 above.

¹⁵ See *Boswell in Extremes*, pp. 11–15. For an interesting reconstruction of the impact of Hume's death on Boswell, see M. Ignatieff, *The Needs of Strangers*, London, 1984, Chapter 3.

juvenile essay on the history of astronomy and some fragments of 'a connected history of the liberal sciences and elegant arts', but they were instructed to destroy the rest 'without examination'. As things turned out, Smith was able to perform the deed himself: he could face death with contentment only when it was done. In this way the rest of his work on what he described a few years earlier as 'a sort of Philosophical History of all the different branches of Literature, of Philosophy, Poetry and Eloquence', and 'a sort of theory and History of Law and Government', was consigned to the flames.¹⁶ Hume wanted his unpublished views on religion to become part of his philosophical reputation, Smith to be judged mainly by those substantial parts of his ambitious plan that were already in the public domain and had been revised by his own hand.

II

Smith's solicitude in such matters was accompanied by other disabilities that have hindered biographers. As the numerous complaints of his friends testify, Smith was a poor correspondent, the brevity and tardiness of his letters being partly due to the fact that he found the act of writing physically painful. Although he employed amanuenses extensively when engaged on his books and official duties, it is harder to use someone else to write personal letters in an off-the-cuff fashion. Smith's difficulties in this respect probably explain the relatively small number of letters from him that have survived: an average of no more than three or four for every year of his life. Living in an age that was addicted to occasional pamphlets of a political, religious, and satirical kind, Smith was also unusual in writing only full-scale treatises. Even the posthumously published essays on philosophical subjects are lengthy and highly polished. With fewer comments on issues of topical moment outside those contained in his formal writings, we have less to go on when trying to establish his passing enthusiasms, moods, and changes of direction. For this purpose we have to rely almost entirely on the finished work and the changes made as new editions were prepared.

The contrast with Hume is obvious. For not only do we have the record provided by Hume's popular essays on all manner of topics from politics to polygamy, from the balance of trade to suicide and the

¹⁶ Letter to La Rochefoucauld, 1 November 1785 in *Corr.*, p. 287.

immortality of the soul, there are also his witty, sometimes impatient, and usually exuberant letters to friends. The risk here is of *embarras de richesse*, with private and public statement becoming confused, irony and fleeting mood being taken at face value, and the difference in weight to be attached to formal treatises and letters being elided.¹⁷ Hume also wrote 'a very inoffensive Piece called *My own Life*', while Gibbon, in more highly wrought fashion, recorded those facts about the author of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* which he felt his readership would appreciate. Smith was not so inclined, and even seems to have avoided the lesser vanity of sitting for his portrait. A likeness executed in wax by Tassie, possibly while Smith was doing something else, and a couple of caricatures by John Kay is all we have.

In the absence of autobiography, and given the other difficulties mentioned so far, those who wished to know more about Smith than can be gathered from his writings had to rely on Dugald Stewart's *Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith*, a work that was written for delivery to the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1793 as an *éloge* and was therefore constrained by the conventions of that genre. It was based on limited personal acquaintance, the testimony of Smith's surviving students and friends, some valuable documents that were later destroyed by Stewart's son, and the kind of detailed knowledge of Smith's works that might be expected of someone who was Professor of Moral Philosophy at Edinburgh. Since Stewart is reputed to have 'hated biography' and consequently spent most of his time on the writings, Smith might be said to have been honoured initially with exactly the kind of treatment he would most have appreciated.¹⁸

Stewart's account was the main biographical source for another century, when John Rae, a journalist with an interest in economics, brought out the first full-scale biography – a readable narrative that was still heavily reliant on Stewart for basic information.¹⁹ Such delay is remarkable in itself, given Smith's nineteenth-century fame as the author of that system of free trade and limited government intervention

¹⁷ See Duncan Forbes's criticisms of G. Giarrizzo's *Hume politico e storico* for some of these points in *Historical Journal*, 6 (1963), 280–95.

¹⁸ The same might be said of the second attempt at a biographical memoir by someone with personal knowledge of Smith, William Smellie's *Literary and Characteristical Lives of John Gregory, Henry Home, Lord Kames, David Hume and Adam Smith*, Edinburgh, 1800. A more gossipy and anecdotal approach can be found in works such as *A Series of Original Portraits and Character Etchings by John Kay*, edited by Hugh Paton, Edinburgh, 1842, 2 volumes, 1, pp. 72–5.

¹⁹ *Life of Adam Smith*, London, 1895.

upon which many mid- and late Victorians believed British prosperity to be built. Walter Bagehot, who took Smith's role in this respect as axiomatic, wrote an intriguing essay in 1876 on 'Adam Smith as a Person' which managed to grasp the scale of Smith's intellectual enterprise ('Scarcely any philosopher has imagined a vaster dream'); but Smith is the odd man out in his sequence of biographical studies devoted to Prime Ministers and politicians.²⁰ Then as now, philosophers and academics, such as Smith pre-eminently was, are chiefly of biographical interest, if at all, to their colleagues, friends, and, possibly, students. Bagehot himself yielded to public taste, or to a journalistic impulse, when he once said that 'no real Englishman in his secret soul was ever sorry for the death of a political economist; he is much more likely to be sorry for his life'.²¹ As far as Smith is concerned, the sorrow persisted until the end of the century, when a spate of short biographies appeared before and after Rae's work, all of them filling gaps in series entitled Famous Scots, Great Writers, and, less appropriately, English Philosophers and English Men of Letters.²²

Most of the scholarly work on Smith during the nineteenth century was done by Germans, where the overriding issue was *Das Adam Smith Problem*.²³ British scholarship experienced a brief revival at the end of the nineteenth century as a result of James Bonar's research on Smith's library, and Edwin Cannan's edition of newly discovered student notes on Smith's lectures on Justice, Police, Revenue and Arms in 1896 – the lectures from which the *Wealth of Nations* emerged as an impressive by-product.²⁴ W. R. Scott followed in the twentieth century with studies of Smith as Glasgow Professor.²⁵ Early drafts of the *Wealth of Nations* were discovered, and a few more letters, including, in 1933, a memorandum Smith wrote in 1778 on possible solutions to the problem created by the

²⁰ See *Biographical Studies*, edited by R. H. Hutton, 2nd edition, London, 1889, pp. 247–81.

²¹ As cited by Jacob Viner in 'The Economist in History', now printed in Douglas A. Irwin (ed.), *Essays on the Intellectual History of Economics*, Princeton, 1991, p. 238.

²² See J. A. Farrer, *Adam Smith*, London, 1881; R. B. Haldane, *Life of Adam Smith*, London, 1887; H. C. Macpherson, *Adam Smith*, Edinburgh, 1899; and F. W. Hirst, *Adam Smith*, London, 1904.

²³ For further reference to this problem see pp. 95, 415–16 below. There is a need for a modern study of Smith's German reputation during the nineteenth century, and it would probably centre on August Önen, *Adam Smith und Immanuel Kant*, Leipzig, 1877 and Wilhelm Hasbach, *Untersuchungen über Adam Smith und die Entwicklung der Politischen Ökonomie*, Leipzig, 1891. It is also significant that the first scholarly edition of *TMS* was the German translation made by Walther Eckstein and published in 1926.

²⁴ See J. Bonar, *A Catalogue of the Library of Adam Smith*, London, 1894, 2nd edition, 1932; Hiroshi Mizuta, *Adam Smith's Library; A Supplement to Bonar's Catalogue with a Checklist of the whole Library*, Cambridge, 1967, now being revised and expanded; and *Lectures on Justice, Police, Revenue and Arms, delivered in the University of Glasgow by Adam Smith*, edited by E. Cannan, Oxford, 1896.

²⁵ W. R. Scott, *Adam Smith as Student and Professor*, Glasgow, 1937.

revolt of the American colonies.²⁶ The next discoveries were made in the late 1950s: student notes on Smith's lectures on rhetoric and *belles-lettres* and another, somewhat fuller, set of notes on the lectures on jurisprudence. With the publication of all this material, new and old, in the Glasgow edition of Smith's works and correspondence, there is now scope for a major new biography. Indeed, a brief but penetrating one has already been written by two of the editors of the Glasgow edition, and a longer biographical study is about to be published by one of the editors of the correspondence.²⁷

Although a combination of persistent fame and time have eroded Smith's wishes, he has still managed to ensure that his published works remain our chief resource, with an understanding of the nature of the vast dream – how the various elements of the intellectual enterprise as a whole do, or do not, fit together – remaining the prize. Working in the opposite direction here, from biographical evidence to published work, it is always worth asking of someone who was so deliberately parsimonious with posterity why we should like to know more than he decided to tell us, and whether the available evidence actually answers our questions.

One or two of Smith's letters provide illumination on the kinds of personal matters that a twentieth-century audience finds interesting. As might be expected, close friends, notably Hume, tend to bring the best out of Smith, though one of the most informative letters on his work was written to a comparative stranger, Andreas Holt, a Danish customs official. But the closest the prying eye comes to Smith's emotional life, outside his numerous friendships, is a letter written a month after his mother had died, when he was fifty-one. The effect of this loss was broached as part of an apology to his publisher for the delay in returning the proofs of the second edition of the *Wealth of Nations*:

I should immediately have acknowledged the receipt of the fair sheets; but I had just then come from performing the last duty to my poor old Mother; and tho' the death of a person in the ninetieth year of her age was no doubt an event most agreeable to the course of nature; and therefore, to be foreseen and prepared for; yet I must say to you, what I have said to other people, that the final separation from a person who certainly loved me more than any other person ever did or ever will love me; and whom I certainly loved and

²⁶ For a survey of the state of the art in 1940 – though it does not mention the significant discovery made in 1933 – see W. R. Scott, 'Studies Relating to Adam Smith During the Last 50 Years', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 26 (1940), 250–74.

²⁷ See R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner, *Adam Smith*, London, 1982. Ian Ross is the author of the forthcoming larger biography.

respected more than I ever shall either love or respect any other person, I cannot help feeling, even at this hour, as a very heavy stroke upon me.²⁸

Faced with such evidence, it seems worth asking what use it might be to someone interested in Smith's writings. That he remained a bachelor (as, incidentally, did Hume and Gibbon); that he loved his mother, who was widowed just before his birth; that he lived with her for a large part of his life – such facts can be of interest to students of Smith's writings only if we couple them with some reason for believing that this state of affairs was unusual and tells us something significant about his opinions. As we have seen, Smith's later religious beliefs can be inferred with *reasonable* confidence from his attitude to Hume's death.

Smith's unsympathetic obituarist in *The Times* spoke disparagingly of his 'laboured eulogium on the stoical end of David Hume', stressing irreligion by saying that Smith 'had early become a disciple of Voltaire' in such matters.²⁹ In this case we have a clear reason for being interested. The information provides a valuable insight into his position on the role of providence in human affairs, and on the part played by religion in providing explanations for events that could only be imperfectly understood. On such matters there are public texts that need to be interpreted. It is interesting to know if Smith's 'invisible hand' was ever conceived as being that of a Christian deity. As we shall see in a later essay too, the information is also important when interpreting Smith's attitude towards ecclesiastical establishments.³⁰ With regard to Smith's affective life the interest we have in biographical evidence is far less clear; and psychological imputations that do not bear on a substantive problem of interpretation posed by the texts run the danger of being merely reductive.

The same might be said of political or ideological imputations that purport to derive Smith's allegiances from his acquaintanceships. More reprehensibly, attempts have been made to fill the gap left by the absence of biographical evidence with imputations based on other sources. For this purpose, the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* has proved especially attractive, with the various character types mentioned there – the man of prudence, the aristocrat, the ambitious poor man, and the man of middling rank – being read as straightforward evidence of Smith's own personal affiliations and antagonisms. Yet such readings are no more likely to be true than equivalent attempts to identify a

²⁸ Letter to William Strahan, 10 June 1784 in *Corr.*, p. 275.

²⁹ See *The Times*, 4 and 15 August 1790.

³⁰ See pp. 185–91 below.

novelist with what he makes his characters say. Smith was a subtle and ironic author, not given to displaying his hand openly and without qualifications. As his lectures on rhetoric and *belles-lettres* show, he also held sophisticated views on the requirements of different types of discourse. Moreover, he recognised that what might appear to be the case in some moods was not true in others; and that the philosopher's standpoint was usually not that of the ordinary participant in social life. In such circumstances, it seems foolhardy to pretend that a reliable portrait of Smith's opinions can be drawn on the basis of this evidence.

To a post-Freudian generation, however, it has to be granted that Smith's avowal of his love for his mother may be of interest to those seeking confirmation of a psychological theory or wishing to sustain a generalisation about the *mores* of the period and society to which Smith belonged. Does it also suggest why Smith chose not to marry? Would an answer to this question tell us anything significant about his attitude to domestic law, divorce, and women's education, to mention subjects dealt with in his writings and lectures that are *possibly* related? I doubt it.

Of greater potential interest are Smith's income, paid occupations, and relationships with patrons and politicians. The first two of these are fairly easily established and were not as subject to decorum about disclosure as they would be today. As a professor, Smith's income was around £170 per annum, a large proportion of which was derived from student fees paid directly to the teacher. The life-pension he received from the Buccleuch family for resigning his Glasgow Chair and accompanying the 3rd Duke on an educational tour to France in 1764–6 was £300 per annum. When he became Commissioner of Customs in 1778, Smith received an additional £600, making him nearly as 'opulent' as Hume admitted to being in his final years when the income from his historical writings gave him an income of £1000 a year. We also know that Smith had a habit of making anonymous money gifts to friends in need, though the sums and their recipients, by their very nature, are unknown.

As the notorious case of Samuel Johnson's relations with the Earl of Chesterfield shows, aristocratic patronage was an unavoidable and potentially friction-ridden feature of life for eighteenth-century authors. Smith had to be acceptable to the Duke of Argyll, the manager of patronage in Scotland, in order to be offered his appointment at Glasgow in 1751; and we now know that he had previously enjoyed the

hospitality of the Argyll family during the six unhappy yet personally productive years (1740–6) he spent as Snell Exhibitioner at Balliol College, Oxford. Lord Kames, as much friend as patron, had sponsored the Edinburgh lectures on rhetoric and *belles-lettres* given in 1748–51 which had first established Smith's promise as a teacher. Smith became known to Charles Townshend – who, as the stepfather of the Duke of Buccleuch, offered Smith the tutorship that enabled him to travel in France – chiefly as a result of his only published work at that time, the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Smith advised Townshend and Lord Shelburne as ministers on various economic and other subjects in the 1760s, remaining in close touch with the Buccleuch family throughout his life. The influence of the Duke of Buccleuch, together with the success of the *Wealth of Nations*, also led to Smith's candidacy for the Commissionership of Customs. A letter from Sir Grey Cooper, the person to whom he applied for the post, provides further evidence of how Smith did so, and of the way in which his presentation of self struck others:

When you solicited the appointment of your friends Son to the Collectorship of Grenville Harbour, I remember well the zeal, the assiduity, and the warmth of heart with which you recommended him, and I reflect with satisfaction that it was in my power to second your wishes, and to contribute my good offices to give success to that application; you now solicit a place at the Board of Customs at Edinburgh for another Person, but in this case, instead of a warm and eager application, I find nothing But Phlegm, Composure and Indifference; It is however fortunate that the person whom you so faintly support, does not want yours or any other great mans recommendation; and tho you seem to have no very high opinion of him, His merit is so well known to Lord North and to all the world, That (Alas what a Bathos!) He will very soon, if I am not much mistaken be appointed a Commissioner of the Customs in Scotland.³¹

This letter can be read either as a sign of Smith's skill in what the eighteenth century called 'address', or as evidence of genuine modesty. It probably falls somewhere between the two, with justifiable confidence being granted by his record and obvious qualifications for a post that required considerable knowledge of commerce and its regulations.

A reversible version of the proverbial relationship between game-keeping and poaching is tempting as a description of this translation of one of the leading eighteenth-century proponents of free trade into

³¹ Letter from Sir Grey Cooper, 7 November 1777 in *Corr.*, p. 228.

customs official. Smith certainly used the information acquired in his official role to strengthen his criticisms of trading companies and the mercantile system in later editions of the *Wealth of Nations*, thereby making him a better gamekeeper/poacher. But another construction can be put on the translation. As the records of his attendance at meetings show, Smith did not treat the post as a sinecure: for ten years he attended most of the meetings required of him, which sometimes amounted to over 180 a year, the only exceptions being due to illness, the death of his mother, and a couple of study trips to London, when formal leave of absence was always obtained.³² Since his views on free trade and the benefits to public revenue from lower duties were unchanged, and bearing in mind his belief that complete establishment of free trade in Britain, let alone elsewhere, was a utopian dream, the post offered him an opportunity to do in a minor way what, as we shall see in a later essay (number 4), he urged on the wise legislator in his formal writings, namely when he cannot establish the best system of laws to work for 'the best which the interests, prejudices, and temper of the times would admit of, hoping that this would prepare the way for a better system'.³³

III

The qualities of 'Phlegm, Composure and Indifference' noted by Sir Grey Cooper touch on another feature of Smith's character as writer on public affairs that can best be approached via a contrast with Adam Ferguson, a friend with whom Smith quarrelled towards the end of his life, probably over the vexed question of plagiarism or inadequate acknowledgment of borrowings from Smith's writings or conversation. What makes the contrast revealing is that Ferguson was conscious of the differences between his own temperament as a philosopher and that of Hume as well as Smith. The differences turn on the relative importance to be attached to contemplation versus action, and the role of conflict and the exercise of will in politics when compared with impersonal forces.³⁴

It is difficult to imagine Smith expressing Ferguson's impatience at being removed from the centre of political action at the height of the

³² See Campbell and Skinner, *Adam Smith*, Chapter 16.

³³ *WN*, iv.v.b.53.

³⁴ On this see D. Kettler, 'History and Theory in Ferguson's *Essay on the History of Civil Society*: A Reconsideration', *Political Theory*, 5 (1977), 437-59.

dispute with the American colonies where he could 'shoot at the flying folly of the times'.³⁵ Smith's onslaught on the mercantile system and his criticisms of the established church and the English universities in the *Wealth of Nations* show that he was not lacking in courage when it came to attacking entrenched institutions and modes of thinking. But the way he chose to shoot at folly was different from Ferguson's. Smith was in fact in London in the period 1773 to 1776, the years in which the crisis was developing, making good use of the opportunity to acquire additional information and incorporate his views on the emerging American dispute within his attack on the mercantile system. He also indulged in a self-conscious philosopher's exercise in sketching a utopian solution to the problem – a constitutional and fiscal union between Britain and its American colonies. Ferguson's pamphlet contribution to the same debate ended with a proclamation: 'I confess that I think, when the cause of our country is at stake, impartiality is but a doubtful virtue.'³⁶ A letter written at much the same time that was probably aimed at the author of the *Wealth of Nations*, confirms Ferguson's stance: 'I find that People of Letters think there is a dignity in keeping aloof from present affairs and writing only for Posterity. I am of the Contrary opinion. I believe that what is done for today has more effect than books that look big on the shelve.'³⁷

As befitted someone who had been Chaplain to the Black Watch regiment, Ferguson described himself as 'a war-like Philosopher'. He took the view that the American colonists deserved 'a sound drubbing', lending some irony to the fact that he became secretary to an unsuccessful British peace mission in 1778.³⁸ The failure of this mission led to a reversion to his earlier, more punitive stance. Smith's position, as we shall see, was not entirely sympathetic to the colonists, but it always entailed acceptance of the likelihood of separation. Though no less engaged by contemporary public issues than Ferguson, he chose to present himself as enjoying the advantages of impartiality – a philosophical perspective taken up from a provincial location removed from 'the great scramble of faction and ambition'.³⁹

As I shall try to show, this urbane and often ironic stance runs deep in Smith, and its origins are a mixture of temperament and a

³⁵ Letter from Ferguson to Sir John Macpherson, n.d., Edinburgh University Library.

³⁵ *Remarks on a Pamphlet Lately Published by Dr. Price intitled Observations on the Nature of Civil Government, and the Justice and Policy of the War with America*, London, 1776, p. 58.

³⁷ See letter mentioned in n. 35.

³⁸ Letter to Sir John MacPherson, 27 October 1777, Edinburgh University Library.

³⁹ *WN*, v.iii.90.

preference for explaining complex historical events as the unintended outcome of motives that had different, usually less far-sighted and noble, goals in view. The stance lends weight to a long-standing interpretation of his position that suggests he leaves little scope for the exercise of effective political agency. While this interpretation has been exaggerated over the years, and will be questioned in a later essay (number 4), the kernel of truth it contains can partly be expressed in terms of Smith's contrast between the mere politician and the statesman or legislator. Fully as much as Ferguson, Smith appreciated the realities of English party politics. He did not hesitate to lend his support to a variety of political friends of whose public conduct he approved. In the 1780s, for example, he sympathised with Burke's Rockinghamite faction. Burke also (in consequence?) recommended Smith to Rockingham as a man 'sense and honesty' who could be relied upon to provide discreet and accurate political information.⁴⁰ But like Hume, Smith's chosen public persona did not include open commitment to party politics, and in the *Wealth of Nations* he addressed himself to a rare breed, possibly an imaginary one, the legislator whose deliberations were 'governed by general principles which are always the same'. Smith may, therefore, have been vulnerable to Ferguson's charge of writing more for posterity than to support present action, though another view would be that he did not despair of the existence of statesmen, and that he hoped to influence events over a longer period by changing the state of educated opinion.

In what has been said so far, I have exaggerated the lack of information we possess on Smith's opinions outside his published work. The student notes on his lectures – a forum in which he seems to have been more expressive than in ordinary conversation – has been a major new source of information, though one that needs to be used carefully by cross-checking with the published works. Moreover, if Smith was a spectator of public affairs, he was often a highly privileged one, as we can tell from the surviving letters he wrote in answer to requests from statesmen for confidential advice. We are more than compensated for the lack of Smith pamphlets by some revealing correspondence in which he gave ministers his frank advice on how to relax mercantile restrictions, and by the remarkably Machiavellian memorandum that he wrote to Alexander Wedderburn, Lord North's Solicitor-General,

⁴⁰ See letter from Burke to Rockingham, 27 April 1782 in Burke, *Corr.*, iv, pp. 448–9; and the earlier letters between Smith and Burke, *ibid.*, v, pp. 3, 86–7, 98–9, 296–8.

not long after the defeat of the British forces at Saratoga in 1777.⁴¹ His calming response to someone who thought this defeat presaged national ruin is better known and tends to confirm Smith's phlegmatic image: 'Be assured, my young friend, that there is a great deal of ruin in a nation.'⁴² The memorandum to Wedderburn nevertheless shows how sensitive Smith could be to the *Realpolitik* decisions facing politicians at the time.

The letters and memoranda reveal that Smith's confidential advice was fully in line with what he had written in the *Wealth of Nations*, but that, as might be expected, his views were expressed in blunter fashion. This suggests another quality that Smith admired in others and appears to have successfully cultivated in himself, namely what he once described as 'inflexible probity'. A group of recently discovered letters by Smith confirms this persistent feature of his behaviour in conducting public and semi-public business; it also sheds further light on the importance he attached to reputation.

The letters arise out of some delicate business he undertook, with characteristic punctilio, on behalf of Ferguson, whose appointment as tutor to Earl Stanhope's nephew and ward, the 5th Earl of Chesterfield, he had recommended and negotiated. The appointment entailed a promise of a life annuity to be paid to Ferguson once his duties were completed. In view of Ferguson's doubts as to whether Stanhope's promises would be binding on Chesterfield after he attained the age of majority, Stanhope had given Ferguson a written guarantee that the annuity would be paid by him and his heirs. Smith had misgivings about the arrangement: 'I can with great truth assure your Lordship that no transaction of my life has ever given me more uneasiness than the thought of my having been in any respect instrumental, tho' it was in consequence of your Lordships own proposal, in bringing, what I have often thought, a most unnecessary burthen upon your family and estate.'⁴³ These misgivings looked like being fulfilled when Chesterfield dismissed Ferguson from his employment and proved unwilling to pay the annuity agreed by his former guardian. Smith was once more called in as intermediary, and he marshalled some powerful legal advice designed to make Chesterfield realise that he was honour-bound

⁴¹ See 'Smith's Thoughts on the State of the Contest with America' in *Corr.*, Appendix B.

⁴² *The Correspondence of the Rt Hon. Sir John Sinclair, Bt, with Reminiscences of the Most Distinguished Characters who have Appeared in GB, and in Foreign Countries, during the last 50 Years*, 2 volumes, London, 1831, 1, pp. 390-1.

⁴³ Letter to Stanhope, 29 March 1777 in *Corr.*, Appendix E, Letter d.

to discharge an obligation entered into by his guardian for his own benefit. Threat of legal action eventually led to a satisfactory outcome from both Ferguson's and Stanhope's point of view.⁴⁴ During the negotiations a letter (no longer extant) was sent to Ferguson by Stanhope. From Smith's reply we gather that it contained a magnanimous acknowledgment of Stanhope's liabilities in the affair, which gave rise to the following formal request from Smith: 'If your Lordship will give me leave I wish to keep the original [of your letter to Ferguson], not only to shew it to some of my young friends in the mean time, but to leave it a legacy to my family and Posterity, if it should ever please God to grant me any, as an example of inflexible probity which they ought to follow upon all occasions.'⁴⁵ The editors of Smith's correspondence note the unlikely hint that Smith, a life-long bachelor then aged 54, was still capable of entertaining the possibility of marriage and children; but the letter also underlines the importance Smith attached to probity – to the point of wishing to retain for family use a letter that would exemplify this.

Other, more significant, episodes confirm this characteristic: his insistence on returning fees to students when he had to curtail his teaching at Glasgow; his offer to return the pension granted by the Duke of Buccleuch when he obtained an office of profit under the Crown; and the meticulousness with which he looked after the affairs of individuals and those corporate interests with which he was entrusted. When he became a Commissioner of Customs he may have, dutifully, burned all those personal belongings that were prohibited – though irony in reporting that he had done so cannot be discounted.⁴⁶ More telling is the evidence of the frequency with which he was entrusted with administrative tasks by his Glasgow colleagues: Quaestor for the university library, Dean of the Faculty of Arts, Vice-Rector, and, as a final honour, Rector. Acting in what he considered to be the best interests of the university, he was more firm in resolving an earlier conflict of duty posed by his friendship with Hume. He refused to lend support to Hume's candidacy for a Glasgow Chair in 1751 on the following grounds: 'I should prefer David Hume to any man for a colleague; but I am afraid the public would not be of my opinion; and

⁴⁴ The entire episode, together with all the relevant letters, is described in D. D. Raphael, D. Raynor, and I. Ross, "'This Very Awkward Affair': An Entanglement of Scottish Professors with English Lords", *Studies in Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 278 (1990), 419–63.

⁴⁵ Letter to Stanhope, 8 May 1777 in *Corr.*, Appendix E, p. 428.

⁴⁶ See letter to William Eden, 3 January 1780 in *Corr.*, pp. 245–6.

the interest of the society will oblige us to have some regard to the opinion of the public.'⁴⁷ All this furnishes a portrait of someone who acquired a reputation for probity at an early stage of his career and took steps to maintain it. While this characteristic may make Smith seem rather sober-sided, it adds a new dimension to the caricature of the speculative, absent-minded, ever-systematising professor which emerges from other anecdotes.

The only question mark against Smith's probity has been raised by twentieth-century economists. It arises out of his failure to be as explicit as they would like him to have been on the subject of his intellectual debts and, to a lesser extent, his antagonisms – the implication being that he was ungenerous at best, devious at worst. Indeed, this has been the source of the most serious charges Smith has had to face, and if sustained, they would cast doubt on that will-of-the-wisp concept in intellectual history, his originality. This was a sensitive subject during Smith's life, and is given substance by accusations of plagiarism that Smith is supposed to have levelled against various acquaintances at different times, notably William Robertson, Hugh Blair, and Ferguson. Whatever the exact truth behind these stories, Smith's autonomy, or sense of it, could be described, along with his library, as his chief vanity.

IV

As a final illustration of the way in which biographical evidence can sometimes be enlightening, not least when it sheds almost casual light on the conversational use of sensitive terms, an episode arising out of Hume's famous quarrel with Jean-Jacques Rousseau should be mentioned. The fact that Rousseau had made it known that he was writing his *Confessions* was a source of some concern to Hume (as it may have been designed to be) when he was debating the wisdom of publishing a reply to the rumours Rousseau was spreading about his part in a conspiracy against the Genevan philosopher.

He himself had told me that he was composing his Memoir, in which Justice wou'd be equally done to his own Character, to that of his Friends, and to that of his Enemies. As I had passed from the former Class to the latter, I must expect to make a fine Figure: And what, thought I, if these Memoirs be published after his Death or after mine? In the latter Case, there will be no-

⁴⁷ Letter to William Cullen, November 1751 in *Corr.*, p. 5.

one to vindicate my Memory: In the former Case, my Vindication will have much less Authenticity.⁴⁸

Smith's part in this episode shows him in the familiar light of an anxious bystander who was keen to protect Hume's reputation by discouraging him from giving way to the impulse to go beyond informing his friends about Rousseau's strange behaviour. Anything of a more public nature would merely feed the taste of the 'English literati' for 'little gossiping stories'.⁴⁹ Shrewdness can be added to probity on this occasion because Smith proved entirely correct. To his subsequent regret, Hume allowed the advice of some of his French friends rather than his Scottish ones to prevail: an *Exposé succinct de la contestation qui s'est élevé entre M. Hume et M. Rousseau, avec les pièces justificatives* appeared in Paris under D'Alembert's direction. It was quickly followed by an English translation.⁵⁰ Hume also took the further precaution of offering to deposit his correspondence with Rousseau in the British Museum to counter possible charges of falsification.⁵¹ The episode provoked a flurry of comment, some of it scurrilous, all of it enjoying the now public spectacle of two philosophers engaged in personal dispute. Boswell, with fine disregard for his friendship with Hume and his earlier flattery of Rousseau, surreptitiously helped to keep the controversy simmering by designing a print lampooning both men. If Rousseau had seen this print, his suspicions that he was the object of a conspiracy would have been confirmed. Hume took the print in good part, possibly overlooking the fact that he was depicted as 'costive' and hence in need of the enema being supplied.⁵²

Before Rousseau fled from England, he made it known that he had given up any intention of publishing an account of his misfortunes in exile. Hume thought this meant he was giving up the entire project of

⁴⁸ Letter to Mme la Présidente de Meinières, 25 July 1766 in *New Letters of David Hume*, edited by R. Klibansky and E. C. Mossner, Oxford, 1954, pp. 150-1.

⁴⁹ Letter to David Hume, 6 July 1766 in *Corr.*, p. 113.

⁵⁰ See *A Concise and Genuine Account of the Dispute between Mr. Hume and Mr. Rousseau with the Letters that Passed between them during their Controversy. As also, the Letters of the Honourable Mr. Walpole, and Mr. D'Alembert, Relative to this Extraordinary Affair*, translated from the French, London, 1766. The first life of Hume was dominated by the quarrel; see Thomas Ritchie, *An Account of the Life and Writings of David Hume*, London, 1807.

⁵¹ The details of the quarrel can be found in E. C. Mossner, *The Life of David Hume*, 2nd edition, Oxford, 1980, Chapter 35.

⁵² For Hume's reaction to the print see Mossner, *Life of David Hume*, p. 535. Boswell acknowledged his part in stirring the quarrel in a letter to William Temple, 1 February 1767, but denied responsibility for the enema idea; see *Letters of James Boswell*, 1, p. 103.

THE SAVAGE MAN.

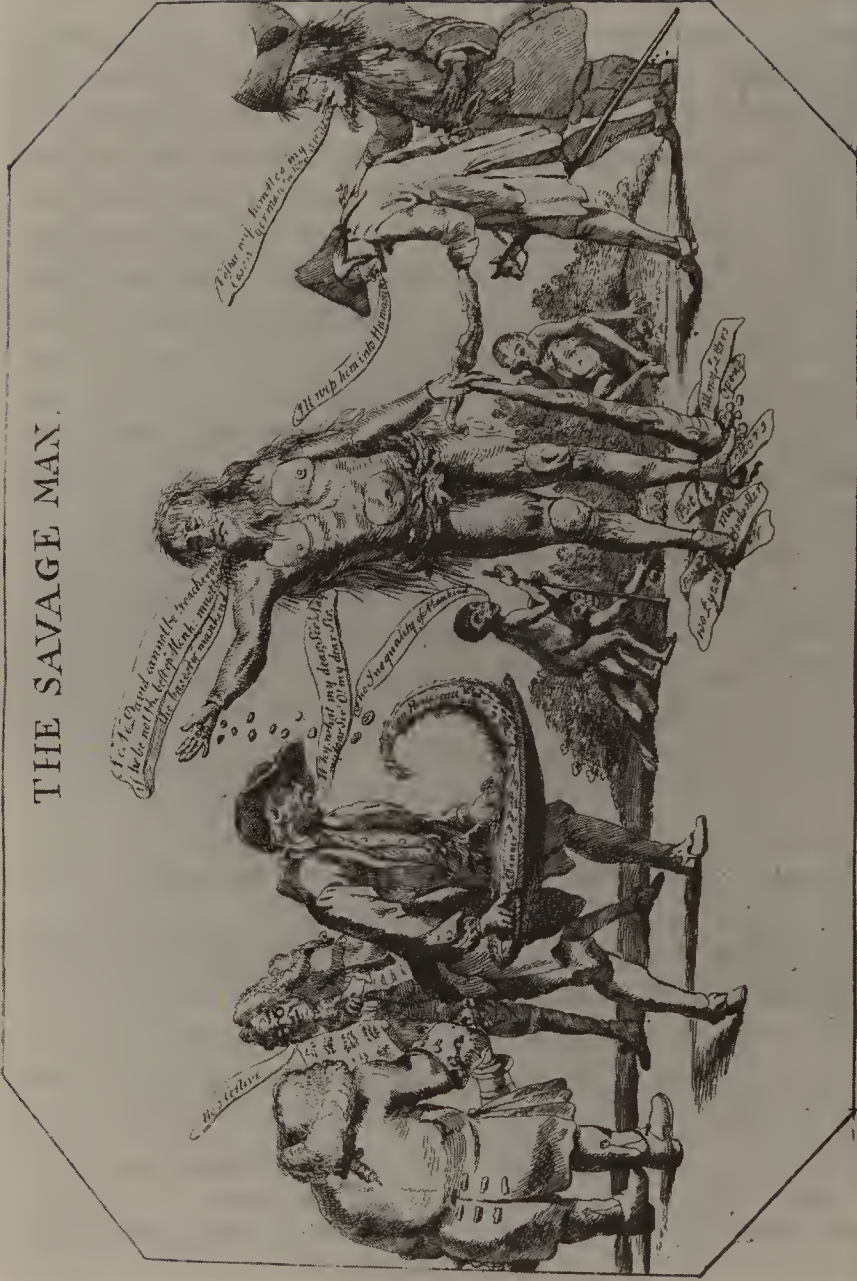


Plate 1. This print, *The Savage Man* (1766), was suggested by James Boswell as a lampoon on the quarrel between Rousseau and Hume. It depicts the former as the savage man, with Hume to his right offering him a meal and having an enema administered to him by two doctors saying 'He's Costive.' Voltaire stands on Rousseau's left, and is being encouraged to whip him by Peter the Wild Boy, a youth found in Germany and brought to England in 1767. Rousseau is saying: 'No No David cannot be treacherous if he be not the best of Men he must be the basest of mankind.' The three monkeys in the background comment on 'the inequality of mankind'.

writing his autobiography, and might well have worried if he had known that this was by no means the case.⁵³ Rousseau's *Confessions* were published posthumously in 1778, two years after Hume had died. Hume did not refer to the quarrel in his autobiography, though it disproved his statement there that he was never attacked by the 'baleful tooth' of calumny. Rousseau, for his part, kept his promise not to mention the quarrel in the *Confessions*, but what he says there about Hume throws a sharp beam of light on a theme that runs through several of the essays that follow.

In summing up what little he knew of Hume before meeting him, Rousseau said that he combined 'une âme très républicaine' with those 'paradoxes anglois en faveur de luxe'.⁵⁴ Hume did maintain that in theory at least 'the Republican Form of Government is by far the best', though he also felt that it was adapted only to small states, and that any attempt to create such a government in Britain would 'produce only Anarchy, which is the immediate forerunner of Despotism'.⁵⁵ Smith too was once described as approaching 'to republicanism in his political principles'.⁵⁶ In the *Wealth of Nations* he debated the relative merits of standing armies versus citizens' militias with those he described as 'men of republican principles', several of whom, including Hume and Ferguson, were fellow-members of the Poker Club – a society formed to agitate in favour of establishing a Scottish militia. Smith adopted a public stance that seemed to favour standing armies and hence was at variance with his membership of the club. He was criticised by Ferguson for so doing, and another member of the club, Alexander Carlyle, attacked him in print. What it meant to describe someone as having republican sympathies is one of those terms of eighteenth-century political art that has proved worth deciphering. The differences between Smith's views on military provision and those of his Scottish friends are crucial to this subject and will feature in a later essay.⁵⁷

But first it is worth considering that other peculiarity of Hume's opinions noted by Rousseau, those English paradoxes favouring luxury. Rousseau had attacked these paradoxes in his *Discourse on the*

⁵³ See Hume's letter to Turgot, in *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Grieg, Oxford, 1932, 2 volumes, II, pp. 137–8.

⁵⁴ *Oeuvres complètes de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, edited by Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond, Paris, 1959, 5 volumes, I, p. 630.

⁵⁵ See *Letters of David Hume*, II, p. 306.

⁵⁶ By the Earl of Buchan in a memoir written a year after Smith's death; see *The Bee or Literary Weekly Intelligence*, 8 June 1791.

⁵⁷ See pp. 117–19 below.

Sciences and Arts in 1750. They provided one of the chief reasons for the regrettable contrast he noted between ancient and modern political thinkers: whereas the former 'forever spoke of morals and of virtue', the latter 'speak only of commerce and of money'.⁵⁸ As he was later to show, the primary source of evil was inequality, from which arose the riches that supported both luxury and idleness, while at the same time condemning the poor to a way of life that involved a brutalising choice between endless labour or hunger. Such concerns were to propel Rousseau on to the subject of his second discourse, the *Discourse on Inequality*, and they provide a leitmotif of his career as a republican political moralist. The ancients were fully justified, he believed, in linking luxury and inequality as the main causes of enfeeblement and depopulation.⁵⁹ Although Jean-François Melon and Voltaire had espoused the paradox in favour of luxury in the 1730s, Rousseau was fully aware that its origins were to be found in the English writings of Mandeville published a decade or more earlier.⁶⁰ Hume's qualified endorsement of Mandeville's position in his essays 'Of Commerce' and 'Of Luxury' was the source of Rousseau's surprise: a man of republican principles, such as he was himself, could never have regarded luxury and inequality as anything other than a source of moral and political decay to both large and small states. Smith shared Hume's opinions on luxury, but in the *Wealth of Nations* he developed them in a direction that went well beyond mere elaboration of Hume's position. As will be argued in the succeeding essay, Smith's work marks the culmination of the eighteenth-century debate on the dangers to civil existence of luxury – though not entirely to moral existence. It was also a decisive, if not unqualified, rebuttal of all that Rousseau had come to represent. By the last quarter of the century, therefore, through its association, partially with Hume, but chiefly with Smith, the paradox in favour of luxury had pre-eminently become a Scottish one. Nevertheless, the next essay takes up the theme by first considering an exponent of luxury who was unquestionably English, Dr Samuel Johnson.

⁵⁸ See *The First and Second Discourses*, edited by V. Gourevitch, New York, 1986, p. 16.

⁵⁹ For Rousseau's attacks on luxury see *First and Second Discourses*, pp. 45–6, 72–3, 88, 211–12.

⁶⁰ See the references to Mandeville in *First and Second Discourses*, pp. 102, 161–2. The extent of Rousseau's engagement with and borrowings from Mandeville was first noted by Smith: see pp. 67, 71–4 below. For a demonstration that Mandeville's influence went much further than Smith could have known, see E. J. Hundert, *The Enlightenment's Fable; Bernard Mandeville and the Discovery of Society*, Cambridge, 1994, pp. 58–9, 105–15.

The secret concatenation

When I look round upon those who are thus variously exerting their qualifications, I cannot but admire the secret concatenation of society, that links together the great and the mean, the illustrious and the obscure; and consider with benevolent satisfaction, that no man, unless his body or mind be totally disabled, has need to suffer the mortification of seeing himself useless or burdensome to the community: he that will diligently labour, in whatever occupation, will deserve the sustenance which he obtains, and the protection which he enjoys; and may lie down every night with the pleasing consciousness, of having contributed something to the happiness of life.

The Adventurer, 26 June 1753

I

Samuel Johnson's admiration for the secret concatenation linking the fortunes of rich and poor was provoked by observations on urban life in his favourite city, London. The hidden connections were manifested in the multiplicity of occupations required to meet the varied and often evanescent wants of modern society, its 'popular and modish trifles' as well as its necessities. Johnson was meditating on that 'general concurrence of endeavours' according to which 'there is scarce any one amongst us, however contracted may be his form of life, who does not enjoy the labour of a thousand artists'. The system of 'artificial plenty' which gave rise to this interdependence meant that 'each of us singly can do little for himself. This state of affairs could be compared with the more self-sufficient life of the savage, of which Johnson concluded that 'though the perseverance and address of the Indian excite our admiration, they nevertheless cannot procure him the conveniences which are enjoyed by the vagrant beggar of a civilised country'.¹

¹ *The Adventurer*, no. 67 in Johnson, *Works*, II, pp. 383-9.

Such reflections on luxury and urban life are frequent in Johnson's reported conversations; and he clearly enjoyed attacking the facile moralism of much contemporary opinion on these subjects:

Now the truth is, that luxury produces much good. Take the luxury of building in London. Does it not produce real advantage in the conveniency and elegance of accommodation, and this from the exertion of industry? You are much surer that you are doing good when you *pay* money to those who work, as the recompence of their labour, than when you *give* money merely in charity . . . And as to the rout that is made about people who are ruined by extravagance, it is no matter to the nation that some individuals suffer. When so much general productive exertion is the consequence of luxury, the nation does not care though there are debtors in gaol; nay, they would not care though their creditors were there too.²

Despite supplying the final lines to Oliver Goldsmith's *Deserted Village*, Johnson, as we shall see, gave an equally blunt response to his friend's complaint against luxury as the cause of rural depopulation.

For reasons that will become clearer later, Smith would not have endorsed Johnson's cavalier attitude to debtors *and* creditors. Nevertheless, readers of the *Wealth of Nations* will readily recognise that Smith employed essentially the same argument when describing the unintended benefits derived from the division of labour. Less obviously, it is also present in Smith's diagnosis of the unintended moral drawbacks associated with urban life and the increased specialisation of manual tasks, where, again, he could have found an ally in Johnson. In answering Goldsmith on depopulation and degeneration, Johnson first doubted the facts and then went on to question whether luxury could produce such conditions:

Luxury, so far as it reaches the poor, will do good to the race of people; it will strengthen and multiply them. Sir, no nation was ever hurt by luxury; for, as I said before, it can reach but to a very few. I admit that the great increase of commerce and manufactures hurts the military spirit of a people; because it produces a competition for something else than martial honours, — a competition for riches. It also hurts the bodies of the people; for you will observe, there is no man who works at any particular trade, but you may know him from his appearance to do so. One part or other of his body being more used than the rest, he is in some degree deformed: but, Sir, that is not luxury.³

² Boswell, *Life*, III, pp. 55–6; see also II, pp. 170, 217–19; III, pp. 282–3, 292–3; IV, p. 173.

³ See Boswell, *Life*, II, pp. 217–18.

Both in his lectures and in the *Wealth of Nations* itself, Smith laid great stress on the effects of specialisation in creating a situation in which, as far as the 'great body of the people' is concerned, dexterity in their particular trade seems 'to be acquired at the expence of . . . intellectual, social, and martial virtues'.⁴ It posed one of the main problems to be tackled by the wise legislator and will be considered more fully in the succeeding essay.⁵

In common with Johnson, Smith often employs savage life to mark the contrast with civilised existence; he also treats the diffusion of benefits to the lowest levels of society as part of a similar process. Thus Johnson speaks of 'the endless variety of tastes and circumstances that diversify mankind', where even the 'refuse of part of mankind furnishes a subordinate class with the materials necessary to their support'. This filtering down, particularly of durable goods, the modish trifles that become Smith's 'baubles and trinkets', the dependence of everyone upon an anonymous army of artificers, even, as we have seen, Johnson's question as to 'how much is taken from our native abilities as well as added to them by artificial expedients' – all this figures as part of the same discussion in Smith.

The reasons for this coincidence of view between two men who did not enjoy an harmonious personal relationship, many of whose opinions on religion and politics were at odds with one another, are not far to seek. By the third quarter of the eighteenth century the standard defences of luxury were so well established that Rousseau was quite right to speak of an English paradox in favour of luxury. Since the defences were subject to persistent, yet equally standard challenges from other moralists, however, he could also have spoken of an English *fear* of luxury.⁶ If a common provocation to Johnson and Smith is required, one need look no further than Bernard Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*, a work that Johnson acknowledged to have 'opened [his] views into real life very much'.⁷ He also had occasion to refer to Mandeville

⁴ *WN*, v.i.f.50. ⁵ See pp. 120–1 below on this subject.

⁶ For a survey of the British debate on luxury see J. Sekora, *Luxury; The Concept in Western Thought, Eden to Smollett*, Baltimore, 1977. The topic has been given extensive coverage in an older French literature: see H. Baudrillart, *Histoire de luxe privé et public, depuis l'antiquité jusqu'à nos jours*, Paris, 2nd edition, 4 volumes, 1880–1; and A. Morizé, *L'Apologie du luxe au XVIIIème siècle*, Paris, 1909. For a more recent French treatment of the luxury debate focussing on Rousseau see R. Galliani, *Rousseau, le luxe et l'idéologie nobiliaire, étude socio-historique*, Oxford, 1989. The subject has also been accorded both conceptual and historical treatment by Christopher J. Berry, *The Idea of Luxury*, Cambridge, 1994: see especially Chapter 6 on the eighteenth-century debate.

⁷ Boswell, *Life*, III, p. 292. This remark and other comments by Johnson led Mandeville's

when discoursing on another of his favourite topics, the vanity, egotism, and general depravity of human nature:

The natural depravity of mankind and remains of original sin were so fixed in Mr. Johnson's opinion, that he was indeed a most acute observer of their effects; and used to say sometimes, half in jest half in earnest, that they were the remains of his old tutor Mandeville's instructions. As a book however, he took care always loudly to condemn the *Fable of the Bees*, but not without adding, 'that it was the work of a thinking man'.⁸

Although Smith retained a large place for vanity and emulation in his account of the ambition to better oneself, he took a more benign position, less influenced by original sin, and closer to that of the Earl of Shaftesbury, Francis Hutcheson, and Hume, than to Johnson and Mandeville, in assuming man's natural endowment with the capacity for mutual sympathy and understanding. Smith was also following Hutcheson and Hume when he devoted considerable effort to separating the kernel of truth in Mandeville's scandalous paradoxes from what was mere sophistry. Moreover, another significant figure features in the background of Smith's argument: Rousseau, whose *Discourse on Inequality*, first published in 1754 and reviewed by Smith in the *Edinburgh Review* in the following year, provided an inverted image of Mandeville's cynical anatomy of modern society. Smith was, indeed, one of the first to notice the fundamental affinities between Mandeville and Rousseau, which meant that when Smith was dealing openly and covertly with Mandeville in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, he was also answering some of Rousseau's arguments.

With the chief members of the cast assembled, it is now possible to consider how the secret concatenation features in Smith's earliest writings and lectures. Having done so, it may then be possible to obtain a clearer view of what was peculiar to Smith's final position as expressed in the *Wealth of Nations*.

editor, F. B. Kaye, to claim that Johnson's 'economic theories were largely borrowed from Mandeville'; see his editorial introduction to *The Fable of the Bees*, 2 volumes, Oxford, 1924, 1, pp. cxix, cxxxviii. Such a strong (and unnecessary) statement of influence was open to exaggerated correction in the opposite direction by Earl R. Miner, 'Dr Johnson, Mandeville, and "Publick Benefits"', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 21 (1958), 159-66. For more balanced accounts of Johnson's position on economic subjects see J. H. Middendorf, 'Dr Johnson and Mercantilism', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 21 (1960), 66-83; and 'Johnson on Wealth and Commerce' in *Johnson, Boswell and their Circle*, Oxford, 1965, pp. 47-64.

⁸ Hester Lynch Piozzi, *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson during the last twenty years of his Life*, in G. B. Hill (ed.), *Johnsonian Miscellanea*, Oxford, 1985, p. 268; see also p. 207. Johnson seems to have passed his taste for Mandeville on to Mrs Thrale: see *Thraliana: The Diary of Mrs Thrale, 1776-1809*, edited by Katherine C. Balderston, 2 volumes, Oxford, 1942, 1, pp. 4, 25, 421; 11, pp. 656, 784, 1066-7.

II

Smith's speculations on this subject began well before he wrote what is now his best-known work. They appear in his lectures given in the 1760s alongside some revealing remarks about the delicacy of the wants of man, his inability to be content with unimproved natural products, and his insatiable desire for aesthetic pleasures that went beyond the utility or 'real substance' of material goods and services: 'The whole industry of human life is employed not in procuring the supply of our three humble necessities, food, cloaths, and lodging, but in procuring the conveniences of it according to the nicety and delicacy of our tastes.'⁹ Once development has gone beyond the savage state, in which 'every one enjoys the whole fruit of his own labour', while remaining 'indigent', the acquisition of conveniences and luxuries is accompanied both by greater industry in society at large and inequality in the distribution of the means of enjoyment. Thus 'he who, as it were, bears the burthen of society has the fewest advantages'.¹⁰ In the earliest draft of the *Wealth of Nations*, dating back to much the same period, the luxury of the idle few is forcefully connected with the theme of inequality and oppression:

In a civilised society the poor provide both for themselves and for the enormous luxury of their superiors. The rent which goes to support the vanity of the slothful landlord is all earned by the industry of the peasant. The monied man indulges himself in every sort of ignoble and sordid sensuality, at the expence of the merchant and tradesman to whom he lends out his stock at interest. All the indolent and frivolous retainers upon a court are, in the same manner, fed, cloathed, and lodged by the labour of those who pay the taxes which support them.¹¹

The unfairness of the distribution of burdens and rewards seems to carry as much weight as overall harmony and interdependence. But the point of the argument was to show that 'in the midst of so much oppressive inequality' the division of labour was capable of explaining how the 'lowest and most despised member of civilised society' enjoyed 'superior affluence and abundance' when compared with what 'the most respected and active savage can attain to'. In rather less colourful terms, of course, the same argument features in the chapters on the division of labour in Book 1 of the *Wealth of Nations*, often described as

⁹ *LJB*, p. 488; see also *LJA*, p. 335.

¹⁰ *LJB*, p. 490.

¹¹ See *ED* in *LJB*, p. 563.

remarkable for the peculiar stress laid upon this single 'cause of improvement in the productive powers of labour'.

In Smith's first published work, however, the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, another version of the same argument, with different emphases, was used. On this occasion it was linked with the image that has since become famous as a result of its use in the *Wealth of Nations*, that of an 'invisible hand' bringing order out of apparent chaos and apparent injustice. It occurs in a chapter that begins with an account of the aesthetic pleasures associated with the precise adjustment of means to ends, but rapidly moves on to the way in which the pursuit of objects of 'frivolous utility' are 'often the secret motive of the most serious and important pursuits of both private and public life'. The ambition to rise in the world is connected with the delusive belief that riches and power will bring happiness, whereas in fact they are merely 'operose machines' that only protect their possessors from trivial inconveniences. The delusion, however, has important consequences for society. It is the crucial 'deception' which 'keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind', and has consequently led to the subjugation of nature and all the 'sciences and arts which ennoble and embellish human life'.¹² Within this setting Smith returns to the connection between luxury and inequality in a rhetorical set-piece on the inability of the 'proud and unfeeling landlord' to engross the material sources of happiness to which his political and economic status in society entitles him:

The homely and vulgar proverb, that the eye is larger than the belly, never was more fully verified than with regard to him. The capacity of his stomach bears no proportion to the immensity of his desires, and will receive no more than that of the meanest peasant. The rest he is obliged to distribute among those, who prepare, in the nicest manner, that little which he himself makes use of, among those who fit up the palace in which this little is to be consumed, among those who provide and keep in order all the different baubles and trinkets, which are employed in the oeconomy of greatness; all of whom thus derive from his luxury and caprice, that share of the necessaries of life, which they would in vain have expected from his humanity or his justice. The produce of the soil maintains at all times nearly that number of inhabitants which it is capable of maintaining. The rich only select from the heap what is most precious and agreeable. They consume little more than the poor, and in spite of their natural selfishness and rapacity, though they mean only their own convenience, though the sole end which they propose from the labours of all the thousands whom they employ, be the gratification of their own vain and insatiable desires, they divide with the poor the produce of all

¹² *TMS*, IV, I.10.

their improvements. They are led by an invisible hand to make nearly the same distribution of the necessaries of life, which would have been made, had the earth been divided into equal portions among all its inhabitants, and thus without intending it, without knowing it, advance the interest of the society, and afford means to the multiplication of the species. When Providence divided the earth among a few lordly masters, it neither forgot nor abandoned those who seemed to have been left out in the partition. These last too enjoy their share of all that it produces. In what constitutes the real happiness of human life, they are in no respect inferior to those who would seem so much above them. In ease of body and peace of mind, all the different ranks of life are nearly upon a level, and the beggar, who suns himself by the side of the highway, possesses that security which kings are fighting for.¹³

The richness of allusion here justifies lengthy quotation. It is certainly not surprising that this rhetorical set-piece distancing happiness from fortune has been variously described by commentators as Smith 'at his most darkly stoic', or as 'romantic' extravagance, reflecting while answering Rousseau's position on the natural equality of man.¹⁴ A decidedly non-utilitarian view of the connections between wealth and happiness has taken on some additional features that make it sound more like an eighteenth-century sermon on the vanity of human wishes than a celebration of the material benefits of civilised existence. The rapacity of the rich is futile. They can enjoy their riches only by sharing them, and they profit little more from their consumption than those with whom they are forced to share. Johnson had found no difficulty in combining his Mandeville-inspired views on luxury with just such a poetic sermon based on Juvenal's tenth satire in which 'Wealth heap'd on wealth, nor truth nor safety buys / The dangers gather as the treasures rise.'¹⁵ In his own way, Smith was performing the same feat, though there is more of Juvenal's satirical contempt and less of the tragic bleakness of Ecclesiastes on vanity in Smith than one finds in Johnson's poem. Johnson was also resisting Juvenal's invocation of Stoic virtue as a means of coming to terms with the emptiness of human desires, offering instead Christian obedience to God's will as the only true source of tranquillity. Judging from what Smith had to say about Christian resignation when speaking of Hume's death, he probably thought more highly of the Stoic solution.¹⁶

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ The first description is that of Hont and Ignatieff, 'Needs and Justice in the *Wealth of Nations*' in *Wealth and Virtue*, p. 10; the second is that of D. D. Raphael, *Adam Smith*, Oxford, 1985, pp. 71-2, 79.

¹⁵ See 'The Vanity of Human Wishes', in Johnson, *Works*, vi, p. 92, lines 26-7.

¹⁶ See p. 38 above.

It is also significant that Smith qualified his line of argument in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* by saying that it was the product of a 'splenetic philosophy, which in time of sickness or low spirits is familiar to every man', implying that we are not obliged to see it in this light.¹⁷ Mandeville was Smith's chief example of a splenetic philosopher, defined as a 'peevisish' individual who imputes 'to the love of praise, or to what they call vanity, every action which ought to be ascribed to that of praise-worthiness'.¹⁸ But this did not prevent Smith from taking over Mandeville's use of the double truth as a mode of explanation. The natural selfishness and rapacity of the rich, their very greed, supplies its own antidote in an imperfect world. There is also a clear, if complacent, providentialist suggestion that these matters would be worse arranged if left to human contrivance, to a conscious regard for 'humanity' and 'justice' on the part of the rich and powerful. Smith was never one to give much credit to conscious reason in explaining 'the oeconomy of greatness'.

This is another significant phrase in the passage cited. It was Smith's equivalent of Johnson's 'artificial plenty', or what Burke was later to describe as 'the great wheel of circulation'.¹⁹ In the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* the consumption and hence circulation of the landowner's entitlement to the agricultural surplus in the form of rent brings about a redistribution of the stock of existing material goods. Remaining within an agrarian framework, the focus, one might say, is on the distribution of *each* year's harvest through consumption. In the *Wealth of Nations*, how the agricultural surplus could be *augmented* year by year becomes the main problem, with the non-material costs of progress being duly registered in a way that was not possible within the providentialist framework of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. The surplus produce of the soil, when expended by landowners on military retainers and menial servants, or later devoted to the acquisition of the baubles and trinkets produced in commercial towns, provides the clue to the 'natural progress of opulence' in Book III of the *Wealth of Nations*. There it is linked with an equally potent theme derived from Hume's historical writings. It becomes a story, for which the elements had been assembled in the lectures, of how the emergence in trading cities of commerce and manufacturing 'gradually introduced order and good government, and with them, the liberty and security of individuals,

¹⁷ *TMS*, IV, I.9.

¹⁸ *TMS*, III.2.27.

¹⁹ See p. 215 below.

who had before lived almost in a continual state of war with their neighbours, and of servile dependency upon their superiors'.²⁰ Feudalism, instead of savage society, now becomes the relevant standard by which commercial modernity is assessed. Book III introduces the 'silent and insensible revolution' associated with commerce that had led to the breakdown of feudalism and laid the foundation for what was distinctively modern about commercial society – an end to dependency (though not, as we shall see, to deference) and the beginnings of modern liberty defined as security under the rule of law. Smith's summary of the process by which this historic result was achieved is expressed with an asperity and a stress on unintentionality that reminds us of the origins of the argument in his earliest speculations:

A revolution of the greatest importance to the publick happiness, was in this manner brought out by two different orders of people, who had not the least intention to serve the publick. To gratify the most childish vanity, was the sole motive of the great proprietors. The merchants and artificers, much less ridiculous, acted merely from a view to their own interest, and in pursuit of their own pedlar principle of turning a penny whenever a penny was to be got. Neither of them had either knowledge or foresight of that great revolution which the folly of the one, and the industry of the other, was gradually bringing about.²¹

It was this statement that led Edward Gibbon to add a slightly critical note to his endorsement of Smith's account in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*: 'This gradual change of manners and expense is admirably explained by Dr. Adam Smith who proves, *perhaps too severely*, that the most salutary effects have followed from the meanest and most selfish causes.'²² Earlier in his work, however, when dealing with the Antonines, Gibbon had been entirely happy to give his own version of the role of luxury in the 'oeconomy of greatness'.

In their dress, their table, their houses, and their furniture, the favourites of fortune united every refinement of conveniency, of elegance, and of splendour, whatever could soothe their pride, or gratify their sensuality. Such refinements, under the odious name of luxury, have been severely arraigned by the moralists of every age; and it might perhaps be more conducive to the virtue, as well as happiness, of mankind, if all possessed the necessaries, and none the superfluities, of life. But in the present imperfect condition of society, luxury, though it may proceed from vice or folly, seems to be the only means

²⁰ *WN*, III.iv.4.

²¹ *WN*, III.iv.17.

²² *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, edited by J. B. Bury, 6th edition, 7 volumes, London, 1912, VII, p. 98, emphasis added.

that can correct the unequal distribution of property. The diligent mechanic, and the skilful artist, who have obtained no share in the division of the earth, receive a voluntary tax from the possessors of land; and the latter are prompted, by a sense of interest, to improve those estates, with whose produce they may purchase additional pleasures.²³

By the last quarter of the eighteenth century, therefore, the English paradox supported the conclusion that luxury was both a source of employment and a way of taxing the rich to support the poor that induced the rich to strive harder to increase the income necessary for their vice and folly. It had become a standard defence that owed a good deal to reflections by Hume and Smith that were provoked by Mandeville's writings. But Smith's main contribution to the debate lay elsewhere, partly in a rejection of the splenetic moral or psychological foundations of Mandeville's doctrines which he shared (also in part) with Hume, partly in a rejection of a feature of Mandeville's political economy, the disparagement of frugality, that provides the clue to one of the most distinctive features of the *Wealth of Nations*: the stress on private parsimony and capital accumulation. The next two sections are devoted to these issues.

III

Mandeville and Rousseau, taken singly and together, mark Smith's point of departure, with Hume acting as a kind of intermediary in the case of Mandeville. The *Fable of the Bees* revealed its author's delight in overturning the established rhetoric connecting private virtue and frugality with public benefit – a rhetoric that drew from Christian teaching on moderation and self-denial as well as classical republican anxieties that centred on the threat to public spirit posed by luxury and inequality. In bald summary, Mandeville had attempted to demonstrate that civilisation and luxury were indissolubly connected; that virtue and equality were synonymous with poverty; that self-interest and vanity played an indispensable part in human affairs; and that there was an irrevocable connection between private vice and the public benefits of life in civilised or commercial societies. This extended *reductio* practised on moral rigorists, and those who set out to reform manners as an antidote to the spread of luxury, was later supplemented by an attack on Shaftesbury's benevolism. The assumption of man's

²³ See *ibid.*, II, p. 71. On luxury and Gibbon's relationship to Smith on this subject see J. W. Burrow, *Gibbon*, Oxford, 1985, pp. 87–8.

sociability was denied in favour of the view that vice and virtue were essentially rhetorical devices designed to turn unsociable creatures into sociable ones by making them more pliable in the hands of the 'skilful politician'. A new and ignoble form was thereby given to what Plato had thought of as the noble lie. It became an assumption that since humankind were incapable of being ruled by reason or sentiment, they had to be governed by flattery, deceit, and artifice.

It was this doctrine that Smith discerned in Rousseau when he said that 'the Fable of the Bees has given occasion to the system of Rousseau' in his *Discourse on Inequality*. Mandeville's profligacy had been replaced by 'all the purity and sublimity of the morals of Plato', revealing, as Smith perceptively noted, that Rousseau possessed 'the true spirit of a republican carried a little too far'. Rousseau had also modified Mandeville's picture of the primitive state of mankind as one of wretched poverty. Nevertheless, both authors supposed:

that there is in man no powerful instinct which necessarily determines him to seek society for its own sake: but according to [Mandeville], the misery of his original state compelled him to have recourse to this otherwise disagreeable remedy; according to [Rousseau], some unfortunate accidents having given birth to the unnatural passions of ambition and the vain desire of superiority, to which he had before been a stranger, produced the same fatal effect. Both of them suppose the same slow progress and gradual development of all the talents, habits, and arts which fit men to live together in society, and they both describe this progress pretty much in the same manner. According to both, those laws of justice, which maintain the present inequality amongst mankind, were originally the inventions of the cunning and the powerful, in order to maintain or to acquire an unnatural and unjust superiority over the rest of their fellow creatures.²⁴

In their philosophical and historical treatments of law and government, and in their accounts of how morals were shaped by society, Hume and Smith rejected this doctrine as antagonistic to their respective moral psychologies based on the primacy of the social passions. For Hume, perhaps, the task of differentiating his position from that of Mandeville was more acute, partly because he had advertised his pursuit of a similarly naturalistic anatomy of morals in his *Treatise of Human Nature* – an approach that sought to avoid the teleological short cut of assuming that the capacity to make moral judgements or establish rules of justice could either be treated as the outcome of will based on rational intuition, or as the product of special

²⁴ 'Letter to the *Edinburgh Review*', reprinted in *EPS*, pp. 250–1.

moral sense, where both attributes were God-given. Hume's solution, in the case of justice, was to have recourse to 'artificial' virtues based on self-interest and regard for public utility. The rules of justice appear then as the outcome of an unconscious process of social interaction between individuals, each acting on the basis of limited benevolence. But if justice was, as he maintained, an 'artificial' virtue, this implied that it was the product of habit and convention, entailing a learning process that was capable of surmounting the limitations of our benevolence in a world of scarcity and competition between 'mine' and 'thine'.²⁵ Hume agreed with Mandeville in thinking, therefore, that education and 'the artifice of politicians' had a role to play in fortifying the motives for obeying general rules of justice that might not always accord with immediate self-interest. But he was equally convinced that sympathy provided a natural basis for the moral approbation accorded to justice as a virtue. This meant that law and government were less arbitrarily voluntaristic than Mandeville's conspiracy theory suggested; that justice was more than a device by which élites transformed what would otherwise be obstacles to their desires into instruments. Mandeville was in consequence one of the targets of Hume's criticisms of those who made artifice the sole basis for distinguishing vice and virtue:

if nature did not aid us in this particular, 'twou'd be in vain for politicians to talk of *honourable* or *dishonourable*, *praiseworthy* or *blameable*. These words wou'd be perfectly unintelligible, and wou'd no more have any idea annex'd to them, than if they were of a tongue perfectly unknown to us. The utmost politicians can perform, is, to extend the natural sentiments beyond their original bounds; but still nature must furnish the materials, and give us some notion of moral distinctions.²⁶

²⁵ The role of 'convention' in Hume's thinking has received a good deal of attention in recent writings on the subject; see especially Frederick G. Whelan, *Order and Artifice in Hume's Political Philosophy*, Princeton, 1984; and Donald W. Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life*, Chicago, 1984.

²⁶ *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd edition revised by P. H. Nidditch, Oxford, 1978, p. 500; see also pp. 533-4, 546. Mandeville was presumably the target of the equivalent passage in the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd edition revised by P. H. Nidditch, Oxford, 1975, p. 214. See also the more explicit criticism of Mandeville in the essay 'Of Refinement in the Arts' in *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary*, edited by Eugene F. Miller, Indianapolis, 1985, p. 272: 'Is it not very inconsistent for an author to assert in one page that moral distinctions are inventions of politicians for public interest; and in the next page maintain, that vice is advantageous to the public?' It should perhaps be noted that such criticisms of Mandeville are disputed by his editor, F. B. Kaye, who points out that *invention* is incompatible with the *evolutionary* perspective which Mandeville also espoused; see *Fable of the Bees*, 1, pp. lxiv-lxvi. One answer, as Kaye also shows, is that the evolutionary doctrine was stressed in response to early critics.

Smith was to contest the role accorded by Hume to utility in forming moral judgements in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, but the title and opening paragraph of the work proclaim the centrality of man's natural social passions: 'How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortunes of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it.' Mandeville, along with Hobbes, was undoubtedly one of those being criticised in the opening book, where it is argued that man's need for society cannot be derived from 'certain refinements of self-love' – a doctrine that will also feature in the next essay when dealing with the mercantile equivalents of Hobbes and Mandeville.

Agreeing with all those – including, incidentally, Johnson²⁷ – who had seen that much of Mandeville's reputation was based on a wilful (or peevish) refusal to make *any* distinctions between virtuous and vicious behaviour, Smith, in company with Hume, recognised Mandeville's claims, beneath the satire, to be a genuine anatomist of human nature.²⁸ As with all systems of moral philosophy, and in contrast with those advanced by natural philosophers, Mandeville's system 'could never have imposed upon so great a number of persons, nor have occasioned so general an alarm among those who are the friends of better principles, had it not in some respects bordered upon the truth'.²⁹ As we have seen, Smith had made much of vanity and emulation: it was the basis for that useful deception which accounted for material and cultural progress, however delusive the gains to individuals might be when viewed by a 'splenetic philosophy'. This was what lay behind the comma linking Smith's version of 'private vices, public benefits', and the Mandevillian cynicism with which he dealt with its unwilling results provoked Gibbon's mild reproof. Licentiousness was not the main defect of Mandeville as a moral anatomist. Smith believed that moral systems had *some* influence for good or ill on conduct, but his main criticism of Mandeville was one of intellectual

²⁷ 'The fallacy of that book is, that Mandeville defines neither vices nor benefits. He reckons among vices every thing that gives pleasure. He takes the narrowest system of morality, monastick morality, which holds pleasure itself to be a vice, such as eating salt with our fish, because it makes it taste better; and he reckons wealth as a publick benefit, which is by no means always true. Pleasure of itself is not a vice.' (See Boswell, *Life*, III, pp. 291–2.)

²⁸ Mandeville's claims in this regard are rehearsed in D. Castiglione, 'Considering Things Minutely: Reflections on Mandeville and the Eighteenth-Century Science of Man', *History of Political Thought*, 7 (1986), 463–88; see also Hundert, *The Enlightenment's Fable*, pp. 18, 37, 43, 54,

113.

²⁹ *TMS*, VII.ii.4.14.

error. It centred on his failure to take account, as an observable fact of social life, of certain human capacities and the practices built upon them, chiefly those involved in distinguishing between mere vanity – the love of praise, whether earned or not – and genuine praiseworthiness. Expressed in a later language, Smith did not believe that the problem of false consciousness was endemic to all social relationships, however much delusion played a part in his explanations of some social behaviour on some occasions. It was in this fashion, and once more in harmony with Hume, that Smith reached his accommodation with the unsettling aspects of Mandeville's position.

In his lectures on jurisprudence Smith gave his own version of the story of the 'slow progress' of the 'arts which fit men to live together in society'. There is no pre-social state of nature for Smith, whether brutish in Hobbes's or Mandeville's sense, or simply based on a-moral animal instincts, as in Rousseau's. Even the most primitive or savage state of society, the hunter-gatherers who mark the zero point on Smith's scale of civilisation, possess the benefits of society and language. With language comes the unique human capacity to persuade others to collaborate in satisfying wants, allowing them to make use of that famous propensity to truck and barter which Smith employs to account for the origins of the division of labour.³⁰ Once this is introduced, the way is open for improvements in the productivity of labour that enable a surplus beyond immediate wants to be achieved – though the scope for this is limited by the extent of the market at any given time or place.

As in the case of Rousseau's speculations, inequality enters into the account with property, the significant initial steps in this direction occurring with the ownership of flocks during the second or pastoral stage of development. They assume greater importance during the third or agrarian stage of society, when feudal systems of landownership and dependency are adopted. At this point Smith comes close to Mandeville and Rousseau in connecting law and government with inequality:

³⁰ *WN*, I.ii.1–3. What might be described today as the 'linguistic turn' is even more evident in *LJA* (see p. 352): 'Men always endeavour to persuade others to be of their opinion even when the matter is of no consequence to them ... And in this manner every one is practising oratory on others thro the whole of his life. You are uneasy whenever one differs from you, and you endeavour to persuade him to be of your mind; or if you do not it is a certain degree of self command, and to this every one is breeding thro their whole lives. In this manner they acquire a certain dexterity and address in managing their affairs, or in other words in managing of men; and this is altogether the practise of every man in the most ordinary affairs.'

Laws and government may be considered in this and indeed in every case as a combination of the rich to oppress the poor, and preserve to themselves the inequality of the goods which would otherwise be soon destroyed by the attacks of the poor . . . The government and laws hinder the poor from ever acquiring the wealth by the violence which they would otherwise exert on the rich; they tell them they must either continue poor or acquire wealth in the same manner as they [the rich] have done.³¹

But the very bluntness of this statement rules out any version of the ignoble lie: there may be combination and the use of differential power, but the benefit to the public is genuine, however unintended by the rich. Moreover, there is no deception in the shape of an unjust pact of government or contract between rich and poor – Rousseau’s system of chains into which the poor run so heedlessly and fatefully. Security under the rule of law benefits both large and small property-owners. The various legitimate titles to property posed no problems for Smith’s version of natural law doctrines. The litany of occupation, accession, prescription, succession, and voluntary transference provided adequate answers, and not merely when repeated by generations of his students in examinations. By the time he came to write the *Wealth of Nations*, Smith was also to emphasise that any system based on natural justice ought to include those whose property consists only in their labour.

Regular systems of law and government not only protect property that has been legitimately acquired and allow the different arts and sciences to flourish – a point accepted by Rousseau, while placing a negative evaluation on the results – but represent ‘the highest effort of human prudence and wisdom’.³² It was not necessary, according to Smith’s account, to posit a mixture of cupidity on the part of the knowing rich and stupidity on the part of the unreflecting dispossessed. Imperfections and injustices in the administration of the rules of justice provide a constant challenge to human wisdom, but they are not such as would require, as Rousseau believed, a new social contract and the attentions of a Lycurgus-like legislator to stabilise or reverse the historical process. The reasons why this should be so can be found not only in the differences between the basic assumptions of Smith and Rousseau, but in their respective diagnoses of the nature of the secret concatenation as it presented itself in modern commercial societies.

³¹ *LJA*, p. 208.

³² *LJB*, p. 489.

For Rousseau, the relationship of riches and poverty is of a devastatingly simple zero-sum kind, further compounded in its tragic consequences by his view of the relationship between the economic life of town and country. The rich can be rich only *because* the poor are poor. As a solution to inequality, the luxury expenditure of the rich is worse than the evil it is supposed to remedy: the employment given to the urban artisan results in a decline in the living standards of the rural poor. Manufacturing can prosper only at the expense of agriculture, and the result of allowing it to do so for the economy as a whole must be depopulation.

For every hundred paupers whom luxury feeds in our cities, it causes a hundred thousand to perish in our countryside: the money that passes between the hands of the rich and the Artists to provide for their superfluities, is lost for the Husbandman's subsistence; and he is without a suit of clothing just because they must have piping on theirs.³³

Although the simplicity of this early analysis could hardly serve as much of a stimulus to Smith, it helps to underline just how comprehensively he reversed Rousseau's logic. The divergence between the two positions could only grow when Rousseau later advocated the suppression or taxation of luxury consumption, whether of goods or services, and espoused the aim of reducing all those relative inequalities that corrupted morals and undermined citizenship.³⁴ For Smith, achieving a surplus beyond subsistence needs through the division of labour meant that the economic game is a positive one, with scope for both rich and poor to improve their position, however unequally the relative gains are distributed. Similarly with the relationship between town and country, there is a symbiotic relationship between manufacturing and agriculture when the economy as a whole is expanding.

On other matters where Smith may have been responding to Rousseau or writing in parallel with him, there was room for more interesting interchange. It could be argued, for example, that Smith's theory of sympathy, as expounded in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, is an augmented version of Rousseau's concept of *pitié*. This was an instinctive response to the injuries and sorrows of others that had been recognised by Mandeville and which Rousseau attributed to men and

³³ *First and Second Discourses*, pp. 72, 211–12.

³⁴ See Rousseau's *Social Contract*, edited by G. D. H. Cole, London, 1913, pp. 19, 42–3, 55; and the article on 'Political Economy', in *ibid.*, pp. 250, 255, 258–9, 264–9. See also Michael Ignatieff's comparative treatment of Smith and Rousseau on this subject in *The Needs of Strangers*, Chapter 4.

animals alike – though Rousseau also believed that the instinct became weaker as man increasingly became subject to the corruptions of civil society.³⁵ From this perspective, Smith could be said to have controverted Rousseau by making civil society the domain within which *pitié* was polished through the mechanisms of the impartial spectator to form the basis for regular codes of morals and rules of natural justice. Once again then, far from being the enemy of private virtue and public spirit, civil or commercial society might become the arena in which *some* of these virtues were acquired or enhanced through social practice. This did not mean, however, that the progress towards greater civility was an unmixed blessing, that the result was guaranteed, and that it did not exact a moral price. Nor, on the other hand, did it require resort to Mandeville's Augustinian version of the zero-sum game, namely one in which temporal happiness could be purchased only at the expense of virtue. Smith was charting a course between his two antagonists on this matter.

In other respects, however, Smith bypasses them, as can be illustrated by means of Rousseau's distinction between an acceptable, 'natural', self-preserving *amour de soi*, and an unacceptable, 'artificial' *amour propre* which comes into play within civil society.³⁶ Translated into Smith's English, one can point first to Smith's positive assessment of self-love. This was a case where Smith differed from Hutcheson in holding that prudential regard for personal affairs was a virtue – one that could readily be distinguished, *pace* Mandeville, from mere selfishness and vice. The divergence from Rousseau's critique of *amour propre* turns on Smith's refusal to deny the genuine *social* benefits associated with the desire to better oneself by pursuing the objects of vanity. Thus while the same basic assumption of man's unsocial proclivities was present in both Mandeville and Rousseau, in erecting his own moral philosophy upon the *opposite* foundation, Smith built closer to Mandeville by accepting the realism and higher explanatory content of Mandeville's observations. And yet in his evaluation of the actual benefits to the individual of vanity and ambition, Smith, while rejecting Mandeville's equation of vanity with vice and Rousseau's exaggerated republican sentiments, often seems to share the latter's Stoicism. Material goods, beyond those that meet our minimal needs for food and shelter, do not confer greater happiness; they are not worthy of the effort involved in acquiring them, though their pursuit is

³⁵ See *First and Second Discourses*, pp. 160–3.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 226–7.

attended by genuine, if unintended, social benefits. Such withholding of moral approval at the individual level, while appreciating the social benefits, is one of the additional freedoms enjoyed by Smith as a naturalistic observer *and* moralist, employing the doctrine of unintended consequences for purposes of explanation.³⁷

Naturalism also underlies another subtle difference between Smith and Rousseau on the subject of inequality. There might seem to be little subtlety in comparing Rousseau's condemnation of relative inequality with Smith's more neutral analysis of the stabilising qualities of a system of ranks in society based on tangible differences of wealth.³⁸ In this respect, at least, Smith might have agreed with Johnson's reported conclusion that 'mankind are happier in a state of inequality and subordination'.³⁹ He would not have accepted Johnson's corollary that without this men would 'degenerate into brutes', but he agreed with the historical observation, reinforced perhaps by Mandeville's satire on what had happened to the 'grumbling' bee-hive once it had espoused virtue, that equality and poverty had gone hand in hand. Nevertheless, Smith's continuing concern with the underlying moral issue can be gauged from his additions to the 1790 edition of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, especially those parts which stress the 'corruption of our moral sentiments' involved in the propensity to admire the rich and powerful, regardless of true merit or virtue, and the expanded account he gives of the qualities required of the man of wisdom who is capable of exercising self-command and therefore of resisting the short-sighted temptations of avarice and vanity. Whereas the static republican logic of Rousseau's political economy invited outright rejection in the light of Smith's more dynamic view of the progress of opulence, the issue of corruption, of ensuring that behaviour in commercial society was not distorted by false consciousness, could not be resolved so readily. It might involve capacities that were beyond most people, and it certainly deserved the serious attention – as we shall see in the succeeding essay – of legislators.⁴⁰

Like Hume before him, therefore, Smith's relationship to the Mandevillian (and the associated Rousseauist) position is a complex one. The way in which Hume and Smith sustained this relationship is best illustrated by the former's essay 'Of Refinement in the Arts',

³⁷ On this see Burrow, *Whigs and Liberals*, Chapter 3.

³⁸ *TMS*, I.iii.2.3; VI.ii.1.20; VI.iii.3.30.

³⁹ Boswell, *Life*, III, p. 219.

⁴⁰ *TMS*, I.iii.3 and VI.1.

originally titled 'Of Luxury' – the essay that had rightly given Rousseau the impression that Hume, in common with Melon and Voltaire, had endorsed the English paradox in favour of luxury. Hume defended commerce as a means of reconciling private gain and national 'greatness'. Under modern conditions, far from enfeebling states, commerce and manufacturing added to military potential, overcame agrarian indolence, and introduced a lively regard for liberty that benefited all the arts and sciences of civilised existence. Throughout the essay Hume addressed those republican anxieties which Mandeville had ridiculed and for which Smith had criticised Rousseau only for taking to extremes. He recognised not merely the validity of these anxieties under ancient conditions, but noted the possibility that luxury and inequality could still prove detrimental to modern states. In other words, Hume makes the distinction between 'innocent' and 'blameable' luxury which Mandeville consistently refused to recognise – without which, indeed, much of the force of his paradoxes would have collapsed.

But Hume's acceptance of commerce and luxury had another rationale that remains close to Mandeville's naturalism. It was based on the view that legislators 'must take mankind as they find them' and follow policies which complied with 'the common bent of mankind'.⁴¹ This often meant that the legislator operated in a second-best world in which 'he can only cure one vice by another' that has fewer pernicious consequences.

To say, that, without vicious luxury, the labour would not have been employed at all, is only to say, that there is some other defect in human nature, such as indolence, selfishness, inattention to others, for which luxury, in some measure, provides a remedy; as one poison may be an antidote to another. But virtue, like wholesome food, is better than poisons, however corrected.⁴²

This was what Gibbon argued later, and it probably comes close to explaining Johnson's position as well. The same rationale underlies Hume's advice to legislators when designing political institutions, namely to assume that men were self-interested knaves, even if the assumption was not true of all men at all times.⁴³ As will be shown in subsequent essays, a similar practical philosophy of the second-best, together with a preference for relying on impersonal machinery to

⁴¹ 'Of Commerce' in *Essays*, p. 260.

⁴² 'Of Refinement in the Arts' in *Essays*, p. 279.

⁴³ 'Of the Independency of Parliament' in *Essays*, pp. 42–3.

guide self-interested action into publicly beneficial channels, is also characteristic of Smith's advice to legislators.

IV

By the time Smith had completed the *Wealth of Nations*, of course, he had gone well beyond playing variations on Mandevillian themes, or even embellishing Hume's version of the paradox in favour of luxury. In that work Mandeville was listed, along with Thomas Mun and others, as one of the 'pretended doctors' of the mercantile system. This chiefly referred to the confusion of wealth with specie, and hence to what Smith regarded as the erroneous obsession with a favourable balance of trade as the index of national economic advantage. Although Mandeville did subscribe to the view that one of the duties of the skilful politician was to ensure a favourable balance of trade, this was by no means the only aspect of his political economy which remained within the established boundaries of late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thinking.⁴⁴ Mandeville's writings have so often been quarried for material that would establish the origins and ethos of modern capitalism that it is necessary to stress his limitations as an economic thinker.⁴⁵ Apart from balance-of-trade preoccupations, these limitations can be seen in his opinion that cheap labour and a regime that prevented the poor from escaping the necessity for hard work was essential to national wealth. The scandalous announcement, in his *Essay on Charity and Charity Schools*, that in the interests of national wealth the poor should be kept both ignorant and poor was perhaps another case of Mandeville joining hands with Rousseau by accepting the zero-sum view of inequality. Though framed in a deliberately provocative manner, however, these opinions conformed with conventional wisdom on what has become known as the utility of poverty doctrine.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ See *Fable of the Bees*, I, p. 249: 'what I have insisted on the most, and repeated more than once, is the great Regard that is to be had to the Balance of Trade, and the Care the Legislature ought to take that the Yearly Imports never exceed the Exports'.

⁴⁵ See D. Castiglione, 'Excess, Frugality and the Spirit of Capitalism: Readings of Mandeville on Commercial Society' in J. Melling and J. Barry (eds.), *Culture in History: Production, Consumption and Values in Historical Perspective*, Exeter, 1992, pp. 155-79. It is one of the distinctive qualities of E. J. Hundert's *The Enlightenment's Fable* that he stresses Mandeville's conventionality as an economic thinker; see pp. 186-200.

⁴⁶ The best treatment of this doctrine is still that of Edgar S. Furniss, *The Position of the Laborer in a System of Nationalism*, New York, 1957, especially Chapter 6. For a comprehensive survey see A. W. Coats, 'Changing Attitudes to Labour in the Mid-Eighteenth Century', originally published in 1958, and now included in *On the History of Economic Thought; British and American Economic Essays*, London, 1992, pp. 63-84.

Overturning this doctrine was another of Smith's accomplishments in the *Wealth of Nations*, but the groundwork for so doing had been laid in his lectures when he singled out another of Mandeville's arguments for refutation: the view that 'no luxury nor folly whatever, not the greatest extravagance imaginable, if laid out on commodities of home production could in the least be prejudicial':⁴⁷

Mandeville had certainly argued that 'the Prodigal is a Blessing to the whole Society, and injures no body but himself'.⁴⁸ Johnson's opinion on the indifference of the public to private extravagance and debt comes close to endorsing what Smith would have regarded as a similar fallacy. Frugality, according to Mandeville, was 'a mean starving Virtue, that is only fit for small Societies of good peaceable Men, who are contented to be poor so they may be easy'.⁴⁹ Far from being an active virtue, it was merely a conditioned response to necessity. For Smith, on the other hand, parsimony or saving had much greater significance, and it was not to be confused with mere avarice, where this connoted barren hoarding. Wherever 'tolerable security' existed, he said, 'a man must be perfectly crazy' not to make use of the opportunity either to invest his savings on his own account or lend them to others who would do so in return for an interest payment.⁵⁰ Prodigality involved the consumption of stock or capital and could never be beneficial to a nation. The wastrel who merely consumes his patrimony and ends in debt has not benefited the public.⁵¹ Nor has the person who engages in ventures that fail.⁵² It followed that 'every frugal man [was] a publick benefactor'.⁵³ Moreover, by maintaining that 'what is prudence in the conduct of every private family, can scarce be folly in that of a great kingdom', Smith, in this case at least, collapsed one of Mandeville's double truths into a single one.⁵⁴ By so doing, he also eliminated much of the space Mandeville had created for the operations of the 'skilful politician'.

⁴⁷ *LJA*, pp. 393, 513–14.

⁴⁸ See *Fable of the Bees*, I, p. 116.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, I, p. 104.

⁵⁰ *WN*, II.i.30.

⁵¹ 'By not confining his expence within his income, [the prodigal] encroaches upon his capital. Like him who perverts the revenues of some pious foundation to profane purposes, he pays the wages of idleness with those funds which the frugality of his forefathers had, as it were, consecrated to the maintenance of industry'; *WN*, II.iii.20.

⁵² 'Every injudicious and unsuccessful project in agriculture, mines, fisheries, trade, or manufactures, tends in the same manner to diminish the funds destined for the maintenance of productive labour'; *WN*, II.iii.26.

⁵³ *WN*, II.iii.25.

⁵⁴ *WN*, IV.ii.12.

Smith, as we shall see, was to do much the same to Steuart's rival conception of the pervasive duties of the statesman in economic affairs.

The mature form of Smith's answer to Mandeville and others on this subject was given in Book II of the *Wealth of Nations*, where he deals with capital accumulation. The division of labour dealt with in Book I acquired its necessary complement: 'As the accumulation of stock must, in the nature of things be previous to the division of labour, so labour can be more and more subdivided in proportion only as stock is previously more and more accumulated.'⁵⁵ *Au fond*, this did not represent an advance on the lectures, but in expounding the idea more fully in the *Wealth of Nations* Smith gave his own meaning to terminology borrowed from the *économistes* as a result of his visit to France in 1763–4: the distinction between productive and unproductive labour. Hence the new way of expressing one of the main elements in his account of the progress of opulence. A nation's wealth not only depended on 'the skill, dexterity, and judgment with which its labour is generally applied', but on the proportion of the available labour force that was annually employed in 'useful and productive labour' compared with those who were engaged on unproductive labour. In appropriating this distinction for his purposes, Smith sought to distinguish those (productive) activities associated with private investment which added to a nation's capacity to grow over time, from those (unproductive) activities, whether public or private, that merely circulated wealth through consumption. As we shall see in the next essay, although the new terminology served Smith's purpose well enough in this respect, it also created problems when dealing with some prominent types of unproductive labour, particularly those supported by public expenditure.⁵⁶

Seen as part of his attack on the theorists of the mercantile system, however, Smith's emphasis on capital accumulation and productive labour allowed him to advocate an alternative, more dynamic index of a nation's capacity to add to its wealth over time. In place of a favourable balance of trade Smith substituted the idea of a favourable balance between annual consumption and production that enabled a nation to add to its capital stock, regardless of the state of its trade balance.⁵⁷ This also gives a new dimension to the idea of the poor

⁵⁵ *WN*, II.3.

⁵⁶ See pp. 112–13 below.

⁵⁷ See *WN*, IV.iii.c.15–17 for the comparison between the balance of trade and the balance of production and consumption. See also *LJA*, p. 393 for evidence that Smith did not need the terminology borrowed from the *économistes* to express the same idea.

being reliant on the rich for employment by showing those circumstances in which the productive members of society, rich or poor, support the unproductive. For Smith, the latter were normally the rich, but as we shall see in the case of later Poor Law debates, a growing number of paupers could also be described as unproductive. An imbalance between productive and unproductive labour could become detrimental to a nation's growth if carried so far as to retrench on a nation's annual balance of production over consumption.

It is important to note, however, that the new terminology and emphasis on parsimony and productive expenditure in the *Wealth of Nations* did not mean that Smith had reneged on his defence of luxury in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Unproductive expenditure continued to serve its lesser circulatory and employment-generating function. While the effect of such expenditure on the *level* of employment might be the same, the type of employment would differ.⁵⁸ Moreover, the durable luxury goods discarded by the rich could still serve a purpose when passed on to those lower in the income scale. Indeed, Smith could be particularly indulgent towards certain kinds of private and public magnificence of a durable variety that added to dignity and beauty, if not to the nation's productive capacity: 'Noble palaces, magnificent villas, great collections of books, statues, pictures, and other curiosities, are frequently both an ornament and an honour, not only to the neighbourhood, but to the whole country to which they belong. Versailles is an ornament and honour to France, Stowe and Wilton to England.'⁵⁹ Such examples of durable magnificence were preferable to other forms of unproductive expenditure on the services of menial servants, as well as to a good deal of what governments spent from tax revenues. But growth required private frugality, especially in a world in which governments were habitually profligate and entirely capable of producing national ruin as a result of the institution of public credit which enabled them to anticipate and exceed tax revenues.

Fortunately, neither erroneous teachings such as those of Mandeville, nor the extravagance of some individuals, was a barrier to success: 'Though the principle of expence prevails in almost all men upon some occasions, and in some men upon almost all occasions, yet in the greater

⁵⁸ 'The expence of a great lord feeds generally more idle than industrious people. The rich merchant, though with his capital he maintains industrious people only, yet by his expence, that is, by the employment of his revenue, he feeds commonly the very same sort as the great lord'; see *WN*, II.iii.7 and III.iv.11–12.

⁵⁹ *WN*, II.iii.39.

part of men, taking the whole course of their lives at an average, the principle of frugality seems not only to predominate, but to predominate very greatly.⁶⁰ The reason for this, of course, was that 'desire of bettering our condition' which comes with us from the womb to the grave. It was not a short-sighted desire to confirm social status and achieve present enjoyment, as was the case with most luxury consumption, but a 'calm and dispassionate' attempt to improve our condition over time:

The uniform, constant, and uninterrupted effort of every man to better his condition, the principle from which publick and national, as well as private opulence is originally derived, is frequently powerful enough to maintain the natural progress of things toward improvement, in spite both of the extravagance of government, and of the greatest errors of administration. Like the unknown principle of animal life, it frequently restores health and vigour to the constitution, in spite, not only of the disease, but of the absurd prescriptions of the doctor.⁶¹

The productive use of the results of private frugality provided Smith with the capstone of his answer to jeremiads on luxury. Only by taking the longer view of national wealth could the addition to capital and the slow rise in each year's annual produce be observed. Concentration on the uneven fortunes of particular branches of industry or districts over shorter periods accounted for the fact that 'five years have seldom passed away in which some book or pamphlet has not been published, written too with such abilities as to gain some authority with the publick, and pretending to demonstrate that the wealth of the nation was fast declining, that the country was depopulated, agriculture neglected, manufactures decaying, and trade undone'.⁶²

V

Goldsmith's *Deserted Village* undoubtedly belonged to this well-stocked branch of literature, at least so far as rural depopulation was concerned. Smith's likely response to the didactic dimension of the poem can be gauged from remarks similar to the one just quoted, but the real novelty of his position, paradoxically, lies in what he did *not* say on the subject. The causes of depopulation or populousness was a subject that had engaged the attention of many of Smith's predecessors and contemporaries, including Hume, one of whose essays was written as part of a

⁶⁰ *WN*, II.iii.28.

⁶¹ *WN*, II.iii.31.

⁶² *WN*, II.iii.33.

learned dispute with Robert Wallace on whether ancient or modern societies were more populous. Smith did not choose this point of entry into the 'oeconomy of greatness', though on some basic questions raised by population he was content to accept the conventional eighteenth-century position. Thus, in the long passage from the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* cited earlier, there is a passing reference to the idea that 'the produce of the soil maintains at all times nearly that number of inhabitants which it is capable of maintaining'. This theme was of course to serve as the basis for some distinctive variations later performed by Malthus, but where, as we shall see, the speculations of some of Smith's contemporaries on the causes of populousness were more helpful to him than Smith's writings. Along with most of his contemporaries, Smith equated 'greatness' with 'populousness', believing that 'the most decisive mark of the prosperity of any country is the increase of the number of its inhabitants'.⁶³ In common with other eighteenth-century writers on population such as Cantillon and Steuart, Smith also accepted that: 'Every species of animals naturally multiplies in proportion to the means of their subsistence, and no species can ever multiply beyond it.'⁶⁴ Once more, however, where Smith differed was in his interpretation of the nature of the legislator's duties in encouraging populousness. The duties did not need to be directly and specifically aimed at preserving or increasing population size: this could be left as the *by-product* of the process of growth through capital accumulation and rising real wages, where the latter connoted greater command over those customary levels of consumption which defined subsistence at any given time or place.⁶⁵ But first a little more must be said about the conventional lines of argument connecting luxury with depopulation by returning to the *Deserted Village*.

Johnson's reported answer to Goldsmith ('Luxury, so far as it reaches the poor, will do good to the race of people') misses the main point of the fears expressed in the poem. As Goldsmith made plain in his dedication, and as Johnson partially recognised in his reference to the hurt inflicted by competition for riches on health and 'military spirit', Goldsmith was self-consciously adopting the position of 'a professed ancient'. This accounts for some broad similarities with Rousseau on the irreversibility of population decline:

⁶³ *WN*, I.viii.23.

⁶⁴ *WN*, I.viii.39.

⁶⁵ Smith's distinctiveness in this regard is one of the conclusions of R. D. C. Black, 'Le theorie della popolazione prima di Malthus in Inghilterra e in Irlanda' in *Le teoria della popolazione prima di Malthus*, edited by Gabriella Gioli, Milan, 1987, pp. 47-69.

Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey,
 Where wealth accumulates, and men decay;
 Princes and lords may flourish, or may fade;
 A breath can make them, as a breath has made.
 But a bold peasantry, their country's pride,
 When once destroyed, can never be supplied.

The luxuries of the rich, even when enjoyed in rural settings, force the poor to emigrate abroad or into cities at home. In contrast with Johnson, Goldsmith was less impressed by the 'artificial plenty' of urban life:

If to the city sped – what waits him there?
 To see profusion that he must not share;
 To see ten thousand baneful arts combined
 To pamper luxury, and thin mankind.

In Goldsmith's case it was not so much manufacturing, but the spread of luxury connected with the growth of foreign commerce and colonial expansion that was the threat. He was registering a specific protest against a particular type of 'blameable' excess rather than mounting a general attack on commerce and luxury. Still less was he protesting, as some have held, against the enclosure movement, the horrors of capitalism, and an incipient industrial revolution.⁶⁶ His target was 'unwieldy wealth', where 'one only master grasps the whole domain' and proceeds to transform agricultural land into a lordly pleasure park.

Smith had recognised that the arrival of a 'great lord' in a district that had previously engaged in manufacturing could render the populace 'idle and poor'.⁶⁷ He attributed this to the change of occupations that occurred when manufacturing was replaced by menial service. A similar explanation was given for the lower crime rate in commercial cities such as Paris and Glasgow when compared with Versailles and Edinburgh, where the number of those engaged in domestic or court service was greater.⁶⁸ As Johnson might have put it, however, 'Crime and Demoralisation, Sir, are not Depopulation!'⁶⁹

In his lectures, Smith had answered another ancient form of the argument that was closer to the one Goldsmith had in mind, and he

⁶⁶ For a corrective to these anachronistic readings see Howard J. Bell, 'The Deserted Village and Goldsmith's Social Doctrines', *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, 59 (1944), 747–72.

⁶⁷ *WN*, II.iii.12.

⁶⁸ See *LJA*, pp. 333, 486–7; and *WN*, II.iii.12.

⁶⁹ Johnson's response to Goldsmith's poem was shared by contemporary reviewers; they admired the sentiments and the imagery more than the underlying thesis; see *Goldsmith, The Critical Heritage* edited by G. S. Rousseau, London, 1974, pp. 76–86.

did so in a manner that brings the subject back to inequality. Smith informed his students why agrarian laws designed to reduce 'overgrown fortunes' had understandably been popular among a Roman citizenry faced with competition from large landowners employing slaves to cultivate their domains and meet their needs for manufactured goods. The point of Smith's story, however, was to show why 'in the present state of things a man of a great fortune is rather of advantage than disadvantage to the state, providing that there is a gradual descent of fortunes betwixt these great ones and others of the least and lowest fortune'.⁷⁰ The justification turned, once more, on the diffusion of benefits via the consumption of the rich. Goldsmith would not have been convinced by this general answer to his particular problem: he believed that depopulation had in fact resulted from the cause he described. With regard to large estates, Smith held that they were usually poorly managed, and that they were likely to be better farmed if they fell into the hands of those who had previous experience of commercial enterprise. If, as may well have been the case, Goldsmith's *bêtes noires* were those who had recently made fortunes in commerce, he would not have been impressed by this argument. It also has to be added that in the *Deserted Village* we are invited to pity the inhabitants of Auburn more for their loss of simple communal pleasures than for the destruction of their industry and enterprise – of which Goldsmith tells us nothing. Smith might have further compounded his error in Goldsmith's eyes by adopting a worldly attitude toward the kinds of durable magnificence often associated with plutocracy. From the point of view that Smith went on to establish in the *Wealth of Nations*, however, Goldsmith's mistake was exactly that noted when dealing with other popular writings on luxury and decline: a failure to take a sufficiently long or broad view of the real sources of a nation's wealth, of its accumulating stock of capital and rising labour productivity.

On the other hand, neither Smith nor Goldsmith were men of one song. Smith neutrally described the freedom of merchants to shift their capital when compared with landowners as the reason why merchants were often thought of as 'not necessarily the citizen of any particular country'.⁷¹ He was also to give solid reasons why agriculture should be given priority in any attempt to return the progress of opulence to its natural footing. There are occasions too when he seems prepared to acknowledge the wider attractions of pastoral values.

⁷⁰ See *LJA*, p. 196.

⁷¹ *WN*, III.iv.24 and v.ii.f.6.

The beauty of the country besides, the pleasures of a country life, the tranquillity of mind which it promises, and wherever the injustice of human laws does not disturb it, the independency which it really affords, have charms that more or less attract every body; and as to cultivate the ground was the original destination of man, so in every stage of his existence he seems to retain a predilection for this primitive employment.⁷²

For his part, Goldsmith could also join the chorus of those who praised the contribution of innocent luxury to the secret concatenation:

The greater the luxuries of every country, the more closely, politically speaking, is that country united. Luxury is the child of society alone, the luxurious man stands in need of a thousand different artists to furnish out his happiness; it is more likely, therefore, that he should be a good citizen who is connected by motives of self-interest with so many, than the abstemious man who is united to none.⁷³

What this should remind us is that the debate on town versus country, luxury versus frugality, increasingly lost the character of a binary moral choice between opposites. It became a debate about the golden mean, about how to define and strike a balance between opposed tendencies, how to establish the point at which losses outweighed benefits. But this too appears to mark a point on which Smith parted company with many of his contemporaries. When defining necessities, conveniences, and luxuries for the purposes of recommending that taxes be concentrated on luxuries, Smith, as one might expect, does not endorse the usual case for sumptuary laws. Indeed, he makes only the slightest bow in the direction of moral assessment.⁷⁴ It was an essential feature of his attempt to undermine the 'utility-of-poverty' doctrine advanced by Mandeville and others that he should not only draw attention to the spread of luxury consumption to the labouring classes, but that he should refuse to endorse 'the common complaint that luxury extends itself even to the lowest ranks of the people'.

The standard literature on luxury and populousness contains another feature that is either absent or appears in modified form in Smith.

⁷² *WN*, III.i.3.

⁷³ Letter XI of *The Citizen of the World* in *The Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith*, edited by A. Friedman, 5 volumes, Oxford, 1966, II, p. 52. Howard Bell, 'The Deserted Village and Goldsmith's Social Doctrines', 753–9, explains why this does not contradict *Deserted Village*.

⁷⁴ 'Under necessities therefore, I comprehend, not only those things which nature, but those things which the established rules of decency have rendered necessary to the lowest rank of people. All other things, I call luxuries; without meaning by this appellation, to throw the smallest degree of reproach upon the temperate use of them': *WN*, v.ii.k.3. The only concession to moral judgement is the word 'temperate'.

Efforts to establish the golden mean not only had to address the relationship between private vices and public benefits, but the optimal balance between economic activities *within* nations as well. In his account of the natural progress of opulence, and in his treatment of the ‘different employment of capitals’, Smith envisaged that agriculture would occupy the topmost point on any ideal temporal hierarchy of employments – an indication of his belief that there were unexploited investment opportunities in agriculture. The mercantile system was criticised for disturbing the natural hierarchy, and he classified nations according to the degree to which capital had been employed in some or all of the possible outlets.⁷⁵

The differences between this train of thought and that of those who revived the dispute between ancients and moderns on the connections between populousness and luxury in the middle of the century can be seen in Hume’s amicable exchange with Wallace on the subject. The exchange could be amicable precisely because both men recognised that categorical statements were out of place on a subject that involved achieving a balance between the respective roles of commerce, agriculture, slavery, luxury, cities, modes of conducting war, and forms of government in favouring or discouraging population growth.⁷⁶ Although Hume and Wallace were addressing a larger problem than that posed by Goldsmith’s *Auburn*, what makes their dispute of interest is not so much the conclusion (the ancients were/were not more populous), but the way in which both authors sought to define the middle ground. Thus Wallace took the side of the ancients against Hume by contending, in a statement that is a mild echo of Rousseau, that ‘trade and commerce instead of increasing, may often tend to diminish the numbers of mankind and while they enrich a particular nation and entice great numbers of people into one place may not be a little detrimental upon the whole as they promote luxury and prevent many useful hands from being employed in agriculture’.⁷⁷ Note the ‘may often’ rather than ‘always’, and ‘upon the whole’ rather than ‘invariably’. Similar qualifications appear on Hume’s side, where the hypothetical imperative is widely and safely deployed.

Two further illustrations of contemporary treatments of populous-

⁷⁵ See *WN*, II.v.20–57.

⁷⁶ To this list of topics could be added the problem of whether trade and prosperity could be engrossed by those nations who were first in the field. For a treatment of the Hume–Wallace exchanges within this context see I. Hont, ‘The Rich Country–Poor Country Debate in Scottish Classical Political Economy’ in Hont and Ignatieff, *Wealth and Virtue*, pp. 289–91.

⁷⁷ *A Dissertation on the Numbers of Mankind in Antient and Modern Times*, Edinburgh, 1753, p. 22.

ness, published before and after the *Wealth of Nations* respectively, confirm the centrality of the issue of balance: Steuart's *Inquiry into the Principles of Political Oeconomy* and William Paley's *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy*. The first of these was to be eclipsed by Smith, though in company with Paley's work it was to serve as one of Malthus's starting points. Steuart, much indebted to Hume's economic essays, raises and summarises the debate on luxury in his preface:

Luxury, says one, is incompatible with the prosperity of a state. Luxury is the fountain of a nation's welfare and happiness, says another. There may, in reality, be no difference in the sentiments of these two persons. The first may consider luxury as prejudicial to foreign trade, and as corrupting the morals of a people. The other may consider luxury as the means of providing employment for such as must live by their industry, and of promoting an equable circulation of wealth and subsistence, through all the classes of inhabitants. If each of them had attended to the other's complex idea of luxury, with all its consequences, they would have rendered their propositions more general.⁷⁸

The opening book of the *Inquiry* was devoted entirely to population and agriculture, stressing as Steuart does throughout the active role of the statesman in solving the subsistence problem and in promoting the optimal distribution of the population between agriculture and those other employments which he nominated as open to 'free labour'.⁷⁹

Paley's chapter 'Of Population and Provision; and Of Agriculture and Commerce, as Subservient Thereto', based on a thoroughgoing utilitarian perspective that made the quantity of happiness depend directly on numbers, posed the problem of luxury as one of counterposing its beneficial effect on employment against the discouragement to marriage that would occur once luxuries became necessities for the population at large. Diffusion of luxury was now treated as the chief concern, and Paley responded to it in a Mandevillian manner by concluding that 'the condition most favourable to population is that of a laborious, frugal people ministering to the demands of an opulent, luxurious nation'.⁸⁰ Johnson's belief that luxury could not harm a nation when so few enjoyed it had given way to concern about the effect of its spread to the populace at large. Here too opinion was divided between those who feared, in Wallace's words, that luxury

⁷⁸ *Inquiry into the Principles of Political Oeconomy*, edited by A. S. Skinner, 2 volumes, Edinburgh, 1966, I, p. 8.

⁷⁹ 'In every question of political oeconomy, I constantly suppose a statesman at the head of government, systematically conducting every part of it.' See *ibid.*, I, pp. 37, 122.

⁸⁰ *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy*, London, 1785, 19th edition, 1911, p. 360.

would ‘render servants and the poorer sort of people idle and insolent’, and those, including Wallace himself, who considered this a ‘narrow maxim’, acceptable only if the many were treated solely, in Paley’s manner, as ‘serviceable for supporting the grandeur, and heightening the luxury of a few’.⁸¹ ‘Upon the whole’, Wallace had plumped for simplicity of manners, but fully appreciated Hume’s arguments on commerce and luxury. Thus while he could dispute with Hume, Wallace also sprang to his defence when he was attacked by a more extreme opponent of luxury, John Brown.⁸²

There is much in Wallace and Hume that seems to anticipate the spirit of what became categorical assertions in the *Wealth of Nations* on the ‘sacred and inviolable’ property every man has in his labour, and on the equitable distributional criteria for judging a nation’s wealth – with the following being perhaps Smith’s best-known statement on this subject:

No society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable. It is but equity, besides, that they who feed, cloath and lodge the whole body of the people, should have such a share of the produce of their own labour as to be themselves tolerably well fed, cloathed and lodged.⁸³

Nevertheless, in a context defined by luxury and inequality, Smith had decisively altered the question by making continual increase rather than actual greatness of national wealth central. Progressive states were those experiencing capital accumulation, and in these circumstances wages would be high and rising, whatever level of actual wealth they had attained – a situation favourable to population growth, expanding markets, and increased productivity. By deploying this insight Smith could classify Britain’s North American colonies as a more ‘thriving’ or prosperous society than the mother country because wages depended on the rate of accumulation rather than on ‘actual greatness of national wealth’.⁸⁴ The ‘mark’ of greatness remained unchanged: it was the mechanisms underlying the ‘oeconomy of greatness’ that Smith had modified. It made no sense to decry high wages in Mandeville’s or anybody else’s manner when it was both the ‘necessary effect’ and

⁸¹ *Dissertation on the Numbers of Mankind*, p. 152.

⁸² The dispute was commended as an example of how philosophers should deal with one another. Wallace’s defence of Hume against John Brown’s criticisms in his *Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times*, 1757, can be found in *Characteristics of the Present Political State of Great Britain*, London, 1758, pp. 148, 154, 157.

⁸³ *WN*, 1.viii.36.

⁸⁴ *WN*, 1.viii.22.

'natural symptom of increasing national wealth'.⁸⁵ Societies could now be classified as progressive, stationary, and declining according to a much longer time-scale, with North America, China, and India best representing the three conditions respectively. The possibility of a nation reaching 'that full complement of riches which the nature of its soil and climate, and its situation with respect to other countries allowed it to acquire' was scouted, with China cited as a candidate for the vacancy. Even so, the limits were chiefly political in the largest sense: with 'other laws and institutions' further growth might be possible.⁸⁶

Smith's legislator, therefore, still had important duties to perform in adjusting laws and institutions to economic circumstances, as well as in minimising those unintended consequences accompanying progress that were morally detrimental. Nevertheless, he was excused from one of the main duties on the agenda of Steuart's ever-present statesman, the preservation of balance *between* various employments. If Smith's system of natural liberty could be established, the constant desire for self-betterment would ensure that capital and labour were distributed between employments according to individual *and* national advantage:

The statesman who should attempt to direct private people in what manner they ought to employ their capitals, would not only load himself with a most unnecessary attention, but assume an authority which could safely be trusted, not only to no single person, but to no council or senate whatever, and which would nowhere be so dangerous as in the hands of a man who had folly and presumption enough to fancy himself fit to exercise it.⁸⁷

This appears to be one of those places where Smith carried out his policy of refuting while ignoring Steuart's book: 'Without once mentioning it, I flatter myself that every false principle in it, will meet with a clear and distinct confrontation in mine.'⁸⁸

It may be right to say that Smith achieved special status in the eighteenth century by placing the kind of stress he did on the division of labour as the foundation for growing opulence.⁸⁹ Nevertheless, the basic argument and even the illustrations of the benefits of the division of labour used in the *Wealth of Nations* were either borrowed from the *Encyclopédie* or from Mandeville, as Marx was one of the first to point

⁸⁵ *WN*, I.viii.27.

⁸⁶ *WN*, I.ix.14-15.

⁸⁷ *WN*, IV.ii.10.

⁸⁸ Letter to William Pulteney, 3 September 1772 in *Corr.*, p. 164.

⁸⁹ The influential opinion of Schumpeter, *History of Economic Analysis*, p. 187.

out.⁹⁰ In the context of the luxury debate, however, where others had seen only one aspect of the secret concatenation, the recirculation of wealth through consumption and employment, Smith moved beyond the static form of this argument which he had endorsed in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* to see something else as well. Building on the foundations of an existing debate, Smith constructed the distinctive amalgam that constitutes the 'system of artificial plenty' in the *Wealth of Nations*. The desire for self-betterment expressed itself in abstention from present enjoyment rather than extravagance. When invested productively, the results of frugality showed that, contrary to Mandeville's vision, commercial society was constructed on more than mere whimsy and vanity, important though the latter might still be in explaining some aspects of human behaviour. Nor was frugality simply a reflex response to economic necessity. It was in this respect that Smith gave a more decisive answer to popular jeremiads by opening up the prospect of overcoming perennial seeds of decay, of creating stable ways of living in a world in which the wants of the imagination were infinite. In this respect too his work represented a culminating point of one phase of the debate on luxury. Smith did not achieve this simply by wishing to see luxury given full rein as a corrective to inequality. Nor did he do so solely by recognising the role of vanity in making consumption and the acquisition of visible signs of rank the sole end and purpose of economic activity. The result was accomplished by arguing that, under propitious legal and political circumstances, capital would not only accumulate freely but be employed optimally, generating irreversible social change and processes of growth that were potentially limitless. What circumstances were most propitious, and how the wise legislator should comport himself in their absence, is the subject of the next essay.

⁹⁰ See *Capital*, I, p. 354n.

The wisdom of Solon

Man is generally considered by statesmen and projectors as the materials of a sort of political mechanics. Projectors disturb nature in the course of her operations in human affairs; and it requires no more than to let her alone, and give fair play in the pursuit of her ends, that she may establish her own designs . . . Little else is requisite to carry a state to the highest degree of opulence from the lowest barbarism, but peace, easy taxes and a tolerable administration of justice; all the rest being brought about by the natural course of things. All governments which thwart this natural course, which force things into another channel, or which endeavour to arrest the progress of society at a particular point, are unnatural, and to support themselves are obliged to be oppressive and tyrannical.

Adam Smith, 1755

I

That seems to be the authentic voice of Smith and, what is more, of Smithianism as it has come to be known over the two hundred and twenty years since the publication of the *Wealth of Nations*. It is a further minor illustration of the elusiveness of the author that the words come from a document that no longer exists, though the fact that they were penned nearly a quarter of a century before Smith finished the work for which he is most well known testifies to the length and depth of his commitment to a science of the legislator, the practical conclusions of which supported leaving economic affairs to 'the natural course of things'. The words were written as part of a paper drawn up by Smith to stake his 'exclusive right' to certain propositions at a time when he suspected an acquaintance of plagiarising, or being about to plagiarise, his ideas. Dugald Stewart, to whom the paper was entrusted, was too diplomatic to name the suspect when he cited Smith's paper in his *éloge*;

he was less interested in stirring up memories of 'private differences' on that occasion than in responding to counter-claims that were being mounted on behalf of the French paternity of the science of political economy based on the prior publication of similar arguments in favour of *laissez-faire, laissez-passer* by François Quesnay and his physiocratic followers.¹

The longevity of Smith's commitment to the basic views that underlie the system of natural liberty can be confirmed by citing a more famous statement that comes from the final revisions he made to the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* in 1790:

The man of system . . . is apt to be very wise in his own conceit; and is often so enamoured with the supposed beauty of his own ideal plan of government, that he cannot suffer the smallest deviation from any part of it. He goes on to establish it completely and in all its parts, without any regard either to the great interests, or to the strong prejudices which may oppose it. He seems to imagine that he can arrange the different members of a great society with as much ease as the hand arranges the different pieces upon a chess-board. He does not consider that the pieces upon the chess-board have no other principle of motion besides that which the hand impresses upon them; but that, in the great chess-board of human society, every single piece has a principle of motion of its own, altogether different from that which the legislature might chuse to impress up on it.²

First and last testament, therefore, carry the same message. Projectors, or men of system, who are arrogant enough to believe that they can impose order on human affairs, rather than allow it to emerge as the natural outcome of decisions made by individuals, each obeying their own principles of motion within a setting in which there is 'a tolerable administration of justice', are not to be trusted. Smith's warning about men of system in 1790 has a political bearing that goes beyond the systems he attacked in the *Wealth of Nations*; it will therefore feature again in the essays in the middle part of this book that deal with the implications of the American and French revolutions. The two existing systems of political economy, mercantile and agricultural, addressed by Smith in Book IV of the *Wealth of Nations* were both the

¹ See Stewart, 'Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith', in *EPS*, pp. 319–23 for Smith's paper, and for the background to its composition. For the evidence that Ferguson may have been the object of Smith's later suspicions of plagiarism see Scott, *Adam Smith as Student and Professor*, pp. 118–20. Dupont de Nemours was the unnamed target of Stewart's defence of Smith's originality in 1793; see my 'Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in the Early Histories of Political Economy' in M. Albertone and A. Masoero (eds.), *Political Economy and National Realities: Patterns and Paths in the Origins and Development of Economic Science*, Turin, 1995.

² *TMS*, vi.ii.2.17.

work of projectors and equally subject to the criticisms levelled at men of system. Thus, although Smith borrowed physiocratic terminology for his own purposes, and while he paid tribute to Quesnay and the French *économistes* for having created a theory that was 'the nearest approximation to the truth that has yet been published upon the subject of political economy', he also regarded Quesnay as 'a very speculative physician' whose followers had insisted upon establishing in its entirety everything required by their 'idea of the perfection of policy and law'.³ They had overlooked the natural curative properties at work in economic life which enable the patient to recover in spite of the nostrums of physician-legislators, whether well intentioned or not. By stressing completeness and perfection, the *économistes* had failed to observe a basic truth that informs Smith's alternative, namely that: 'If a nation could not prosper without the enjoyment of perfect liberty and perfect justice, there is not in the world a nation which could ever have prospered.'⁴ But the agricultural system had never been tried in practice and could be treated by Smith with the tolerance due to an heroic utopian speculation.

On the other hand, the mercantile system – not perhaps Smith's original coinage, but one to which he gave such detailed pejorative content that it survived in that form for the next century – represented the combination of doctrine and practice that prevailed in Britain and other commercial societies. It was quite simply the basis for 'the policy of Europe'. Smith's antagonism towards what he treated as mercantile fallacies, and his condemnation of those methods by which merchants and manufacturers, acting in concert, had duped legislators into creating an illiberal programme of bounties, monopolies, and other exclusive privileges designed to serve their interests at the expense of the rest of society, is expressed, as Stewart noted, in 'a tone of indignation, which he seldom assumes in his political writings'.⁵ It was this feature of the *Wealth of Nations* that Smith's early Scottish readers consistently noted in their letters of congratulation, with Hugh Blair speaking for them all when he said: 'You have done great Service to the World by overturning all that interested Sophistry of Merchants, with which they had Confounded the whole Subject of Commerce.'⁶

³ *WN*, IV.ix.38.

⁴ *WN*, IV.ix.28.

⁵ *EPS*, p. 316.

⁶ See letter to Smith, 3 April 1776 in *Corr.*, p. 188, and for other letters on the subject see pp. 190–3.

Smith's treatment of what, as a result of debates over the merits of free trade conducted by his English successors and their German critics during the nineteenth century, has become known as mercantilism (via *Merkantilismus*), has not always had such a sympathetic hearing.⁷ Among the charges brought against Smith have been those of failure to discriminate between disparate authors in an effort to create a unity of doctrine where none existed; and a wilful disregard for the distinction between doctrine and the 'unplanned miscellany' of official practice, with the consequence that he was unable to give an adequate explanation for the actual measures adopted by mercantile states.⁸ To these charges can be added mean-spiritedness in failing to recognise the intellectual merits of those he spoke of scornfully as the 'pretended doctors' of the mercantile system, despite the fact that several earlier English writers on commerce had anticipated the benefits of allowing free scope to unregulated markets, the division of labour, and self-interest.⁹ They were not all guilty of 'interested Sophistry', and since Smith was obviously aware of many of these writers, it is possible to ask why he *chose* to repay his debts to them in such a decidedly grudging way.

A related but more subtle question is posed by Smith's assumption that mutual self-interest rather than benevolence characterises our dealings with butchers and bakers, and all the other more or less anonymous market transactions into which we enter. If the invisible hand of competition is capable of turning the pursuit of private interest to public good in these cases, is Smith not guilty – if not of self-contradiction then of over-playing his hand – when he treats merchants and manufacturers as though they were simultaneously 'conscious demon kings but unconscious social benefactors'?¹⁰ Twentieth-century

⁷ For the most recent treatment of the debate see Lars Magnusson, *Mercantilism; The Shaping of an Economic Language*, London, 1994, pp. 21–53. A useful compendium can be found in D. C. Coleman (ed.), *Revisions in Mercantilism*, London, 1969. Coleman has returned to the subject in recent years in two articles which criticise Smith's interpretation of mercantilism: see 'Mercantilism Revisited', *Historical Journal*, 23 (1980), 773–91; and 'Adam Smith, Businessmen, and the Mercantile System in England' as reprinted in *Myth, History and the Industrial Revolution*, pp. 153–63.

⁸ The quoted expression is from Coleman, *Myth, History and the Industrial Revolution*, p. 158.

⁹ See Schumpeter's opinion that: 'If Smith and his followers had refined and developed the "mercantilist" propositions instead of throwing them away, a much truer and much richer theory of international economic relations could have been developed'; *History of Economic Analysis*, p. 376. Joyce Oldham Appleby's study of mercantile writings also begins from the premise that there were several key ideas that Smith *could* have used: *Economic Thought and Ideology in Seventeenth-Century England*, Princeton, 1978; see especially the preface and concluding chapter.

¹⁰ For this way of posing the question see Coleman, *Myth, History and the Industrial Revolution*, p. 161.

economists are more prone to notice with regret Smith's failures to follow through with the logic of self-interest as far as they would have liked or think he should have done.¹¹ Finally, what are we to make of Smith's disparaging remarks about that 'insidious and crafty animal', the politician who was guided by the 'momentary fluctuations of affairs', and hence at the mercy of the better-organised and more clamorous interest groupings? In a world where human affairs are normally conducted by such politicians, what scope is there for his wise and virtuous alternative, the man of public spirit or legislator whose deliberations are 'governed by general principles which are always the same'? Does this not imply that Smith, for all his boasted realism, is guilty of a surreptitious form of the perfectibilism that he criticised in the French *économistes*? In propounding his own system of natural liberty, was he not a projector himself and therefore open to the same accusations he made against men of system?

Any approach to Smith's political economy via the science of the legislator also has to confront another common accusation based on a paradox that can be expressed quite simply as follows: if the main lesson of Smith's science is that human affairs are best left to 'the natural course of things', what positive part is there for *any* legislator to play? The only virtues he is being advised to cultivate seem to be those of the contemplative philosopher, observing natural historical and economic processes and issuing pious warnings about the harmfulness of artificial expedients. Little scope seems to be left for the active statesman as purposive moulder of events and outcomes. It was this spectatorial feature of Smith's work that aroused the impatience of Ferguson, and it has led many later commentators to regard Smith as being responsible for pronouncing a *quietus* upon politics in any genuine sense, partly through promotion of the economic at the expense of the political, partly through restriction of the public space available for the exercise of legislative will or virtuous participation by citizens.¹²

¹¹ See G. J. Stigler, 'Smith's Travels on the Ship of State' in Skinner and Wilson (eds.), *Essays on Adam Smith*, pp. 237–46. By ignoring *TMS* and its connections with *WN*, however, it is possible to arrive at a portrait of Smith as the consummate 'public choice' theorist; see Gary M. Anderson, 'The Butcher, the Baker, and the Policy-Maker', *History of Political Economy*, 21 (1989), 641–60.

¹² The anti- or a-political interpretations of Smith are surveyed in Winch, *Adam Smith's Politics: An Essay in Historiographic Revision*, Cambridge, 1978, Chapters 1 and 8. For more recent reiterations of the view that Smith cannot be treated as a genuine political theorist, see Shannon C. Stimson, 'Republicanism and the Recovery of the Political' in *Critical Issues in Social Thought*, London, 1989, pp. 91–112; and P. Minowitz, *Profits, Priests, and Princes; Adam Smith's Emancipation of Economics from Politics and Religion*, Stanford, 1993.

Active pursuit of public good seems at best to have problematic existence in a world where unintended consequences of a beneficial kind are produced without the use of reason and foresight; and where an appeal to them is either equated with intellectual arrogance or treated as a sign that a conspiracy to mislead the public is being mounted by interested parties.

Answers to these questions will be explored below, but they cannot be arrived at by relying on the *Wealth of Nations* alone, as though the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* was not an integral part of Smith's larger project – a part, incidentally, that Smith continued to revise after the *Wealth of Nations* appeared and had itself been revised. The success of the *Wealth of Nations* in its own right, together with Smith's failure to complete his more comprehensive plan, have left his two main works standing rather like the pillars of a catenary bridge without the chains that bear the traffic they were designed to carry. Yet what exact principles of motion Smith ascribes to individuals in differing social circumstances is more fully explored in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, with the man who prudently conducts his domestic affairs serving as the *alter ego* of self-interested man in the *Wealth of Nations*. As an extension of his treatment of the formation of moral codes in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith also advances the theory of justice which is frequently invoked and applied to specific cases in the *Wealth of Nations*. Moreover, it should already be clear that to grasp the nature of Smith's science of the legislator and the strategy of persuasion that he recommends to any philosopher hoping to influence public affairs, we need to consider what Smith says in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. For it is in that work he defines the balance that has to be struck between the dangers associated with the 'spirit of system', when 'from a certain love of art and contrivance, we sometimes seem to value the means more than the end', and the need for 'some general, and even systematical idea of the perfection of policy and law' that will carry conviction with legislators who might prove unamenable to more directly utilitarian exhortations:

if you would implant public virtue in the breast of him who seems heedless of the interest of his country, it will often be to no purpose to tell him, what superior advantages the subjects of a well-governed state enjoy; that they are better lodged, that they are better clothed, that they are better fed. These considerations will commonly make no great impression. You will be more likely to persuade, if you describe the great system of public police which procures these advantages, if you explain the connexions and dependencies of

its several parts, their mutual subordination to one another, and their general subserviency to the happiness of society; if you show how this system might be introduced into his own country, what it is that hinders it from taking place there at present, how those obstructions might be removed, and all the wheels of the machine of government be made to move with more harmony and smoothness, without grating upon one another, or mutually retarding one another's motions.¹³

This can be read as an account of the strategy Smith followed in the *Wealth of Nations* when he had given substance to his own version of 'the great system of public police'. The non-utopian feature of this strategy, however, needs to be stressed. Smith's ideal legislator may be wiser and more public-spirited than the mere politician, but he is not equipped by personality or science with gifts of rational foresight that are superior to those over whom he exercises power. Indeed, true wisdom often consists in respecting the superior knowledge that actors in the social drama have of their own affairs, and in recognising the constraints on legislative action posed by entrenched habits and privileges, including those arising out of ignorance and prejudice:

The man whose public spirit is prompted altogether by humanity and benevolence, will respect the established powers and privileges even of individuals, and still more those of the great orders and societies, into which the state is divided. Though he should consider some of them as in some measure abusive, he will content himself with moderating, what he often cannot annihilate without great violence. When he cannot conquer the rooted prejudices of the people by reason and persuasion, he will not attempt to subdue them by force; but will religiously observe what, by Cicero, is justly called the divine maxim of Plato, never to use violence to his country no more than to his parents. He will accommodate as well as he can, his public arrangements to the confirmed habits and prejudices of the people; and will remedy as well as he can, the inconveniences which may flow from the want of those regulations which the people are averse to submit to. When he cannot establish the best system of laws, he will not disdain to ameliorate the wrong; but like Solon, when he cannot establish the best system of laws, he will endeavour to establish the best the people can bear.¹⁴

It will be clear from this that Smith is not assuming contemplative passivity: 'accommodating' may not involve the purposive moulding required of Steuart's ever-present statesman, but neither does it imply fatalism and inaction. What it often entails, notably with regard to one of the most important duties of the legislator, namely establishing and

¹³ *TMS*, iv.i.II.

¹⁴ *TMS*, vi.ii.2.16.

maintaining a tolerable regime of justice, is what might best be called negative action of a vigilant, firm, yet flexible variety.

II

The centrality of justice to Smith's science of the legislator is now well understood, particularly since the publication of the new student notes on his lectures on jurisprudence. It was built into the original jurisprudential ground-plan of Smith's lectures and was confirmed by the belief, shared with Hume, that enforcement of the rules of commutative justice, protecting the 'perfect rights' associated with injuries to person and property, was the foundation of social existence. The capacity of post-feudal monarchies of a centralised variety to erect and maintain an effective machinery of justice, guaranteeing a reasonable degree of impartiality, was the basis for modern conceptions of civil as opposed to political liberty. Indeed, protection of property in all its forms, including the inequality that was its inevitable accompaniment, was the chief justification for regular government of any kind. The bluntness of the lectures on this point is repeated in the *Wealth of Nations*:

Wherever there is great property, there is great inequality. For one very rich man, there must be at least five hundred poor, and the affluence of the few supposes the indigence of the many. The affluence of the rich excites the indignation of the poor, who are often both driven by want, and prompted by envy, to invade his possessions. It is only under the shelter of the civil magistrate that the owner of that valuable property, which is acquired by the labour of many years, or perhaps of many successive generations, can sleep a single night in security. He is at all times surrounded by unknown enemies, whom, though he never provoked, he can never appease, and from whose injustice he can be protected only by the powerful arm of the civil magistrate continually held up to chastise it.¹⁵

As defined in Book v of the *Wealth of Nations*, the more precise duties of the sovereign in this field were to protect 'every member of the society from the injustice and oppression of every other member of it' by ensuring the 'exact administration of justice'.¹⁶ This involved, of course, providing effective remedies for the criminal and civil injuries that citizens were capable of inflicting upon one another. Less precisely, outside the strict confines of commutative justice, it entailed a duty on

¹⁵ *WN*, v.i.b.2.

¹⁶ *WN*, iv.ix.51, repeated in v.i.b.1.

the part of the legislator or sovereign to avoid favouring one order or group within society at the expense of others, and to reform those institutions and policies which explicitly licensed or tacitly encouraged combinations against the public interest. That these are not the only duties required of the legislator will be shown later, but even at this stage it is worth noting that a major legislative programme is entailed by the advice to dismantle those misguided and unjust laws connected with the mercantile state. Moreover, in commercial societies where capital is being accumulated and new forms of property are being created, and where in consequence the pattern of potential injuries is subject to change, the legislative and judicial activity required to achieve 'fair play' is likely to become increasingly important as the means of adjusting institutions and practices to shifting circumstances. For reasons that Smith recounts as part of his history of legal establishments, commercial societies are more likely to possess superior machinery for enforcing rules of justice. Those who live most of their lives by exercising a prudent regard for their own self-interest will also come to realise that a reputation for probity is an important asset.¹⁷ But Smith does not commit himself to any larger positive proposition on such matters, whether by way of congratulating the present or prophesying a better future. For all his obvious dislike of feudal dependency, Smith does not claim that its successor, commercial society, possesses, or is likely to possess, greater moral legitimacy; that it is, or is becoming, more or less unjust than other types of society.¹⁸ Counterbalancing such neutrality on the other side, however, there is more evidence to support the positive conclusion that Smith regards commercial society as having a greater need for a more precise system for dealing with injustices.¹⁹

Only a very unobservant reader of the *Wealth of Nations* could fail to notice the frequency with which Smith invokes natural justice when

¹⁷ On why the 'middling and inferior stations of life' are more likely to realise that honesty is the best policy, see *TMS*, I.iii.3.5.

¹⁸ On this question I part company with Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff, who conclude that for Smith modern commercial society was 'not unjust', and that the benefits derived by the poor from the division of labour conferred a 'moral legitimacy' on inequality by guaranteeing an adequate level of subsistence; see 'Needs and Justice in the *Wealth of Nations*' in Hont and Ignatieff (eds.), *Wealth and Virtue*, p. 44.

¹⁹ 'Commerce and manufactures can seldom flourish long in any state which does not enjoy a regular administration of justice, in which the people do not feel themselves secure in the possession of their property, in which the faith of contracts is not supported by law, and in which the authority of the state is not supposed to be regularly employed in enforcing the payment of debts from all those who are able to pay'; *WN*, v.iii.7.

praising or condemning policies and institutions. In dealing with the gains and losses associated with mercantile regulations, Smith did not confine himself to calculations of economic expediency conducted in terms of income transferred or pecuniary benefits foregone. Where such gains and losses were the outcome of the normal flux of economic life, operating within established rules of fair play, they did not constitute part of any system of justice. For that purpose there had to be an injury, an infringement of a perfect right that, being perfect, justified coercion as the means of ensuring that it was respected. As in the 1755 statement cited at the beginning of this essay, and in various remarks noted in the previous essay concerning *oppressive* inequality, however, the legislator's duties do not seem to be confined to that role. There are ways in which sovereigns can injure subjects quite as badly as subjects injure one another. Smith consistently fortifies charges of inexpediency by reference to situations in which 'the ordinary laws of justice' were being sacrificed 'to an idea of public utility, to a sort of reasons of state'; in which natural rights were being infringed; and where a pervasive kind of disorder was being introduced into the body politic by special privileges that could be granted only by the sovereign.²⁰ Natural justice is not given an overriding status in all these cases, but it is certainly one of the considerations that needs to be borne in mind by those appraising policies and institutions – the wider audience Smith was addressing in his work.

Smith's inability or unwillingness to complete his projected work on the science of jurisprudence has left readers in some doubt as to its content, and what weight ought to be attached to its findings. Nevertheless, the final remarks in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* on the science are clear enough: it was to be 'a theory of the principles which ought to run through and be the foundation of the laws of all nations'.²¹ And the observation that immediately precedes this provides the rationale for Smith's criticisms of the mercantile system in the *Wealth of Nations*: 'Sometimes what is called the constitution of the state, that is the interest of the government; sometimes the interest of particular orders of men who tyrannise the government, warp the positive laws of the country from what natural justice would prescribe.' The account of the

²⁰ On monopolies and privileges granted in response to 'the clamorous importunity of partial interests', Smith says that: 'Every such regulation introduces some degree of real disorder into the constitution of the state, which it will be difficult afterwards to cure without occasioning another disorder'; *WN*, iv.ii.44.

²¹ *TMS*, vii.4.37.

psychological basis of justice given in the same work shows what instincts lie behind our resentment of injury and how the resulting rules come to form the foundation for social existence. Smith is at one with Hume on the centrality of justice, though Smith's theory goes beyond Hume in dealing with personal as well as acquired or adventitious rights such as those typified by property.²² Conducting a thought-experiment by asking on what minimum basis society could exist, justice becomes the pillar, benevolence merely 'the ornament which embellishes' – which does not mean, of course, that a society based solely on justice would be preferable.²³ There is a clear connexion between what Smith says here and the minimalist definition of commercial society in the *Wealth of Nations* as one in which every man becomes a merchant: 'Society may subsist among different men, as among different merchants, from a sense of its utility, without any mutual love or affection; and though no man in it should owe any obligation, or be bound in gratitude to any other, it may still be upheld by a mercenary exchange of good offices according to an agreed valuation.'²⁴ Like any other sensible person, Smith would prefer a society in which benevolence and public spirit were also present, but not, perhaps, as we shall see, if they had to be purchased *at the expense of* liberty, security, and justice.

By contrast with the positive virtues and duties underlying codes of morality and benevolence, the rules of justice embody negative virtues. This means that we can act justly merely by abstaining from injuring the rights of others, provided that we have learned how to do so. The injuries, rights, and correlative obligations were capable of that precise definition which was essential wherever communal enforcement by the coercive means entrusted to magistrates was employed. A negative definition of justice, therefore, does not imply unimportance. Nor, of course, does it imply that what is true for individuals, namely abstention, applies to the sovereign. But it is also important to bear in mind the restriction of the application in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* to commutative as opposed to distributive justice.²⁵ Smith shares this restriction with Hume, for whom notions of relative desert as between individuals and groups – however 'agreeable' such notions might be –

²² As Knud Haakonssen has indicated, however, Hume does deal with 'goods of the mind and body' as well as external goods; see 'The Structure of Hume's Political Theory' in D. F. Norton (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, Cambridge, 1993, pp. 198–9.

²³ *TMS*, II.ii.3–4.

²⁴ *TMS*, II.ii.3.2; cf. *WN*, I.iv.1.

²⁵ For Smith's use of the distinction see *TMS*, VII.ii.1.10.

were not sufficiently stable to meet the criteria for communal enforcement.²⁶ This accords with Smith's defence of a society of ranks based on visible distinctions of wealth, and his statement, cited earlier, that the man of public spirit 'will respect the established powers and privileges even of individuals, and still more those of the great orders and societies, into which the state is divided'.

Redistribution of income and wealth through positive intervention could well be a prime illustration of laws implemented for what might seem to be beneficent purposes leading to infringements of liberty and justice. But having said this, the persistent emphasis in the *Wealth of Nations* on what is unjust and oppressive may seem to belie or weaken the restriction to commutative justice. There is certainly more emphasis on such matters than one finds in Hume, though equality of treatment before the law is paramount for both men. Nevertheless, we are often confronted with what has insightfully been described as 'the primacy of the negative' in Smith, as can be illustrated by the following observation: 'To hurt in any degree the interest of any one order of citizens, for no other purpose but to promote that of some other, is evidently contrary to that justice and equality of treatment which the sovereign owes to all the different orders of his subjects.'²⁷ Are we not back with a quietist interpretation of the famous passage in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* on the invisible hand, telling us how, despite the 'natural selfishness and rapacity' of the rich, they are led by their desire for 'baubles and trinkets' to redistribute their income among the other ranks of society?²⁸

The main thrust of the *Wealth of Nations*, however, is in the opposite direction: it can be found in the statements on labour as the source of natural rights; on how the benefits of economic activity ought to improve the lives of those who do most of the work in society; in the defence of high wages; in the attacks on the effect of mercantile restrictions on wage-earners and consumers, and so on. While all this can be cited as evidence of Smith's concern with 'welfare' – as we now rather feebly put it – even of his interest in a form of what might be called economic democracy, the limits placed on this by a commutative view of justice and by the primacy of the negative still cannot be

²⁶ See D. D. Raphael, 'Hume and Smith on Justice and Utility', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 72 (1972–3), 101–3. On the 'agreeable' notion of desert and its inadmissibility within any desirable or workable system of justice see Hume, *Enquiries*, pp. 193–5.

²⁷ *WN*, iv.viii.30. On the primacy of the negative in Smith see Haakonssen, *Science of a Legislator*, pp. 85, 89, 97.

²⁸ *TMS*, iv.1.10, as cited more fully on pp. 62–3 above.

overlooked. The system of natural liberty, should it ever come into existence, will produce a fairer distribution of income and fewer injustices in the form of infringements of natural liberties or rights, such as those affecting choice of occupation, place of residence, and modes of employing capital and other types of property. But Smith chiefly seeks to remove existing forms of intervention: he does not espouse any positive programme of redistribution, unless the decision to tax luxury goods rather than those consumed by the bulk of society falls into this category.

With regard to wealth, as opposed to income redistribution, Smith has more to say. The system of natural liberty would enable more people to be 'enfranchised' – in an economic sense. By allowing the natural progress of opulence fuller scope, a larger number of independent producers, both in agriculture and in manufacturing, would emerge. Maintenance of the progressive state that accompanies more rapid capital accumulation, and the more efficient allocation of capital between competing employments, would certainly benefit wage-earners. Independence achieved through capital accumulation would also be placed within the reach of more people. Herein lies the simplest answer to Smith's lack of generosity towards what he once referred to, in a rare moment of tolerance, as 'the best English writers on commerce'.²⁹ Overshadowing whatever economic acumen these writings contained was his distaste for the political harm to the public interest perpetrated by those powerful interest groups that had taken up mercantile doctrines for self-interested purposes, exerting a malign influence on the 'policy of Europe' in general, and the British legislature in particular. In addition to domestic disorder, however, Smith also believed that mercantile regulations were the source of 'national animosities', or what Hume had referred to more plainly as 'jealousy'. This not only made peace and easy taxes more difficult to achieve, but reflects the cosmopolitan aspects of Smith's political

²⁹ *WN*, iv.i.34. The writers mentioned in *WN* are John Locke, Thomas Mun, and Mandeville. From *ED* and *LJ* it is possible to add references to Joshua Gee and Jonathan Swift (see *LJA*, pp. 392–4), together with the slighting judgement that 'almost all authors after Mun [1664]' (up to Hume?) have defined wealth as specie (*LJA*, p. 300). The reference to the 'best English writers' is undermined by a prefatory remark on how they allow their recognition that goods constitute wealth 'to slip out of their memory'. Smith's library contained a fair sample of the works of these writers, and he makes use of their findings on specific matters: e.g. Joshua Child (*WN*, v.i.e.9.11–12), Mathew Decker ('an excellent authority', *WN*, iv.v.a.20), Charles Smith ('ingenious and well-informed', *WN*, iv.ii.20; iv.v.a.4). Joseph Harris has been suggested by the editors of the Glasgow edition as a pervasive source on money and other matters.

economy, according to which free trade could become a bond of union between nations. It was this aspect of his legacy that was to attract thinkers such as Thomas Paine, and it was, as we shall see, one of the reasons why others with more nationalistic priorities could think of the science Smith had founded as unpatriotic.³⁰

III

Yet another set of reasons can be given for Smith's desire to separate his speculations as moral philosopher turned political economist from the characteristic assumptions of his mercantile predecessors. Bearing in mind Smith's criticisms of systems of morals, such as those associated with Mandeville and Hobbes, that reduced all aspects of social behaviour to self-interest, it seems worth considering whether the author of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is likely to have been attracted to any system of political economy that was based solely on utilitarian calculations and what later became known as the assumptions of *rational* economic man. Those who have praised the anticipatory qualities of mercantile writings for displaying the qualities of being 'instrumental, utilitarian, individualistic, egalitarian, abstract, and rational', believing that in this respect a foundation was being laid for Smith, could have inadvertently put their finger on exactly what Smith wished to reject.³¹ Just as it would not be difficult to show that Smith was unsympathetic to William Petty's Baconian emphasis on 'number, weight, and measure' and to Dudley North's Cartesian method, to mention two figures sometimes cited as having paved the way towards the 'scientific attitude' in economics, so is it with the mechanistic and reductive features of mercantile thinking. Those who read only the *Wealth of Nations*, or rather some of the most-quoted parts of this work, especially those dealing with the pervasiveness of the urge to self-improvement and the irrelevance of benevolence when dealing with butchers and bakers, may find this puzzling. But if we have regard to the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* as well, the puzzle dissolves into something more

³⁰ See pp. 399–400 below.

³¹ The quotation comes from Joyce Oldham Appleby, *Capitalism and a New Social Order*, New York, 1984, pp. 19–23. For a fuller exposition of her position see *Economic Thought and Ideology*, pp. 183–93, 258, 272–3 where she speaks of the 'inexorability of human beings acting out of self-interest', of the use of 'mechanical and impersonal' models, of the concern with the 'lawfulness of necessity', Locke's 'utilitarian conception of honor', and the daring use of Hobbesian assumptions and 'predictable laws of human behavior' as features of mercantile thinking that Smith adopted, though apparently in depleted form.

interesting that could provide an important clue to Smith's desire to separate himself from his predecessors.

In setting the stage for the two central concepts in Smith's moral philosophy, sympathy and the impartial spectator, the opening books of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* argue, as we have seen, that man's need for society cannot be derived from 'certain refinements of self-love'.³² The pleasures and pains of society are felt instantaneously, and while a sense of utility may appear to underlie our capacity to approve or disapprove of the behaviour of others, and hence of ourselves, this is merely an 'after-thought' rather than its origin.³³ These two views, based on self-interest and utility respectively, the second of which Smith associates with Hume, are what Smith wishes to oppose; he contends with them throughout the whole work, returning to deal with them more fully as systems of moral philosophy in the final book. Smith also attacked Hobbes (as well as Pufendorf and Mandeville) for constructing a system in which self-interest was the primary human motive. Again, he acknowledged that when self-interest was connected with regard for public utility in judging social and political institutions, such systems possessed an 'appearance of probability'.³⁴ But Smith had earlier criticised a version of this doctrine (attributed to Hume) when expounding his own, as he saw it, more comprehensive theory based on sympathy. On the related issue of the role of reason, though this time fully in line with Hutcheson and Hume, Smith believed that while inductive reason enabled us to construct rules of justice and general codes of morality, reason was not the original basis on which notions of right and wrong were based. As with Hume, this was a matter of the passions or, as Smith put it, of 'immediate sense and feeling'.

But if this was Smith's position with regard to both licentious and non-licentious systems of morals that gave primacy to self-interest, utility, and reason, how can we explain his willingness to make the individual's desire to improve his condition the moving force in *Wealth of Nations*? How should we interpret his famous statement concerning the irrelevance of benevolence in economic dealings, when tackling the pre-eminently economic side of life that took place within anonymous markets, the central institution of commercial society? The answer with regard to utility and reason has already been given: Smith consistently maintained that while public utility might be the *outcome* of any well-

³² *TMS*, I.i.2.1.

³³ *TMS*, I.i.4-4.

³⁴ *TMS*, VII.iii.1.2.

functioning moral or economic system, and that possessing such qualities it provided the kind of aesthetic pleasures that all successful systems require to satisfy the imagination, it was still not an adequate explanation of how that outcome was produced. It was also the source of a 'spirit of system' that had done harm when acted upon by statesmen or politicians who were unheeding of the wisdom of Solon in such matters. This judgement is certainly of relevance to his remarks on the agricultural system and the modesty of his hopes for implementing his own alternative to the mercantile system in the *Wealth of Nations*.³⁵ If Smith was a projector himself, he was a very modest and pragmatic projector.

In understanding the role of self-interest in the *Wealth of Nations* we have still perhaps to bear in mind the fallacy that underlay so much of the older literature on *Das Adam Smith Problem*, namely the view that treats sympathy as being *opposed* by self-interest. This confusion of benevolence with sympathy lies behind the failure to appreciate that the 'prudent man' described in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is essentially the same person assumed to be at work in commercial society.³⁶ We may have no need of the benevolence of the butcher when we appeal to his self-interest in selling us meat, but that does not mean we have no imaginative sympathy, no capacity to understand and reach a judgement on his behaviour, whether of approval or disapproval.³⁷ Another prevalent source of misunderstanding seems to arise from confusing the 'sub-rational' instincts that Smith uses to explain the propensity to truck and barter, as well as the desire for self-improvement, with the posited behaviour of the creature called rational economic man.³⁸ The emergence and legitimacy of this creature has troubled so many generations of social theorists from the mid-nineteenth century onwards that we tend to assume Smith invented or borrowed him, and that the whole idea of economic self-interest was especially problematic to Smith.³⁹ Yet he was clearly not the first moral

³⁵ The practical import of this modesty will be considered on pp. 157–62 below.

³⁶ This confusion seems to underlie Louis Dumont's influential treatment of the subject in *From Mandeville to Marx: The Genesis and Triumph of Economic Ideology*, London, 1977, p. 61. For a French response to Dumont see Claude Gautier, *L'Invention de la société civile: Lectures anglo-écossaises, Mandeville, Smith, Ferguson*, Paris, 1993.

³⁷ See D. D. Raphael, *Adam Smith*, Chapters 3 and 5.

³⁸ The term 'sub-rational' is that of Jacob Viner; see *The Role of Providence in the Social Order*, Princeton, 1972, p. 79.

³⁹ See, for example, Milton L. Meyers, *The Soul of Modern Economic Man; Ideas of Self-Interest, Thomas Hobbes to Adam Smith*, Chicago, 1983. Meyer's conclusion, if not style of argument, has some similarities with that of Albert Hirschman, for whom Smith provides the end of a story

philosopher to take up the question of the compatibility of private interest with public good; and he did not feel the need to take upon himself, as Mandeville and Rousseau did for their own reasons, the whole burden of explaining something quite peculiar, something that was in urgent need of justification, namely how the economic realm had emerged and whether it could be legitimated in terms of those moral categories which were traditional to ancient or Christian notions of virtue. Smith's qualified acceptance of luxury, and of the kind of commercial society that made luxury possible, may mark a significant divergence from the ancient view of virtue, the loss of which was mourned by Rousseau. But opposing Rousseau on such matters does not entail an attempt to perform the impossible feat of seeking to anticipate all those who later sought to differentiate status-oriented from contract-based societies, *Gemeinschaft* from *Gesellschaft*, and so on. It may say a good deal about nineteenth- and twentieth-century social theory, from Marx and Max Weber onwards, that we have constantly sought to explain and legitimise the peculiarities of economic striving and competition, but this, I would contend, was not Smith's central problem.

According to the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, acting on the basis of self-interest is one of the few passions that could be taken for granted: 'We are not ready to suspect any person of being defective in selfishness. This is by no means the weak side of human nature, or the failing of which we are apt to be suspicious.'⁴⁰ The instinct to barter, like 'the desire of bettering our condition' is 'a desire which, though generally calm and dispassionate, comes with us from the womb, and never leaves us till we go into the grave'.⁴¹ This is as true of the history of the human race as it is of individuals. The opportunity to pursue the instinct was the only factor differentiating beginnings from the most recent of practices: 'Our ancestors were idle for want of a sufficient encouragement to industry.'⁴² But being an instinct, it cannot be conceived as the *rational* pursuit of self-interest without denying the substance of Smith's moral philosophy, according to which reason was usually a form of *post hoc* rationalisation.

Smith is interested in pointing out that our perceptions of our interests

of how the passions might be deployed to control interests; see *The Passions and the Interests*, Princeton, 1977, pp. 100–13.

⁴⁰ *TMS*, vii.ii.3.16.

⁴¹ *WN*, II.iii.28.

⁴² *WN*, II.iii.12.

are frequently faulty; that we suffer from over-weaning conceit; that our behaviour, even in economic settings, is capable of being blown off course by other motives such as love of dominance and love of ease. Honour, or public approbation, accounts for the fact that some professions 'in point of pecuniary ... gain are generally under-recompensed'.⁴³ The neglect of insurance in shipping is the result of 'mere thoughtless rashness and presumptuous contempt of the risk' – an explanation that also accounts for the willingness of soldiers to endure hardship and discount danger in their search for fame and excitement: 'These romantick hopes make the whole price of their blood.'⁴⁴ An institution that could not be explained in terms of superior economic efficiency, such as Smith conceived slavery to be, can be accounted for only by the urge to dominate, wherever the law allows scope for its exercise.⁴⁵ Love of ease accounts for the indolence of large landowners and it also explains why the recipients of high and easily earned profits indulge in the same propensity.

In these respects, self-interest is bound up with and overlaid by other psychological propensities. Yet its consistency and strength make it different from the other motives or instincts that underlie social interaction. When directed at our most basic needs – hunger, thirst, and sex – almost every expression of the propensity 'excites contempt', showing that 'these principles of the human mind which are most beneficial to society are by no means marked by nature as the most honourable'.⁴⁶ Even when directed towards more respectable ends – 'the care of the health, of the fortune, and of the rank and reputation of the individual' – it is worthy only of 'a certain cold esteem'.⁴⁷ With regard to benevolence and other forms of propriety, we have to learn what behaviour earns the approbation of friends and strangers. In the sphere of justice, where the negative virtue of simply refraining from injuring others is the main object, a learning process is required from childhood onward. Hence what we can call either the providentialist or the evolutionary basis for Smith's treatment of morals: economic transactions based on mutual need are 'so strongly implanted by nature that they have no occasion for that additional force which the weaker principles need'.⁴⁸ Similarly with the division of labour: it could be

⁴³ *WN*, I.x.b.2 and 24.

⁴⁴ *WN*, I.x.b.28–30.

⁴⁵ *WN*, III.ii.10.

⁴⁶ *LJB*, p. 527; *TMS*, I.ii.1.1–2.

⁴⁷ *TMS*, VI.i.14.

⁴⁸ *LJB*, p. 527.

traced to a universal human propensity to engage in truck and barter, to persuade others to supply our needs. It was not based on differences in natural talents, and it required no elaborate historical hypotheses to explain it. A conjectural history of civil society that started, as Smith's did, from an assumption of man's basic need for society, would arrive at very different answers on such matters from those given by Rousseau and Mandeville. According to Smith's point of departure, what needed to be explained was how the progress of opulence had been retarded or distorted, rather than how it ever got launched or might be legitimated.

In an earlier stage of society, the allodial and feudal period, according to a story Smith tells in both the lectures on jurisprudence and in Book III of the *Wealth of Nations*, retardation and inversion of the natural progress of opulence was due to the discouragement of agricultural improvement, to the laws of primogeniture and entail, to the contempt in which mercantile activities were held, and to the unproductive use of the social surplus arising in agriculture. At this stage of the story then, a short-sighted landowners' conspiracy was the distorting force at work, and it was not until the power of the feudal barons was undermined by the growth of commerce and manufacturing in the towns, operating with royal encouragement, that order and good government could be extended from the towns to the countryside. Far from being public enemies, merchants, simply by following 'their own pedlar principle', become the unconscious agents of 'a revolution of the greatest importance to the publick happiness'.⁴⁹ 'The habits, besides, of order, oeconomy and attention, to which mercantile business naturally forms a merchant, render him much fitter to execute, with profit and success, any project of improvement.'⁵⁰ Considered individually and as a character type, therefore, merchants are indeed unwitting public benefactors. Why then does this change when commercial society becomes established?

One of the reasons for believing Smith to be guilty of contradiction on this matter derives from a failure to observe the distinction between *individual* pursuit of self-interest under competitive conditions, when all the rules of fair play and strict justice are being observed, and *collective* pursuit of self-interest through combination, monopoly, and extra-parliamentary pressure-group activity. Employing these concerted tactics, merchants, who come closest to possessing a rational perception

⁴⁹ *WN*, III.iv.17.

⁵⁰ *WN*, III.iv.3.

of their interests, were to be suspected precisely because this perception was accompanied by the capacity to conspire against the public good. In commercial societies, such practices had perpetuated the earlier inversion of the natural progress of opulence, destroyed the 'natural balance of industry', and given rise to widespread infringements of natural liberty and justice. As an antidote to this state of affairs Smith advocated the system of natural liberty, and in this sense only can it be said that he exalted economic individualism over political collectivism.

IV

Leaving these political and jurisprudential considerations to one side for the moment, and confining attention to the better-known economic dimensions of Smith's attack on the mercantile system, one can discern three main prongs. First, there is his elevation of consumers' interests over those of producers, a move he carried well beyond the assault on the 'monopolizing spirit' of merchants to include the 'negligence, profusion and malversation' of bureaucrats, and the indolence of teachers whose incomes derived not from serving the interests of their students but from obeying the dictates of such corporate entities as the colleges at Oxford. The anti-corporatism here relates to a view of human nature that Smith expressed in more cynical moments as part of the 'natural insolence of man' in avoiding the 'use of the good instrument, except when he cannot or dare not use the bad one'.⁵¹ The 'spirit of corporation' lay behind many anti-social forms of behaviour, and the antidote lay in restoring competition, or in inventing institutional machinery that would harness self-interest to the due performance of public services.⁵² Although Smith was fertile in suggesting such expedients, the negative features of his jurisprudence noted earlier are also in evidence here. After condemning the conspiratorial gatherings of merchants in the *Wealth of Nations*, Smith added that: 'It is impossible to prevent such meetings, by any law which either could be executed, or would be consistent with liberty and justice.' But this was not a confession of inability to act, a collapse into world-weariness in the face of a corrupt world. The statement just quoted is immediately followed by the qualification that 'though the law cannot hinder people of the same trade from sometimes assembling together, it ought to do

⁵¹ *WN*, v.i.g.19.

⁵² For a compendium of Smith's remedies based on this insight see N. Rosenberg, 'Some Institutional Aspects of the *Wealth of Nations*', *Journal of Political Economy*, 68 (1960), 557-70.

nothing to facilitate such assemblies; much less to render them necessary' – the prelude to a number of practical measures designed to curb the spirit of combination.⁵³

The second prong of Smith's attack focusses on the critique of the mercantile confusion of the 'real' sources of a nation's wealth with money. This form of Midas-fallacy or specie-fetishism had led to a systematic overestimation of foreign trade at the expense of the far larger and more significant domestic trade that took place between the town and country in Britain and other 'landed countries'. Only by first reversing these priorities could Smith begin the process of analysing the way in which the expansion of domestic and foreign markets interacted beneficially with one another to generate economic growth.⁵⁴ The colonial system had encouraged 'distant' trades at the expense of more advantageous ones nearer to home. It had made a 'jealous' zero-sum indicator – a favourable balance of trade – the barometer of a nation's success in what ought to be seen as a world of multilateral gain and economic interdependence.

Elimination of this fetish, therefore, was essential in order to focus on labour as 'the ultimate price which is paid for everything', and hence on improvements in labour productivity through the division of labour as one of the most important ways in which real wealth is expanded. The quantity of labour embodied in commodities could not explain exchange values in a modern society where labour takes on increasingly differentiated tasks requiring different levels of education and skill, and where the rewards to land (rent) and capital (profits) have to take their place alongside wages as components of 'natural price'. Nevertheless, for Smith, the amount of labour or effort, the 'toil and trouble' required to exercise command over commodities, is still the 'real price of every thing', and hence the best measure of welfare gains over time in a growing economy, as wages rise and the natural price of goods falls or remains constant.⁵⁵ Such gains were, of course, the source of

⁵³ Regulations requiring or allowing members of a specific trade to register, to act collectively for their dependants, and to enact corporate discipline by means of majority decisions, all facilitated informal combination against the public interest, thereby replacing the only discipline capable of ensuring good workmanship, the fear of losing customers and hence employment; see *WN*, I.x.c.27–32.

⁵⁴ For what remains the best exposition of this feature of Smith's thinking, see Hla Myint, 'Adam Smith's Theory of International Trade in the Perspective of Economic Development', *Economica*, 44 (1977), 231–48. Myint first drew attention to the special features of Smith's theory in 'The "Classical Theory" of International Trade and the Underdeveloped Countries', *Economic Journal*, 68 (1958), 317–37.

⁵⁵ *WN*, I.v.2; see also I.v.7.

Smith's cautiously optimistic portrayal of the rise in standards of living achieved by Britain over the previous century.⁵⁶

Thirdly, as a combination of the first two points, there is a shift of emphasis from profits to wages in the assessment of both wealth and welfare. Whereas, under competitive conditions, profits should fall with economic growth, real wages (along with rents) should rise: 'The liberal reward of labour ... as it is the necessary effect, so it is the natural symptom of increasing national wealth.' Complaints about high wages, and the associated diffusion of luxury goods and opportunities for leisure to wage-earners, based on their effect in raising costs and reducing effort, were another mercantile fallacy that Smith was anxious to expose: high wages encouraged population growth and improved the health and hence productivity of labour. An increase in the absolute share of annual produce going to labour was, as we have seen, one of the equitable side-conditions Smith placed on his definition of true opulence.⁵⁷

Smith's attitude to profits is a mirror image of his treatment of wages. Competition among employers for labour raises wages and depresses profit, partly as a result of having to pay higher wages, partly because it forces manufacturers to offer lower prices. The opening of new markets, or the successful monopolisation of old ones, as in the classic case of North America, raised profits – for a time at least, and until the walls of monopoly were breached.⁵⁸ Moreover, in sharp contrast with many of his successors, particularly those who took Ricardo as their guide, declining profits were treated as a sign of progress rather than of an impending drying-up of the sources of accumulation: 'When profit diminishes, merchants are very apt to complain that trade decays; though the diminution of profit is the natural effect of its prosperity, or of a greater stock being employed in it than before.'⁵⁹ Merchants were also apt to blame high wages 'as the cause of their manufactures being under-sold in foreign markets', when the chief culprit was their own

⁵⁶ 'The real recompence of labour, the real quantity of the necessaries and conveniencies of life which it can procure to the labourer, has, during the course of the present century, increased perhaps in a still greater proportion than its money price. The common complaint that luxury extends itself even to the lowest ranks of the people, and that the labouring poor will not now be contented with the same food, cloathing and lodging which satisfied them in former times, may convince us that it is not the money price of labour only, but its real recompence, which has augmented' (*WN*, I.viii.35).

⁵⁷ See the citation from *WN* on p. 87 above.

⁵⁸ See *WN*, I.ix.6–11; I.xi.p. 10; and II.iv.8.

⁵⁹ *WN*, I.ix.10.

expectation of high profits.⁶⁰ In commercial societies where economic legislation was under the sway of the 'standing army' of merchant pressure groups, high profits were often the illegitimate benefit derived from informal combination and special privileges granted by the state. Poor countries, in which capital was scarce, suffered from high profits, and profits were 'always highest in the countries which are going fastest to ruin'.⁶¹ What differentiated Smith most from his predecessors and many of his successors, however, was his confidence in the powers of capital accumulation, *regardless* of the level of profit:

As riches, improvement, and population have increased, interest has declined. The wages of labour do not sink with the profits of stock. The demand for labour increases with the increase of stock whatever be its profits; and after these are diminished, stock may not only continue to increase, but to increase much faster than before. It is with industrious nations who are advancing in the acquisition of riches, as with industrious individuals. A great stock, though with small profits, generally increases faster than a small stock with great profits.⁶²

Far from being a necessary stimulus to saving, in Smith's opinion, high profits were more likely 'to destroy that parsimony which in other circumstances is natural to the character of the merchant'.⁶³

Crowning these shifts of emphasis in economic thinking, therefore, is the idea of frugality and capital accumulation treated in the essay that precedes this one, where it was seen as central to Smith's contribution to the debate on luxury. Improvements in the productivity of labour can take place only as markets widen if they are accompanied by capital accumulation and the maintenance of the existing capital stock. In the rather troublesome terminology Smith borrowed from the French *économistes*, growth depends not only on the extent to which the market allows the division of labour to be carried through, but on the ratio of productive to unproductive labour. The troublesome character of this distinction does not arise in the simpler cases of economic

⁶⁰ *WN*, iv.vii.c.29. ⁶¹ *WN*, i.xi.p. 10.

⁶² *WN*, i.ix.11. Compared with many of his predecessors, Smith regarded the growth of opulence as self-reinforcing rather than self-destructive; see I. Hont, 'The Rich Country-Poor Country Debate', *Wealth and Virtue*, pp. 298-306. The differences between Smith and his successors on this matter are considered at various points in later essays.

⁶³ *WN*, iv.vii.c.61. The peculiarities of Smith's position are stressed in G. S. L. Tucker, *Progress and Profits in British Economic Thought, 1650-1850*, Cambridge, 1960, Chapter 4, especially pp. 72-3. How this peculiarity affected the course of debate on the subject of colonies is covered in D. Winch, *Classical Political Economy and Colonies*, London, 1965, pp. 42-4, 74-89. See also N. Rosenberg, 'Adam Smith on Profits - Paradox Lost and Regained' in Skinner and Wilson (eds.), *Essays on Adam Smith*, pp. 377-89.

backwardness. Thus, within feudal society unproductive labour could readily be identified with the expenditure of landlords on 'menial servants' and to keep men under arms. The difficulty comes when the distinction is applied to complex commercial societies, where the surplus may take the form of profits, rents, and even meagre savings made from wages, and where governments lay claim to an increasing share of the surplus through taxation. By assuming that under conditions which guarantee security, savings will always be invested productively, Smith arrives at a bold division between the productive uses of private parsimony and the unproductive purposes to which public prodigality is generally devoted – with war continuing to serve as the best example of what is meant by unproductive. As will become clearer later, when dealing with some other duties Smith assigns to the legislator, a strong argumentative device for warning against the way in which nations can be impoverished by public prodigality runs into difficulty once it is recognised, as Smith wishes to do, that much government spending for genuine public purposes is both necessary and desirable.

Further difficulties arise from the attempt to employ what sounds like a normative distinction (one that Smith actually used for normative purposes) in order to separate private expenditure on vendible and/or durable material goods on the one side, and personal services and old-fashioned private profligacy, entailing running down one's own assets and going into debt, on the other. The best way of resolving such difficulties is that mentioned in the previous essay, namely by distinguishing between activities such as private investment that are growth-inducing, and other activities such as government spending, or private spending on services and durable items of consumption, that are merely income-circulating. The latter simply maintain the circular flow, the former lead to economic growth by employing labour in ways that add to the future productive capacity of the economy.

Smith's borrowings from the *économistes* have often been treated as a sign that the period he spent in France in the 1760s yielded considerable intellectual profit when he was transforming his lectures on police, revenue and arms into the *Wealth of Nations*. His relationship with, and possible reliance on, Turgot in particular has always aroused interest – another case where Smith has been suspected of inadequate acknowledgment of his debts.⁶⁴ Smith readily conceded the 'liberal and

⁶⁴ For a judicious review of the controversy see P. D. Groenewegen, 'Turgot and Adam Smith', *Scottish Journal of Political Economy*, 16 (1969), 71–87.

generous' character of the practical lessons taught by the French system; they were remarkably similar to his own. His attack on mercantile prejudices had distinct parallels with the *économistes*' attempt to undo Colbert's legacy of commercial regulation and encouragement to manufacturing. Yet the differences of outlook were still such as to justify Smith's belief that the *analysis* underlying his own system of natural liberty was distinctive and original.

Famously, Smith's main criticism of the physiocratic system was its erroneous supposition that only in agriculture, where man laboured directly with nature, was it possible to achieve a net surplus in the form of rent. It followed from this error that commerce and manufacturing were barren or unproductive because they were capable of yielding a return only in the form of wages and profits that repaid the original expenses of production. Smith was prepared to recognise, as noted earlier, that agriculture was *more* productive and should occupy the top-most position in any natural hierarchy of employments for a nation's capital. Nevertheless, he could not accept that the application of capital and labour in commerce and manufacturing was merely a useful but unproductive appendage to agrarian pursuits. According to Smith's view, commerce and manufacturing were activities that yielded a net surplus which was just as available for future accumulation as rent. Indeed, since merchants and manufacturers were 'naturally more inclined to parsimony and saving than proprietors and cultivators', they were more likely to increase the annual produce of society through investment. Having argued in Book 1 that manufacturing offered greater opportunities than agriculture for improvements in physical productivity through the division of labour, Smith could hardly accept any system in which it was treated as the inferior method of achieving growth.⁶⁵

V

It would be a mistake to infer that Smith's vision of limited government intervention in the economic sphere entails weak government. It would be equally mistaken to assume that Smith set legislative goals that were purely economic in character, or that he believed economic goals should take precedence over other legitimate public concerns. Reflecting the expectations of many of Smith's Scottish contemporaries on

⁶⁵ See *WN*, 1.i.4.

the latter point, Adam Ferguson had not only excused his own lack of extended coverage of economic questions by reference to Smith's forthcoming work ('the public will probably soon be furnished with a theory of national economy, equal to what has ever appeared on any subject of science whatever'), but had anticipated that Smith would confirm his own opinion that commerce and wealth did not constitute 'the sum of national felicity' and could not therefore be 'the principal object of any state'.⁶⁶ That may seem an odd point to stress to potential readers of a comprehensive exposition of the principles underlying the growth of opulence, but it contains an insight, as well as a piece of wishful thinking on Ferguson's part, that reveals something significant about Smith's relationship with other members of the Scottish literati. For what was at stake here was the question of military preparedness and the adverse moral and civic consequences of the kind of commercial society Smith had anatomised. In other words, the question had a distinct bearing on those 'republican principles', of which Rousseau was an extreme advocate, but which were also entertained by members of the Moderate literati of Edinburgh.⁶⁷ On these subjects, Smith, usually in company with Hume, adopted a political stance that was at odds with most of their Scottish friends. But first something must be said about the question of strong versus weak, and large versus small government.

The purpose of Book v of the *Wealth of Nations* was to show that in the fields of justice, defence, education, and public works, the legislator has positive duties to perform that could not be undertaken by any other agency.⁶⁸ The duties were justified by the need to make good the shortcomings of private provision, and to deal with those undesirable unintended by-products of commercial societies which required the 'serious attention of government'. In these respects one could say that Smith is an advocate of purposive government, a preference that is equally marked in his attitude towards other essential governmental functions, especially those relating to external defence. It is also clear that if Smith hoped – albeit without anticipating early success – that the activities of legislators in the economic field would become less extensive and detailed, he fully expected governments to absorb a larger proportion of annual produce in rich commercial societies. Just as some forms of durable magnificence were an 'ornament and an

⁶⁶ *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767), edited by D. Forbes, Edinburgh, 1966, p. 287.

⁶⁷ On the Moderate literati, see R. B. Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment*.

⁶⁸ See *WN*, v.i.c.1.

honour' to a nation, so it should be anticipated that the cost of maintaining the dignity of the monarch would rise with the wealth of his subjects. In his lectures, and later in Book v, Smith extended the scope of this generalisation to include all aspects of government:

We may observe that the government in a civilised country is much more expensive than in a barbarous one; and when we say that one government is more expensive than another, it is the same as if we said that the one country is farther advanced in improvement than another. To say that the government is expensive and the people not oppressed is to say that the people are rich. There are many expenses necessary in a civilised country for which there is no occasion in one that is barbarous. Armies, fleets, fortified places, and public buildings, judges, and officers of the revenue must be supported, and if they be neglected, disorder will ensue.⁶⁹

It was on just such issues that the distinction between productive and unproductive expenditure proved unhelpful. For given the unproductive status accorded to government spending by Smith, the problem now became one of recognising the need for an expansion of essential public services without encouraging aggrandisement at the expense of private sources of accumulation. With the capacity of modern governments to supplement tax revenues by borrowing, the dangers arising from public profligacy had increased. Britain had pioneered the debt technique, and Smith was in no doubt that, as a result, it had 'never been blessed with a very parsimonious government'.⁷⁰ The rising debt associated with successive wars against France had been compounded by the difficulties experienced in making the American colonies bear their share of the cost of the imperial civil and military establishment. In contrast with Ferguson and other Scots who believed that failure to subdue her American colonies by military means would spell disaster, Smith, in common with Hume, consistently favoured pacific solutions to Britain's imperial difficulties.⁷¹ Abandoning the meretricious project of a mercantile empire was to be one of Smith's most sweeping practical proposals for accommodating British aims to the 'real mediocrity' of her economic circumstances. Events conspired to make this a reality

⁶⁹ *LJB*, pp. 530-1.

⁷⁰ *WN*, II.iii.36.

⁷¹ See Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment*, Chapter 7. For Hume's position on the American revolution see J. G. A. Pocock, 'Hume and the American Revolution; The Dying Thoughts of a North Briton' in his *Virtue, Commerce and History*, pp. 125-41; and Donald W. Livingston, 'Hume, English Barbarism and American Independence' in R. B. Sher and Jeffrey R. Smitten (eds.), *Scotland and America in the Age of Enlightenment*, Princeton, 1990, pp. 133-47.

without the intervention of statesmen, but that does not detract from the ingenuity of Smith's diagnosis – a subject that will be considered more fully in a later essay (number 6).

Smith suggested other ways of minimising the effects of an increasing public debt, describing it, conventionally, as this 'ruinous expedient'. Nevertheless, his tone is less alarmist than that of Hume on the same subject, chiefly because he was more confident that economic growth had made the debt burden easier to bear, and would probably continue to do so – another case of avoiding the more dramatic conclusions of a jeremiad by adopting the longer view.⁷² As with his criticisms of the perfectionism of the physiocrats, Smith held that the parsimony of private persons based on the natural desire to better their condition was a restorative principle that was generally strong enough to replace what was lost through the spendthrift proclivities of public agencies. But it also confirms a persistent feature of Smith's science of the legislator that he shares with Hume: a belief that institutional devices and constitutional machinery provide the best means of harnessing private interests to public purposes. Although such machinery does not function like clockwork – some degree of political 'management and persuasion' is always likely to be necessary and is definitely to be preferred to more 'violent' methods of governance – it provides better safeguards than any system that relies on virtue or public-spiritedness alone. Smith's institutional remedies were designed to ensure that reward was matched to diligent performance. In this way his suspicions of corporate behaviour were translated into practical devices for dealing with the defects of judicial, religious, bureaucratic, and educational organisations.⁷³

Military establishments posed rather different problems that were central to the concerns of the Moderate literati in Scotland.⁷⁴ The campaign for a Scottish militia organised by the Poker Club, of which

⁷² For a comparison between Hume and Smith on this matter see Winch, *Adam Smith's Politics*, pp. 124–31. For a more detailed examination of Hume's position see I. Hont, 'The Rhapsody of Public Debt' in N. Phillipson and Q. R. D. Skinner (eds.), *Political Discourse in Early Modern Britain*, Cambridge, 1993, pp. 321–48.

⁷³ Supplementing the article by Nathan Rosenberg, mentioned in n. 52 above, which stresses the economic rationale behind Smith's remedies, see J. C. Robertson, 'Scottish Political Economy Beyond the Civic Tradition: Government and Economic Development in the *Wealth of Nations*', *History of Political Thought*, 4 (1983), 451–82.

⁷⁴ See Winch, *Adam Smith's Politics*, Chapter 5; J. C. Robertson, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the Militia Issue*, and Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment*, Chapters 5 and 6. See also R. B. Sher, 'Adam Ferguson, Adam Smith, and the Problem of National Defense', *Journal of Modern History*, 61 (1989), 240–68.

both Hume and Smith were members, was the focal point of many of their intellectual as well as political activities. As a 'war-like philosopher', much concerned with the preservation of those qualities within the populace at large that contributed to a nation's willingness and capacity to engage in defensive war, Ferguson shared Smith's opinion that commercial nations faced special difficulties in securing themselves against attack by increasingly jealous yet more primitive nations. He could have no quarrel with Smith's opinion that 'defence is of much more importance than opulence' when endorsing the Navigation Acts.⁷⁵ He would also have given a hearty endorsement to what Smith had to say in his sections on defence and education about the loss of martial spirit being one of the most serious problems associated with the division of labour in commercial societies. What Ferguson and his Poker Club friends could not stomach, however, was Smith's considered opinion that 'a militia must always be much inferior to a well disciplined and well exercised standing army'.⁷⁶ This conclusion was based on an extension of the social division of labour to the increasingly costly and technical demands of modern warfare. Establishing professional armies required active intervention: without 'the wisdom of the state' it was impossible to create a counterweight to the interest of the private citizen in devoting himself single-mindedly to economic occupations that absorbed more of his time and accorded more with his natural inclinations.

Although Smith found himself at odds with Scottish friends and 'men of republican principles' on the 'irresistible superiority' of standing armies, he did in fact support the creation of militias, partly as a means of supplementing professional forces, but chiefly 'to prevent that sort of mental mutilation, deformity and wretchedness, which cowardice necessarily involves in it' from spreading throughout society.⁷⁷ Apart from their possible military benefits, therefore, militias formed part of Smith's remedy, along with publicly established parish schooling, for the debilitating effect of the division of labour on the 'intellectual, social, and martial virtues' of the mass of society. These unintended results were not only inescapable, they were, in Smith's view, incapable of being solved by improvements at the work-place, whether by machinery or improved work practices. The state therefore

⁷⁵ *WN*, iv.ii.30. For further discussion of the issues raised by this endorsement see pp. 159, 161 below.

⁷⁶ *WN*, v.i.a.23.

⁷⁷ *WN*, v.i.f.60.

had both a direct and indirect interest in overcoming the 'gross ignorance and stupidity which in a civilised society seem so frequently to benumb the understandings of all the inferior ranks of people'. Education was an antidote to 'faction and sedition'. It conferred that personal respectability and regard for 'lawful superiors', as well as a knowledge of public affairs, which was essential to the good order of 'free countries'.⁷⁸

In dealing with defence and education in this way, Smith was acknowledging that legislators have a duty to protect and improve the 'character' of the lower ranks among its citizenry. It was an example of what was referred to in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* as the sphere of 'imperfect rights', where political agency might be called upon to do more than enforce the negative yet perfect rights of commutative justice. In all civilised nations the legislator was entrusted with the power 'of promoting the prosperity of the commonwealth by establishing good discipline, and by discouraging every sort of vice and impropriety; he may prescribe rules, therefore, which not only prohibit mutual injuries among fellow-citizens, but command mutual good offices to a certain degree'. But it is also characteristic of Smith's position that he added the following caveat: 'Of all the duties of a law-giver, however, this, perhaps, is that which requires the greatest delicacy and reserve to execute with propriety and judgement. To neglect it altogether exposes the commonwealth to many gross disorders and shocking enormities, and to push it too far is destructive of all liberty, security and justice.'⁷⁹ Ferguson would have reversed these priorities by stressing the disorders rather than the destructive effects, where the former were concentrated on the loss of those moral qualities required of a society's leading citizens that he considered to be one of the antidotes to the effects of the division of labour. Indeed, Ferguson actually said as much: 'If the pretensions to equal justice and freedom should terminate in rendering every class equally servile and mercenary, we make a nation of helots, and have no free citizens.'⁸⁰ This division neatly encapsulates the differences between what might be called, for shorthand purposes only, the 'commercial' and 'republican' notions of liberty.

According to Smith's 'commercial' view of the matter, equipping

⁷⁸ *WN*, v.i.f.61. Smith's other remedies, centring on organised religion, for the same condition are considered on pp. 188–9 below.

⁷⁹ *TMS*, II.ii.1.8.

⁸⁰ *Essay on Civil Society*, p. 186.

those most subject to the harmful effects of the division of labour with the capacity to act responsibly does not necessarily prepare them for political liberty or a future democratic role.⁸¹ This subject will feature again when considering the effect of the French revolution in giving popular sovereignty a central place on the European political agenda. Here it is necessary only to point out that Smith has very little to say about representation and political liberty. What he does say, however, suggests that representative institutions, by conferring a degree of legitimacy, make their chief contribution to stable government by reinforcing the commitment to *civil* liberty. They do so by constraining 'the interest of government' and 'the interest of particular orders of men who tyrannise the government'. On the other hand, this does not mean that the rationale behind Smith's educational proposals is an entirely economic one, devoted to preparing the lower ranks to be more effective in their occupations. Education assists them in understanding the way in which their interests are connected with the rest of society; and it could also improve their grasp of those natural rights and obligations to which everybody was entitled and everybody could therefore be required to respect. In this manner Smith joined Hume in believing that since opinion was the foundation of all forms of government, especially those enjoying the benefits and running the associated risks of 'free' institutions, a populace capable of judging for itself was of benefit to the public interest.⁸²

Once more, there is a clear contrast with Ferguson, who seems to have believed that the situation of the lower ranks in commercial society was so far beyond repair as to make them unfit for any political role, even by way of constituting a less pathological body of opinion. Most of his anxieties centred on the fatal immersion of those destined to provide political and military leadership in purely professional and other economic pursuits, and on the consequent dismemberment of the human character, with all the attendant risks of dissolving 'the common ties of society' and a descent into 'languor and despotism'.⁸³ Smith too was interested in the 'character' of the middle and higher

⁸¹ For an alternative interpretation that sees Smith as laying the foundation for parliamentary sovereignty and a Gladstonian view of democracy, see J. C. Robertson, 'The Legacy of Adam Smith: Government and Economic Development in the *Wealth of Nations*' in R. Bellamy (ed.), *Victorian Liberalism; Nineteenth-Century Political Thought and Practice*, London, 1990, pp. 15-41.

⁸² 'In free countries, where the safety of government depends very much upon the favourable judgement which the people may form of its conduct, it must surely be of the highest importance that they should not be disposed to judge rashly or capriciously concerning it'; *WN*, v.vi.f.61.

⁸³ See *Essay on Civil Society*, p. 219. See also D. Kettler, *The Social and Political Thought of Adam*

ranks, despite his belief that their occupations and general standing in society offered satisfactory opportunities for its acquisition. Instead of wishing to insulate them from the corrupting effect of economic life, however, Smith proposed that the state should impose on them a meritocratic obligation to achieve a certified command of 'science and philosophy' before being 'permitted to exercise any liberal profession', or before being 'received as a candidate for any honourable office of trust or profit'.⁸⁴

By choosing to deal with this issue within an educational context, Smith was implicitly rejecting Ferguson's diagnosis. His attitude towards the subject that most exercised Ferguson, energetic leadership by political élites, especially the landed aristocracy, has to be assembled from a variety of other sources that will be considered more fully later.⁸⁵ Despite recognising various public-spirited qualities in landowners that were absent in mercantile groupings, Smith also welcomed the way in which commercial society increasingly placed the management of national resources in the hands of more active and discerning decision-makers and employers, those less preoccupied with status and power, those 'who are naturally the most disposed to accumulate', as compared to those who are indolent.⁸⁶ And since Smith welcomed the wider diffusion of the spirit of commerce, it is possible to conclude that he was more interested in seeing landowners perform their economic roles more effectively than in isolating them from them.

Neither Smith nor Hume could share the warmth of many of their compatriots on matters of public virtue. In the eyes of those who thought like Ferguson, Hume and Smith were tainted by a mixture of excessive scepticism and moral optimism. Ferguson could see a good deal *less* ruin in a nation than Smith was prepared to acknowledge: 'The gentlemen and peasants of this country do not need the authority of philosophers to make them supine and negligent of every resource they might have in themselves, in the case of certain extremities, of which the pressure, God knows, may be at no great distance.'⁸⁷ Smith's long view was both less overtly didactic and more pragmatic. One could also say more contemplative, as long as that is not confused with determinism.

Ferguson, Columbus, 1965, Chapter 7; and 'History and Theory in Ferguson's *Essay on the History of Civil Society*', pp. 437–60.

⁸⁴ *WN*, v.i.g.14.

⁸⁵ See pp. 180–4 below.

⁸⁶ *WN*, iv.vii.c.61.

⁸⁷ Letter to Smith, 18 April 1776 in *Corr.*, p. 194.

In addition to its economic benefits, commercial society delivered greater independence and improved standards of honesty, punctuality, and civility. It was far better to be the most fawningly deferential of tradesmen than a vassal. But there were also serious drawbacks that go beyond the loss of various virtues mentioned so far. Prudence, the chief human motive brought into play, commanded only a 'cold esteem' when compared with the more generous, heroic, and noble of sentiments connected with non-commercial pursuits. A commercial society ruled solely by justice and the exact performance of contractual obligations might command respect, but it was also 'less happy and agreeable'.⁸⁸ Nor was it capable of providing scope for activities that were ennobling: mere propriety might take the place of the more heroic virtues. Any tendency towards nostalgia for a world ruled by benevolence and the security of the extended family, however, could not survive the memory of feudal dependence and disorder.⁸⁹ The domain of immediate family and friendship continued to offer scope for non-prudential relationships; and if benevolence and public spirit could not always be relied upon in public settings, this did not mean that they should be discouraged. Public spirit was of particular importance when dealing with crises of legitimacy, such as that posed by the French revolution.⁹⁰ The indefinite multiplication of wants through social emulation and pursuit of the objects of vanity and refinement also fed a corruption in our moral sentiments, the propensity to admire the rich and powerful. This called for special qualities of self-command that might be beyond most people. Many aspects of an opulent society could not be defended by any philosopher in Stoic or ascetic mood. Nevertheless, the public results were genuine enough to counter the kinds of fears expressed by Rousseau when condemning *amour propre* and the resulting confusion of *être* and *paraître*. Any acceptance of Rousseau's utopian and republican solutions to the problems he diagnosed would have struck Smith as involving far too great a sacrifice of liberty in its civil or modern sense.⁹¹ The lessons of Smith's science of the legislator seem to be that commercial society is not precarious; that its defects can either be endured or minimised;

⁸⁸ *TMS*, II.ii.3.2.

⁸⁹ Although 'family pride' survived in commercial societies, Smith regarded the remembrance of connection as 'the most frivolous and childish of all vanities'. He also held the vanities of 'great lords' in low esteem: 'It is not in that order, I am afraid, that we are to expect any extraordinary extension of, what is called, natural affection'; see *TMS*, VI.ii.1.13.

⁹⁰ See pp. 173–4 below.

⁹¹ See again Ignatieff, *The Needs of Strangers*, Chapter 4.

that it is, in short, a viable basis for social existence, the full potentialities of which had yet to be attained.

Smith's regard for established interests and the existing state of public opinion, even when they were abusive and ignorant, supports gradualism and does not expect each generation to solve the next generation's problems. This imparts a decidedly cautious, even conservative, dimension to Smith's thinking, the sceptical qualities of which unite him with Hume in eschewing large-scale extrapolation into an unknowable future. Another way of putting this is to say that it was historically minded without being historicist. When speaking of the 'silent and insensible' revolution that had occurred throughout Europe, but had been put on a more durable basis in England, Smith spoke of the two hundred years since the beginning of the reign of Elizabeth as 'a period as long as the course of human prosperity usually endures'.⁹² While this might suggest that his optimism was stronger in retrospect than in prospect, it is necessary to repeat a point made earlier in this essay. Although there was no guarantee that economic growth would survive the 'ordinary revolutions of war and government', Smith had defined for his contemporaries a position that was more confidently open-ended as far as the prospects for indefinite expansion were concerned. Some of his Scottish contemporaries found it difficult to accept the implications of such a position; and it was not one that commended itself, without significant qualification, to Smith's leading successors as political economists, Malthus and Ricardo. But speculations about future perfectibility through the application of knowledge to social and political problems of the kind that later engaged the attention of some members of the French Enlightenment, especially Turgot's pupil, Condorcet, and to a lesser extent, Dugald Stewart, lay outside the range of Smith's science of the legislator.⁹³ As will become clearer in the next part of this book, however, cautious and sceptical though it might be, Smith's science embodies a definite form of prudential wisdom rather than a denial that practical statecraft has any part to play in the life of commercial societies.

⁹² *WN*, III.iv.20

⁹³ For the contrast between Stewart and Hume and Smith, see Collini *et al.*, *That Noble Science of Politics*, pp. 39–44; and K. Haakonssen, 'From Moral Philosophy to Political Economy: The Contribution of Dugald Stewart' in V. M. Hope (ed.), *Philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment*, Edinburgh, 1984, pp. 211–32.

PART II

*Adam Smith, Edmund Burke
and factious citizens*

If I had not deemed it of some value, I should not have made political economy an object of my humble studies, from my very early youth to near the end of my service in parliament, even before . . . it had employed the thoughts of speculative men in other parts of Europe . . . Great and learned men thought my studies were not wholly thrown away, and deigned to communicate with me now and then on some particulars of their immortal works.

Edmund Burke, *Letter to a Noble Lord*, 1796

Mr. Smith, [Burke] said, told him, after they had conversed on subjects of political economy, that he was the only man, who, without communication, thought on these topics exactly as he did

Robert Bisset, *Life of Edmund Burke*, 1800

Had Mr. Burke possessed talents similar to the author of 'On the Wealth of Nations', he would have comprehended all the parts which enter into, and, by assemblage, form a constitution. He would have reasoned from minutiae to magnitude. It is not from his prejudices only, but from the disorderly cast of his genius, that he is unfitted for the subject he writes upon.

Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man*, 1791

Price[']s speculations cannot fail to sink into the neglect that they have always deserved. I have always considered him as a factious citizen, a most superficial Philosopher and by no means an able calculator.

Letter from Adam Smith to George Chalmers, 22 December 1785



Plate 2. This print, entitled *Reflections on the French Revolution*, is by Cruikshank and is dated 1 January 1795. It depicts Edmund Burke complaining against 'Plunderers, Assassins, Republicans, Villians, Cut Throats Levellers, Regicides, Lovers of Disorder, Exporters of Treason and Rebellion. These are the Articles they Deal in.' In the background, Charles James Fox runs away saying 'D... me he's got the French Disorder.'

Contested affinities

I

The epigraphs that preface this group of essays suggest some affinities and discords between four figures – Adam Smith, Edmund Burke, Thomas Paine, and Richard Price – whose writings help to mark the boundaries of the intellectual space occupied by the political economy of the American and French revolutions. Since Smith and Burke were on friendly terms, it has been natural to assume that Burke was referring to the *Wealth of Nations* when he mentioned ‘immortal works’ in drawing attention to one of his qualifications as a statesman: there were not many competitors for such a description in 1796.¹ Bisset’s anecdote merely confirms the intimacy of the relationship. Yet if we give any credence to Paine’s remark, calling on the *Wealth of Nations* to reveal Burke’s deficiencies, Smith seems awkwardly poised in some borderless no-man’s-land between Paine and Burke. Since these two figures were the architects, for the late eighteenth-century Anglophone world at least, of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary thinking respectively, this places Smith in an ambivalent position that invites clarification if not rescue. Smith’s comprehensive dismissal of Price, however, whose sermon, published as *On the Love of our Country*, was the proximate reason for Burke’s decision to denounce British supporters of the French revolution in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, appears to shift Smith’s allegiance in Burke’s direction. It echoes, in one respect at least, Burke’s lament for the ‘age of chivalry’ in the face of ‘sophisters, economists, and calculators’ – Price having the distinction of being all three in one.

The authoritative status acquired by the *Wealth of Nations* as the

¹ See the letters between Burke and Smith cited p. 49 n. 40 above. Jacob Viner reviewed the evidence on Smith’s relationship to Burke in his *Guide to John Rae’s Life of Adam Smith*, New York, 1965, pp. 23–33.

definitive late-eighteenth-century statement of the grounds for economic liberalism allows Smith to be used as another kind of intermediary – as a characterising or validating agent in studies that seek to capture the social and economic implications of the politics of Burke, Paine, and Price. But once captured, how can such noted antagonists be accommodated in neighbouring quarters? What does Smith's double life tell us about the system he created? The essays in this section approach such questions by focussing on a variety of intellectual and political issues raised by the two revolutions, American and French, that dominated the life and work of Burke, Paine, and Price – the first of which also played a major part in Smith's thinking when he wrote the *Wealth of Nations*. Indeed, Smith had advised ministers on taxation of the colonies in the 1760s, when the difficulties of obtaining a colonial contribution to imperial revenues had first manifested themselves. He continued to advise the North administration in 1777–9, after having received preferment as Commissioner of Customs; and he was called upon again in the 1780s for his opinions on the best solutions to the problems created by the loss of the American colonies.

Bisset's anecdote has done sterling service since it first appeared. With minor variations, it has become an obligatory citation in the more congratulatory biographies of Burke and Smith. It is also likely to feature as part of what some have seen as *the* Burke problem – that of reconciling, if possible, his defence of the *ancien régime* with his endorsement, sometimes in the starkest of terms, of those economic forces that some supporters of revolution, and certainly Paine, believed would eventually undermine the traditional monarchical, aristocratic, and ecclesiastical order. The anecdote can be cited, therefore, according to taste, by both prosecutors and defenders of Burke's reputation.² In either case, however, the supposedly complementary nature of the relationship serves a dual purpose: Smith's political economy furnishes

² For an attempt to rescue Burke from the Smithian *mésalliance* contained in the Bisset anecdote, see Carl B. Cone, *Burke and the Nature of Politics: The Age of the American Revolution*, Lexington, 1957, p. 326, as continued in the companion volume on the French revolution (Lexington, 1964), pp. 489–91. Alfred Cobban could find no grounds for Burke's defence: 'they show to what extremes a naturally benevolent statesman could be led by theory'; see *Edmund Burke and the Revolt Against the Eighteenth Century*, London, 1929, 2nd edition, 1961, pp. 196–7. For Judith Shklar too, there could be no resolution: Burke was 'one of the first social theorists to base his economic and political ideas on entirely opposed principles'; see *After Utopia*, Princeton, 1957, p. 225. The 'disconcerting' properties of the Burke problem are discussed in G. Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty*, pp. 69–73. C. B. Macpherson resolved the problem by maintaining that since Burke had always been both a defender of aristocracy and a 'bourgeois political economist', there was no conflict between the two sides of Burke; see his *Burke*. For references to those who have followed Macpherson's basic approach to Burke see n. 20 on p. 11 above.

a major clue to Burke's thinking, which in turn helps us to understand Smith's politics, not merely in the everyday sense, but its temperamental and philosophical bearings as well.

Yet Paine's conflicting use of Smith to counter Burke's *Reflections* also has a good deal to be said for it. It has proved attractive to those who wish to rescue Smith from the 'conservative' embrace.³ It has proved even more useful to those who wish to portray the (inevitable?) limitations of Paine's radicalism when judged from later, more comprehensively enlightened standpoints. Paine and other supporters of the American and French revolutions drew information and support from Smith's treatment of the inexpediency and injustice of corporate privileges and trade restrictions. In fact, Paine proselytised on behalf of Smith's economic vision in a manner that Burke could never have done. Later in his career as a republican revolutionist, Paine introduced some novel ideas for the redistribution of income and wealth that went beyond Smith's legacy. But it was as one who accepted the legacy that he condemned Burke's antagonism to the attempts by the National Assembly to abolish closed corporations and monopolies, and to establish freedom of trade and mobility of labour within France.

Paine's first revolutionary plea, *Common Sense* (1776), appeared before the *Wealth of Nations* was available to him. It urged American independence not simply on political grounds but as a step towards cosmopolitan free trade. When he wrote the first part of the *Rights of Man*, he was able to treat Smith as an ally and remind his readers that:

In all my publications ... I have been an advocate for commerce, because I am a friend to its effects. It is a pacific system, operating to unite mankind by rendering nations, as well as individuals, useful to each other ... If commerce were permitted to act to the universal extent it is capable of, it would extirpate the system of war, and produce a revolution in the uncivilised state of governments.⁴

If victory for the principles of the American and French revolutions proved capable of ushering in this pacific world of commerce, it would realise what Smith had espoused as a cosmopolitan ideal. An 'extensive commerce from all countries to all countries' would not only resemble trade within 'the different provinces of a great empire', it would unite 'the most distant parts of the world' and be a natural means of communicating knowledge and improvement to those nations that

³ See E. Rothschild, 'Adam Smith and Conservative Economics', *Economic History Review*, 45 (1992), 74-90.

⁴ See *LMW*, p. 400.

were currently dominated by the superiority of European economic and military power. By equalising 'courage and force', multilateral free trade could inspire that 'mutual fear' which 'can alone overawe the injustice of independent nations into some sort of respect for the rights of one another'.⁵ But Smith had conceived of this ideal only as a utopian dream for his own country – by Paine's standards, perhaps, a rather faint-hearted position in the face of vested interests.⁶

Following in Hume's footsteps, Smith had treated commerce and manufacturing as 'silent' revolutionary forces that had overcome feudalism and established that security under the rule of law which constituted liberty in the modern sense. Paine boldly projected this revolution into the future by envisaging commerce as a progressive impulse that had the power of 'rendering modes of government obsolete'.⁷ Commerce and manufacturing, 'the enterprise and industry of individuals, and their numerous associations', had ushered in improvements in civil society that could not fail to bring changes in forms of government in their train, whether by evolution or revolution. Hence Paine's response to Burke in 1791 that: 'If governments are to go on by precedent, while nations go on by improvement, they must at last come to a final separation.'⁸ The argument was part of Paine's thoroughgoing reversal of Burke's priorities, but its underlying rationale had been announced in the first paragraph of *Common Sense* when he said that: 'Society is produced by our wants and government by our wickedness; the former promotes our happiness *positively* by uniting our affections, the latter *negatively* by restraining our vices.'⁹

In what looks in retrospect like a pre-emptive strike against such notions, Burke had given a diametrically opposed answer to the same question in the *Reflections*. In speaking of 'the gods of our oeconomical politicians', commerce and manufacturing, he suggested the possibility of an inversion of the more familiar sequence expounded by Hume, Smith, and other Scottish historians of civil society, whereby commerce brings an improvement in manners and the arts and sciences in its train. The assault on the *ancien régime* in France, abetted by English supporters threatening to copy French example, led Burke to query whether commerce and learning could survive the demise of those

⁵ *WN*, iv.v.b.39 and iv.vii.c.80.

⁶ *WN*, iv.ii.43.

⁷ *LMW*, p. 343.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 387 and note.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

noble and ecclesiastical institutions which had presided over their birth.¹⁰ Paine's extrapolation of the more widely accepted sequence into the future, however, and the welcome given to Smith's system of natural liberty by other contemporary opponents of Burke, has proved as useful to students of turn-of-the-century radicalism as it has to students of what later was seen as Burke's conservatism. In Paine's case, it has allowed him to be characterised as a spokesman for an upwardly mobile society of self-interested economic individualists, as the radical embodiment of all those 'bourgeois' qualities that Smith, alongside and in harmony with Locke, is supposed to represent.¹¹ As in the case of Burke, some of the resulting characterisations have had an homogenising effect on the diverse qualities of radicalism in this period. Including Price alongside Paine in this comparative exercise acts as a reminder that supporters of revolution did not always speak with the same voice when diagnosing the economic conditions most likely to consort with republican institutions. Price did not fully share Paine's 'Smithian' confidence in the progressive potential contained in the spread of commerce and manufacturing. Nor, as we shall see, did Smith share Paine's belief in the capacity or necessity for commerce to civilise by revolutionising government.

II

The groundwork for any comparative exercise must first be laid by considering the primary texts and contemporary contexts more fully. The main public texts select themselves. With regard to the American revolution, they consist of the long chapter on colonies in Book IV of the *Wealth of Nations* which Smith probably extended in 1773–6, during

¹⁰ As has been convincingly argued by J. G. A. Pocock, 'The Political Economy of Burke's Analysis of the French Revolution', in *Virtue, Commerce and History*, p. 199.

¹¹ A mild version of this interpretation can be found in E. Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, New York, 1976, p. 93, 154–6, 298–9. A more full-blown version of the thesis, employing Smith as the licensing agent, can be found in the writings of I. Kramnick; see his introductions to the Pelican Classics edition of *Common Sense*, London, 1976, pp. 39–55, and (with M. Foot), *The Thomas Paine Reader*, London, 1987, pp. 24–9. The extension of the concept of 'bourgeois radicalism' to other radical opponents of Burke is made in the same author's *Republicanism and Bourgeois Radicalism; Political Ideologies in Late Eighteenth-Century England and America*, Ithaca, 1990. Paine's Smithian connections are considered in G. Claeys, *Thomas Paine: Social and Political Thought*, Boston, 1989, but the common roots in natural jurisprudence are noticed alongside genuine differences; see especially pp. 46, 50, 86, 94–101. Another study which does full justice to the differences between various types of radicalism in this period can be found in G. Gallop, 'Politics, Property and British Radical Thought, 1760–1815', Oxford D. Phil. thesis, 1983.

his years in London immediately prior to publication. This was rounded out by his discussion of Britain's public finances and the problem of rising debt in the final book, where the expenditure associated with the 'new war' referred to Britain's attempt to subdue its 'turbulent and factious subjects' in America.¹² It also gives point to the concluding peroration to the whole work in which Smith advised legislators in Britain 'to accommodate her future views and designs to the real mediocrity of her circumstances' by abandoning the 'showy equipage of the empire' and the prejudices of her merchant-influenced politicians.¹³ To this can be added the remarkable private memorandum Smith wrote to Lord North's Solicitor-General two years later, after the British defeat at Saratoga. Acting against the advice of his friend, Hugh Blair, who recommended dropping the parts dealing with the American problem once it had been settled, Smith retained in subsequent editions everything he had proposed by way of alternative solutions in 1776, presumably on the grounds of personal attachment and a belief that various basic principles were at stake which had not been out-dated by post-revolutionary developments in America.¹⁴

On Burke's side, there are his *Observations on a Work Intituled the Present State of the Nation* (1769), a partisan effort to discredit the opinions on imperial government of William Knox, a supporter of William Grenville; two speeches on American taxation and conciliation, delivered in 1773 and 1774; and his *Letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol on the Affairs of America* (1777). These efforts earned him the reputation of being 'an American' in his principles in the eyes of Paine as well as others – a champion of the colonists' complaints if not rights. They also laid the foundation for later charges of inconsistency when Burke opposed the French revolution.

On French events after 1789, bearing in mind that Smith made no significant revisions to the *Wealth of Nations* after the third edition appeared in 1784, more importance attaches to the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and especially to the extensive additions made in 1790 – some of which *may* have been a response to Price and to French developments. The central Burke text, of course, is the *Reflections*, taken in conjunction with his later defences of his political stance and

¹² *WN*, iv.vii.c.66.

¹³ *WN*, v.iii.92.

¹⁴ For further examination of Smith's likely motives see A. S. Skinner, *A System of Social Science*, Oxford, 1979, pp. 184–208.

his writings on France. To these must be added *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* (1800), a posthumous publication compiled by his literary trustees as a record of his final reflections on another emerging crisis – that posed by steeply rising food prices in 1795–6. This work, comprised of material written during the period in which Burke was preoccupied with French affairs, represents his mature position on a topic within political economy that was to assume increasing importance during the wars against France, primarily as a result of Malthus's *Essay on Population* and the controversy over the Poor Laws that it aroused. As Burke's only extended foray into political economy in its narrower sense, this pamphlet is crucial to what has been referred to as the Burke problem. *Thoughts and Details* certainly invites comparison with Smith's views on related questions – an invitation that has often been accepted gratefully or with regret, according to political taste.

Larger issues of more obviously political moment were, of course, raised by Paine and Price: the origins and legitimacy of all forms of government, and what domestic reforms in the British system were called for in the light of American and French experience. Each of them, along with other products of that rich culture of dissenting protestantism that lent so much character to English radicalism in this period, became a figure in Burke's demonology. Despite their divergences on matters of religion, moral philosophy, and political economy, Paine and Price agreed, as the former put it, that 'the cause of America is in great measure the cause of all mankind'. They also agreed that the French revolution, in its early years at least, represented another giant forward step for the same cause.

Thus, in addition to the writings by Paine and Price that have been mentioned so far, the latter's *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty, the Principles of Government, and the Justice and Policy of the War with America* (1776), and the second part of Paine's *Rights of Man* (1792) must be considered. Price took inspiration from John Locke's views on religious toleration; he was also proud to consider himself a disciple of Locke's political doctrines based on the original contract, tacit consent, and rights of resistance to governments that had forfeited popular trust. In opposing war with America, however, Price was engaged on a dual campaign, arguing the right to self-government for the colonies on fundamentalist neo-Lockean lines, while pursuing the theme of jeremiads on declining population and

the perilous state of Britain's finances caused by the failure to control paper money and confront the problem of public debt. Both sides of this campaign came together when he opposed the war against the colonies on grounds of injustice and impending financial ruin. Price continued to offer advice on the course which the United States should pursue in his *Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution* (1784) – a work that points to ways in which the United States could remain a healthy mirror-image of corrupted Europe. Paine too found it necessary to write on *The Decline and Fall of the English System of Finance* in 1796 as part of his defence of the French revolution and in opposition to the war against it on which Britain had embarked in 1793. In doing so, he made selective use of the *Wealth of Nations*, arousing opposition not merely from Smith's defenders, but from all those who adopted Burke's patriotic position as expounded in his *Letters on a Regicide Peace*.

As already mentioned, Price's address to the Revolution Society on love of country provoked Burke into writing his *Reflections*. Given in November, 1789, the address was part of the belated celebrations of the centenary of the English revolution mounted by radicals, and it was Price's linkage of French developments with an interpretation of the modern lessons to be learnt from 1688 that provided the occasion for an open attack by Burke on Price's conclusions and style of political reasoning. Burke had probably planned this over a longer period, with the further object of discrediting Lord Shelburne – the aristocratic patron of Price and his friend and ally, Joseph Priestley – whom he suspected of harbouring revolutionary ideas. Indeed, Burke originally intended to confine himself to Price's *Discourse*, but added his commentary on France over the summer of 1790, thereby giving *Reflections* the double purpose captured in his remark that 'whenever our neighbour's house is on fire, it cannot be amiss for the engines to play a little on our own'.¹⁵

III

The contexts relevant to an understanding of these publications do not select themselves. They are partly comprised, of course, by the circumstances surrounding composition of the various works and the

¹⁵ *Reflections*, in *WS*, viii, p. 60. See also F. Dreyer, 'The Genesis of Burke's *Reflections*', *Journal of Modern History*, 50 (1978), 462–79; and F. P. Lock, *Burke's Reflection on the Revolution in France*, London, 1985, Chapter 2.

different audiences being addressed at particular historical moments. To mention only the most obvious differences, one has to bear in mind the contrast between the way in which Smith interwove his proposals for dealing with the American dispute within the fabric of a treatise composed over a period of twelve years or more, the speeches of an active politician who was serving the interests of the Rockinghamite faction in parliament, and the partisan writings of the supporters of the American revolution, couched in more or less philosophical terms. For the purpose in hand – an inquiry into what can be revealed by a comparison of the positions adopted by Burke, Smith, Paine, and Price on issues that are *genuinely* comparable – other difficulties should be noted. Thus, while Paine and Price took a close interest in constitutional and other developments in *post*-revolutionary America, neither Burke nor Smith commented at length on these subjects. Smith's opinions on the American dispute, as we have noted, were not modified in the light of subsequent constitutional discussions in America. The evidence derived from his advice to various politicians shows that he was more concerned with the economic implications for Britain of the American separation. In the published texts at least, Smith treated constitutional questions as an extension of the analysis he gave to the commercial and fiscal burdens of empire. Similarly, though more mysteriously, with Burke: although he defended the consistency of his political principles in supporting the Americans while condemning the French, he left little by way of guidance to his views on post-revolutionary America.¹⁶

Much the same might be said, with greater force, of Smith's reaction to the French revolution, and when dealing with this sequence of events, direct comparison is virtually impossible. Burke's *Reflections* have to be compared with what can only be conjectured from a few paragraphs added to the last edition of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. This means that Smith's views on the central themes in the *Reflections* have to be assessed on the basis of his earlier work, including the notes on his Glasgow lectures on jurisprudence, which show how he would have written on some central questions of law and government. In the case of Burke's *Thoughts and Details*, with more evidence to hand, the

¹⁶ John Pocock's warning on this subject needs to be borne in mind: 'What Burke thought about the American revolutionary experience we hardly know, and the problem of how he distinguished it from the French may therefore be fictitious. There is nothing to prevent us from constructing a "Burkean" reading of the American Revolution, but whether Burke himself constructed one is another matter.' See his introduction to Burke's *Reflections*, Indianapolis, 1987, p. xv.

position is reversed: a motley publication compiled after Burke's death has to be compared with the *Wealth of Nations*, the author of which had died five years before the specific legislative problems posed by acute grain scarcity had manifested themselves. Clearly, less direct methods of interpretation have to be employed in these circumstances.

The loss of regal government

I

With regard to the revolt of the American colonies, the ending of the comparative story involving Burke and Smith can be disclosed immediately: Bisset's anecdote is highly misleading if it creates the expectation that, as far as the political economy of the American revolution was concerned, both men were operating on the same wavelength. While Paine could have derived considerable support from the *Wealth of Nations* for his diagnosis of American discontents, Burke could not have done so without drastically altering the nature of his case for reconciliation. Indeed, when it came to solutions, Burke had already publicly ridiculed or dismissed both of the alternatives espoused by Smith in the *Wealth of Nations* – amicable separation or a consolidating union involving a new 'states-general of the British Empire'. The advice tendered by Burke and Smith to British legislators was diametrically opposed.¹ This ending to the story, however, bypasses other lessons that can be learned when the respective positions are considered more closely.

It seems best to begin with Burke, whose room for intellectual manoeuvre was circumscribed by his commitment to the measures taken by the Rockinghamites in 1766: abolition of the Stamp Acts and the passage of the Declaratory Act reasserting the authority of parliament to legislate in all matters affecting British colonies.² In the wake of the Boston Tea Party, Burke was able to resume an attack on Lord North's ministry for departing from the statesmanlike course embodied in earlier Rockinghamite policies. He argued for retention of the

¹ This was first documented by Richard Koebner, who concluded that: 'No reader could believe both oracles'; see *Empire*, p. 220.

² The party political background to Burke's speeches is examined in Paul Langford's introduction to *WS*, II, pp. 24–9.

Navigation Acts ('the corner-stone of the policy of this country with regard to its colonies'), and 'the principles of commercial monopoly', but opposed the imposition of taxes – currently proving ineffective – designed to recoup the expenses laid out in defending and governing the colonies. In this, as in other matters, precedent should guide action: 'Be content to bind America by laws of trade: you have always done it. Let this be your reason for binding their trade. Do not burthen them by taxes; you were not used to do so from the beginning. Let this be your reason for not taxing.'³ At the same time, Burke defended the Declaratory Act by stressing the 'imperial character' of parliament and by distinguishing between 'the constitution of the British Empire' and 'the constitution of Britain'. The right to require fiscal support from the colonies by means of requisition was upheld, but reconciliation required that it should not be exercised under present circumstances.

A year later Burke urged conciliation by means of a parliamentary declaration accepting that, since the colonies were unrepresented in parliament, taxation should take place only through the medium of the colonial assemblies. He described this as a generous policy of 'prudent management', an alternative to the use of force which entailed bowing to the strength of that extreme form of the English spirit of liberty which thrived in American circumstances. The speech was high-minded in eschewing legalism in favour of ties of blood and sentiment: 'we choose rather to be happy citizens than subtle disputants'. Statesmanlike though this may have been, however, Burke's compromise was little more than a retreat in the face of the colonists' demands, where the nature of the compromise was dictated by his refusal to countenance the more radical alternatives of separation or direct colonial representation in parliament.⁴

Smith's library contained a volume of political pamphlets in which all Burke's writings and speeches on the American problem were bound together.⁵ The same volume included William Knox's *The Present State of the Nation*, which contained a scheme for dealing with the fiscal problems of empire that is close to the one advocated in the *Wealth of Nations*. In return for the right to tax, Knox proposed that the

³ *WS*, II, p. 458.

⁴ With regard to separation, Burke mentioned this only to dismiss it; see *Speech on Conciliation in Burke: Pre-Revolutionary Writings*, edited by I. Harris, Cambridge, 1993, p. 229. Colonial representation was ridiculed as impracticable in his *Observations on a late Publication, entitled 'The Present State of the Nation'*, and rejected less contemptuously in the *Speech on Conciliation*. On this see Koebner, *Empire*, pp. 220–1.

⁵ See James Bonar, *A Catalogue of the Library of Adam Smith*, p. 146.

colonies should be granted representation in the British parliament in proportion to their contribution to imperial finances.⁶ Alongside Burke's critical *Observations* on Knox's pamphlet were bound the writings on the American problem by Josiah Tucker, a leading spokesman for free trade, an opponent of the colonists' claims, and a forthright advocate of separation as the only solution that was in Britain's interests.⁷ One of Tucker's pamphlets – a response to a personal insult that Burke had inserted into his conciliation speech – poured scorn on Burke's unwillingness to draw the courageous conclusion from his diagnosis of the colonists' rebellious state of mind. In other words, within two covers Smith had placed most of the work published during the final stages of writing the *Wealth of Nations* that was relevant to the positions he was to consider. Although Smith does not mention Burke or Tucker by name, and refers to Knox's pamphlet when dealing with an unrelated issue, it only requires us to assume that Smith was more than a mere book collector to conclude that in rejecting Burke's conclusions, he was doing so self-consciously. That this could have been the period in which Smith 'deigned' to consult Burke, and may have added an interesting sentence to his account of the Corn Law for which Burke claimed some legislative responsibility, merely adds an element of intrigue to the story: Did they discuss their other differences? Was there some falling out between them, such that Burke can be read as a critic of Smith in his later writings?⁸ Why did Burke omit any mention of Smith in his last major statement on the problem in 1777, after he had seen how far apart they were?

For far apart they certainly were. The 'laws of trade' with which Burke hoped to bind the Americans were those laid down by existing mercantile regulations. On this he was in broad agreement with Knox. If Burke disagreed with these regulations, and there is no evidence to suggest that he did, his commitment to remaining within the framework established by earlier Rockinghamite policies prevented him from revealing this opinion when proposing his solution to the problem of imperial government.⁹ On the other hand, Smith's analysis of the

⁶ For a biographical study of Knox see Leland J. Bellot, *William Knox: The Life and Thought of an Eighteenth-Century Imperialist*, Austin, 1977; see pp. 81–95 on the Burke–Knox dispute.

⁷ Tucker's role in the debate is fully dissected in J. G. A. Pocock, 'Josiah Tucker on Burke, Locke, and Price' in his *Virtue, Commerce and History*, pp. 157–91.

⁸ The last of these suggestions is advanced by Rothschild in 'Adam Smith and Conservative Economics', pp. 86–8.

⁹ In one respect, Burke went further than Knox by opposing relaxation of the mercantile system in favour of Ireland; see *Observations in WS*, II, p. 165. For Smith's contrasting position on this matter see p. 158 below.

mercantile system led to the unequivocal conclusion that: 'Under the present system of management . . . Great Britain derives nothing but loss from the dominion which she assumes over her colonies.'¹⁰ Only by comparison with the colonial policies of other European nations, and then largely because it chimed with the interests of the mercantile orders in Britain, was Smith willing to concede that the English version of the system was less 'illiberal'. He endorsed the wisdom of the Navigation Acts on defence grounds, famously holding that since defence was 'of much more importance than opulence', they were 'the wisest of all the commercial regulations of England.'¹¹ Unlike Burke, however, he did not regard them as the 'corner-stone' of British policy. Naval strength depended on the trade with Europe, and this trade had been diverted and diminished by the colonial system. Whereas Burke emphasised the scale of the interests at stake in retaining the American trade (a 'noble object'), Smith was stressing its unnatural 'overgrown' character and attempting to calm public fears that reduction, even if carried out by 'moderate and gradual' steps, would spell ruin.¹²

On the subject of taxation, far from wishing to see Britain relent in its demands, Smith argued, as Knox had done, that: 'It is not contrary to justice that both Ireland and America should contribute towards the discharge of the publick debt of Great Britain.'¹³ His detailed proposals for fiscal union were meant to show how these contributions could be levied by an imperial parliament on a full and regular basis. Smith did not regard the political difficulties of organising representation – those enumerated by Burke when dealing with Knox's ideas – as insurmountable. Taxation by requisition – Burke's alternative – was, however, rejected. As Smith might have shown by reference to Burke's own retreat from the implications of the Declaratory Act, parliament possessed neither the authority nor the inclination to levy a proper assessment on the colonies. Like Tucker, he could also have called upon Burke's glowing account of the spirit of liberty in America to support his argument against taxation by requisition, namely that it failed to cater for the new ambitions of the 'high-spirited men' who had taken the lead in opposing British policies.

Smith clearly believed that separation was the most likely outcome of events, though he recognised that only a 'visionary enthusiast' would

¹⁰ *WN*, iv.vii.c.65.

¹¹ *WN*, iv.ii.30.

¹² *WN*, iv.vii.c.43–4.

¹³ *WN*, v.iii.88.

expect it to be adopted as a measure.¹⁴ In this respect at least he was in agreement with Burke in rejecting Tucker's solution, though he would not have done so in Burke's manner, namely by ridiculing it.¹⁵ It followed from Smith's analysis of the mercantile system, and his opinion that the costs of empire had largely been borne by the British taxpayer for the benefit of merchants, that:

If [voluntary separation] was adopted ... Great Britain would not only be immediately freed from the whole annual expence of the peace establishment of the colonies, but might settle with them such a treaty of commerce as would effectually secure to her a free trade, more advantageous to the great body of the people, though less so to the merchants, than the monopoly which she at present enjoys.¹⁶

II

It will also now be clear why, on economic and fiscal questions at least, Smith's position was much closer to that of Paine. *Common Sense* was designed to convince an American audience that conciliation was no longer possible, that no solution short of complete independence was acceptable. Smith, on the other hand, was chiefly interested in revealing the disadvantages of the imperial connection to British or European readers. But both men agreed that there was little in the economic status quo worth preserving by means of existing constitutional arrangements. Smith could readily have endorsed Paine's statement that: 'England is at this time proudly coveting what would do her no good were she to accomplish it.'¹⁷ The *Wealth of Nations* provided a partial answer to what Paine described as an inquiry into 'the many material injuries which these colonies sustain, and always will sustain, by being connected with and dependent on Great Britain.'¹⁸ He would undoubtedly have warmed to Smith's description of the mercantile restrictions as 'a manifest violation of the most sacred rights of mankind.' Unlike Paine (or for that matter Burke, when speaking of colonial taxation), however, Smith was not prepared to describe the

¹⁴ For a fuller account of the reasons behind this conclusion see Winch, *Adam Smith's Politics*, Chapter 7.

¹⁵ 'It is nothing but a little sally of anger, like the frowardness of peevish children who, when they cannot get all they would have, are resolved to take nothing.' See *Speech on Conciliation in Burke: Pre-Revolutionary Writings*, edited by Harris, p. 229.

¹⁶ *WN*, iv.vii.c.66.

¹⁷ *LMW*, p. 42.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

existing system as involving 'slavery' *tout court*. He chose a less emotive term: 'impertinent *badges* of slavery' – badges that would gradually become 'really oppressive and insupportable' as the colonial economies developed.¹⁹

Nevertheless, even badges of dependence required attention. Echoing, once more, Hume's stress on the importance of opinion to all forms of free government, Smith recognised that placating the resentments, catering for the ambitions, new dignity, and sense of importance felt or imagined by 'the leading men, the natural aristocracy' in the colonies would have to be part of any imperial remedy. The distancing irony of Smith's remarks on the politics of the dispute – offering colonial representatives a chance to exchange the 'paltry raffle' of colonial politics for a share in the prizes that come from 'the great state lottery of British politics' – is a reminder, however, that while Burke and Paine, in their different ways, were actively sympathetic to the claims of the colonists, the same cannot be said of Smith. At least one American observer thought Smith was 'an enemy to American rights', and Governor Pownall reserved his strongest criticism for Smith's proposals for separation: 'This prompt and hasty conclusion is very unlike the author of "the Treatise on the wealth of nations"', it savours more of the puzzled inexperience of an unpracticed surgeon, who is more ready with his amputation knife, than prepared in the skill of healing medicines.'²⁰

If the memorandum Smith wrote for Wedderburn in 1778 had been available for public scrutiny, there would have been no doubt as to how little Smith cared for the constitutional pretensions of the colonists and their supporters in Britain. The 'ulcerated minds of the Americans', he said, might be brought to see sense if 'those splendid, but unprofitable acquisitions of the late war', Canada and the two Floridas, were handed back to France and Spain as a sharp reminder to the Americans of who their real friends were. But the clearest indication of how far Smith was from sharing the enthusiasms of Paine and other supporters of the American revolution can be found in the following comment, with its telling reference to the English civil war:

The Americans, it has been said, when they compare the mildness of their old government with the violence of that which they have established in its stead,

¹⁹ *WN*, iv.vii.b.44 (emphasis added).

²⁰ Letter to Smith, 25 September 1776 in *Corr.*, p. 366. For the reference to Smith as an enemy see Arthur Lee, letter to Charles Dumas from London, 1776, in F. Wharton (ed.), *The Revolutionary Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States*, 1889, II, pp. 110–11.

cannot fail both to remember the one with regret and to view the other with detestation. That these will be their sentiments when the war is over and when their new government, if ever that should happen, is firmly established among them, I have no doubt . . . It was not till some time after the conclusion of the civil war that the people of England began to regret the loss of that regal Government which they had rashly overturned, and which was happily restored to them by such a concurrence of accidental circumstances as may not, upon any similar occasion, ever happen again.²¹

No hint here of the benefits Paine and other supporters of the American cause believed that mankind would derive from a republican system of government respecting natural rights, more suited to human capacities, and better adapted to the social and economic improvements associated with commerce. Smith clearly did not accept Paine's view that Britain lived under an 'uncivilised' form of government; and he implicitly denied the corollary that monarchical governments would be undermined by the acceptance of multilateral free trade and the abolition of monopoly and special privileges. Economy and polity were not linked organically, with the latter taking its cue from the former in the manner suggested by Paine's remarks on society and government.

As a mark of Smith's confidence in the strengths and flexibility of 'regal government' of the 'mixed' British variety, one can also cite his analysis of the advantages likely to accrue to the colonies if they participated in an imperial union centring on the British parliament. When describing the colonial assemblies, Smith had noted that 'they are not always a very equal representation of the people', and that 'as in all other free countries, the descendant of an old colony family is more respected than an upstart of equal merit and fortune' – an observation that simply confirmed his diagnosis of deference in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, about which more will need to be said in the next essay. Nevertheless, the absence of hereditary distinctions and privileges meant that colonial 'manners were more republican, and their governments, those of the three provinces of New England in particular, have hitherto been more republican too'.²² This carried with it the dangers inherent in such forms of government, namely 'those rancorous and virulent factions which are inseparable from small democracies, and which have so frequently divided the affections of their people, and disturbed the tranquillity of their governments'.²³

²¹ See 'Smith's Thoughts on the State of the Contest with America' in *Corr.*, p. 384.

²² *WN*, iv.vii.b.51.

²³ *WN*, v.iii.90.

Scotland had gained respite from factional divisions as a result of the union with England, and the American colonies, as well as Ireland, would benefit from this solution to the destructive 'spirit of party', which was compounded in Ireland by religion. Far from being contrary to the ethos of British constitutional evolution, Smith regarded his proposals, confessedly utopian though they were, as the means by which the constitution could be perfected.²⁴ Any readers who were disturbed, as Pownall clearly was, by Smith's willingness to countenance separation, would be able to read this as an endorsement of the advantages of building on existing foundations. They might, however, have been disconcerted by Smith's calm prediction that in 'little more than a century' the prosperity, and hence tax revenues, of America would justify shifting the seat of empire across the Atlantic.²⁵

None of Smith's Glasgow students in the 1760s would have had much doubt about their professor's confidence in the robustness of the British constitution and the English legal system, whatever historical accidents of geography and royal personality may have contributed to its peculiarities. After Elizabeth's reign, the Commons had become as powerful as the Lords by establishing control over tax revenues and the sinking fund. The standing army and the size of the civil list remained as potential threats to liberty, but Smith taught that sufficient securities against this existed within 'a happy mixture of all the different forms of government properly restrained'.²⁶ The judiciary was independent of the crown, military leadership was in the hands of men of independent wealth, and the custom of appointing life-officers of the Exchequer made it difficult for royal influence to overcome this constraint. 'The system of government now supposes a system of liberty as its foundation. Every one would be shocked at any attempt to alter this system, and such a change would be attended with the greatest of difficulties.'²⁷ Frequency of elections, and parliamentary regulation of their conduct, provided another security in England, contrasting favourably with the 'oligarchical' or 'aristocratical' character of Scottish burgh elections.²⁸ Smith invited his students to regard *habeas corpus*, juries, and a legal system based on precedent which restricted judicial discretion, as further grounds for confidence.

²⁴ *WN*, iv.vii.c.77.

²⁵ *WN*, iv.vii.c.79.

²⁶ *LJB*, pp. 421-2.

²⁷ *LJA*, p. 271.

²⁸ *LJA*, pp. 273-4.

The lecture notes also enable us to form a clear idea of Smith's likely attitude towards those Lockean-inspired 'first principles' of government which were further developed by Price, writing in support of the American right to self-government. Price's idea of civil liberty is a thoroughly normative one that could be apprehended by a process of rational intuition. The self-evident properties of the idea make it independent of historical or actual political circumstances. It rests on the view that each self-determining moral agent ought to possess the right to be his own legislator, following his own conscience in political as in religious matters. Civil government in free states, therefore, had to originate in the choice of the people. All legislation required their consent, ideally through direct participation in decisions, though they could entrust this to representatives, with or without restrictions on the discretion allowed to them. Parliaments exercise their powers on trust. If that trust is betrayed, or not renewed, as in the American dispute, a new government must be formed that commands trust and reinstates the right to self-government. If representation was not complete, or if representatives were not freely chosen, as in Britain, government was no longer free. The absence of political liberty undermined civil liberty. Only free governments were consistent with natural equality. Only those living under free government could enjoy the self-developmental benefits which came from exercising rights. Such was the proper end of all government, making it part of the Divine plan. The whole train of argument originates with Locke, but is extended to give an enlarged creative or destructive role to the people. Consent, instead of being tacit, becomes a continuous process. Locke's account of political obligation is transformed into a case for a form of democracy that is endlessly renewable.²⁹

Without mentioning Price by name, Burke's first reaction to this deductive train of reasoning came in his *Letters to the Sheriffs of Bristol* in 1777:

There are people who have split and anatomized the doctrine of free government, as if it were an abstract question concerning metaphysical liberty and necessity, and not a matter of moral prudence and natural feeling . . . In this manner the stirrers-up of this contention, not satisfied with distracting our dependencies and filling them with blood and slaughter, are corrupting our

²⁹ The main texts are conveniently to be found in *Richard Price and the Ethical Foundations of the American Revolution*, edited by Bernard Peach, Durham, 1979. For an extended critical commentary see D. O. Thomas, *The Honest Mind: The Thought and Work of Richard Price*, Oxford, 1977, who has also edited Price's *Political Writings* in the Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought series, Cambridge, 1991.

understandings ... Civil freedom, Gentlemen, is not, as many have endeavored to persuade you, a thing that lies hid in the depth of abstruse science. It is a blessing and a benefit, not an abstract speculation; and all the just reasoning that can be upon it is of so coarse a texture as perfectly to suit the ordinary capacities of those who are to enjoy, and of those who are to defend it. Far from any resemblance to those propositions in geometry and metaphysics which admit no medium ... social and civil freedom, like all other things in common life, are variously mixed and modified ... according to the temper and circumstances of every community ... Liberty, too, must be limited in order to be possessed.³⁰

This gives an accurate foretaste of the larger attack on Price that Burke was to mount in the *Reflections*, but it ignores much that could not be described as 'geometry and metaphysics' in Price's *Observations on Civil Liberty*. This work was decked out with much more regard for the 'temper and circumstances' prevailing in Britain and the colonies than Burke allows, but it took a conventional form which Burke did not permit himself to notice. Price's writings on America, like his writings on Britain's population and public finances, could serve as a compendium of all those anxieties that were such a prevalent feature of 'Country', 'republican', or oppositional thinking in Britain throughout the eighteenth century: the fear of executive aggrandisement; opposition to the growth of royal influence through placemen, and the consequent loss of balance within the mixed constitution; concern about the standing army; persistent warnings about an uncontrolled paper currency and the growth of the public debt; condemnation of luxury as a force that was corrupting or enfeebling; and so on. Nevertheless, Burke's instinct in detecting what was distinctively subversive about Price's philosophy of *rational* liberty was a sound one.³¹ It also allows us to consider what Smith might have said in his own fashion if he had decided to deal with such topics in the *Wealth of Nations*.

The only evidence we possess on Smith's position can be found in the students' notes of his lectures on jurisprudence. It proves decisively how little Smith had in common with Price's revival of Lockean ideas. The notes show that Smith followed Hume in rejecting contractarian accounts of the origin of government, together with Locke's doctrine of tacit consent. Obligation, for Hume and Smith, was grounded on the

³⁰ See *Works of Edmund Burke*, Oxford, 1906-7, II, pp. 273-4.

³¹ Josiah Tucker also had focussed on the subversive qualities of dissenting radical ideas, but, unlike Burke, had explicitly noted their Lockean origins; see Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and Liberty*, pp. 167-79.

twin psychological principles of natural deference to established authority and regard for the 'common or general interest' (public utility) – principles that were at work in all forms of government in different degrees. The authority principle was dominant in monarchies and more attractive to Tories in mixed constitutions; utility in democratical governments and to Whigs. Both principles were based on sentiments or propensities that made the idea of duty and the advantages of regular government accessible to what Burke described as 'natural feelings' and 'ordinary capacities'. In other words, they were not the product of rational intuition, a position in morals, and hence politics, against which Hutcheson, Hume, and Smith maintained a united front. It was probably this doctrine, as earlier expounded in Price's *Review of the Principal Questions in Morals*, that led Smith to regard Price as 'a most superficial Philosopher'. It is certainly indicative of Smith's attitude to Price that he did not consider him worthy of mention in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, even as an erroneous exponent of the rationalist position, in the section he later devoted to the history of systems of morals.³²

Again in company with Hume, Smith placed little emphasis on 'rights of resistance', despite their prominence in Hutcheson's writings – some of which, it has been argued, influenced pre-revolutionary thinking in America on colonial independence.³³ In his lectures, Smith had recognised the right of resistance 'wherever the confusion which must arise on an overthrow of the established government is less than the mischief of allowing it to continue'. But he had also said that: 'No government is quite perfect, but it is better to submit to some inconveniences than make attempts against it.'³⁴ For reasons that will become obvious when we consider the French revolution, there are good grounds for believing that Smith would not have demurred from Burke's statement on the subject in his *Reflections*: 'I confess to you, Sir, I

³² Price's *Review of the Principal Questions in Morals* first appeared in 1758. When a further edition appeared in 1787, after the publication of Smith's two main works, Price noticed the difference of opinion in a respectful appendix, where he spoke of Smith as 'the author of the valuable work on the *wealth of nations*, and a writer above any praise from me'. On morals, however, he stated that Smith's position, 'delivered by so able a writer', would have influenced him more had it not been for the support he derived from an equal authority, Thomas Reid, Smith's successor in the Chair of Moral Philosophy at Glasgow. See the edition of Price's *Review* edited by D. D. Raphael, Oxford, 1948, Note D.

³³ See C. Robbins, "'When is it that Colonies may turn Independent?"; An Analysis of the Environment and Politics of Francis Hutcheson, 1669–1746', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 11 (1954), 214–51. For the contrast between Hutcheson and Smith on these matters, see Winch, *Adam Smith's Politics*, pp. 46–69.

³⁴ See *LJA*, p. 321; and *LJB*, p. 435.

never liked this continual talk of resistance and revolution, or the practice of making the extreme medicine of the constitution its daily bread. It renders the habit of society dangerously valetudinary.³⁵ This had been Hume's position, and on these matters Smith was closely in sympathy with his friend.³⁶

The natural rights that concerned Smith in his lectures were personal rights under law rather than those pre-political rights to life, liberty, and property that Price and Paine celebrated and believed should be incorporated within the constitutions of all 'free' states. Smith's idea of right derived from his theory of natural jurisprudence, the distinctive feature of which, as we have seen, was his account of those injuries which arouse the immediate resentment of the impartial spectator and therefore command sufficient consensus in the ordinary moral sentiments of mankind to be the subject of coercive action by the sovereign or magistrate. Political rights, especially those which arose from representation, might provide an additional security against infringements of the rule of law, but they were neither essential to personal rights nor were they in fact a common feature of most governments that respected such rights. Smith considered it more important to concentrate on the principles revealed by the actual historical processes according to which law and government had developed rather than deal with the ideal foundations on which they ought to rest.³⁷

This becomes clear in Smith's treatment of the specific issue dividing Britain from its North American colonies, the linkage between taxation and representation. He believed that the colonists, whose assemblies were based on English models and practices, were already guaranteed a liberty which was 'in every respect equal to that of their fellow-citizens at home, and is secured in the same manner, by an assembly of the representatives of the people, who claim the sole right of imposing taxes for the support of the colony government'.³⁸ Although his proposals for imperial union linked taxation to representation, other parts of his case for union are equally significant. They are connected with the remarks noted earlier on the subject of political lotteries and paltry raffles, and will reappear again later when speaking about the

³⁵ *WS*, viii, p. 113.

³⁶ As Duncan Forbes was the first to show in detail; see his 'Sceptical Whiggism, Commerce and Liberty' in Skinner and Wilson (eds.), *Essays on Adam Smith*, pp. 179–201; and *Hume's Philosophical Politics*, pp. 92–101.

³⁷ See, once more, Haakonssen, *The Science of a Legislator*, Chapters 4 and 5.

³⁸ *WN*, iv.cii.b.51.

means available for achieving legislative goals. Smith argued on pragmatic Humean grounds that an increase in the number of representatives in an imperial parliament would be accompanied by an increase in the sources of revenue that could be employed for the purposes of 'management'.³⁹ This interpretation of the realities of the British constitution, of course, was exactly what Price's 'Country' diagnosis of corruption and influence was designed to condemn. Moreover, Smith stopped short of making representation a *sine qua non* of legitimate government: 'It is in Britain alone that any consent of the people is required, and God knows it is but a very figurative metaphoricall consent which is given here.'⁴⁰

Although Smith did not accept the Lockean theory of the origins of property rights in labour, he agreed with Locke to the extent of thinking that the *history* of law and government was one in which government and defence of property went hand in hand.⁴¹ Exorbitant taxes that fell on property might, therefore, justify resistance. Nevertheless, even the subjects of governments where figurative consent to higher taxation was required must show trust in their governors and 'agree to give up a little of their right' in order to avoid the worse consequences of resistance and the overthrow of stable forms of government.⁴² More generally, Smith believed that it was impossible to lay down any rules for what abuses justify resistance. As an advocate of strong but not extensive government, Smith might well have been at odds with Price and Paine over any attempt to build the protection of rights into constitutional arrangements. As one would expect, these broadly yet comprehensively anti-Lockean views are of significance when applied to the French revolution, where further comparisons with Burke's stance become possible.

III

While Smith believed that the Americans were destined to regret and relearn ancient lessons on the faction-ridden politics of democratical republics, there was one major respect in which he accorded to America the status of a model – though history and the peculiar economic advantages enjoyed by America made it a model that could

³⁹ *WN*, IV.vii.c.78.

⁴⁰ *LJA*, p. 323.

⁴¹ See p. 71 above.

⁴² *LJA*, p. 324.

at best only be approximated by European nations. What came, so to speak, with the territory in America, had to be created in Europe, with little or no hope of successful emulation. The colonies of North America were 'much more thriving, and advancing with much greater rapidity to the further acquisition of riches' than European nations. Wages were higher than in England, chiefly as a result of the rate at which capital accumulation was taking place, and population was doubling every twenty years or so, compared with an average European rate estimated by Smith to be a doubling every five hundred years.⁴³ North America was, therefore, Smith's example of a 'progressive' society *par excellence*, measured in those terms which Smith himself had done so much to define for his contemporaries.

The American colonies also had the distinction of being the only case in which the actual progress of opulence had taken its natural course. Whereas European nations had inverted the natural sequence by favouring commerce and manufacturing over agriculture, for the complex mixture of reasons given in Book III of the *Wealth of Nations*, a combination of unlimited supplies of fertile and uncultivated land, together with the absence of a feudal past, had enabled North America to concentrate on agricultural improvement.

It has been the principal cause of the rapid progress of our American colonies towards wealth and greatness, that almost their whole capitals have hitherto been employed in agriculture . . . Were the Americans, either by combination or by any other sort of violence, to stop the importation of European manufactures, and, by thus giving a monopoly to such of their own countrymen as could manufacture the like goods, divert any considerable part of their capital into this employment, they would retard instead of accelerating the further increase in the value of their annual produce, and would obstruct instead of promoting the progress of their country towards real wealth and greatness.⁴⁴

Scarcity of labour in relation to land conferred another blessing:

In other countries, rent and profit eat up wages, and the two superior orders of people oppress the inferior one. But in new colonies, the interest of the two superior orders obliges them to treat the inferior one with more generosity and humanity; at least where the inferior one is not in a state of slavery.⁴⁵

The benefits attached to the absence of feudal relics were most marked with respect to the laws of primogeniture and entail – legal

⁴³ *WN*, I.viii.23.

⁴⁴ *WN*, II.v.21; see also III.i.5.

⁴⁵ *WN*, IV.vii.b.2–3.

practices which Smith regarded as a persisting obstacle to the full development of agricultural, and hence population, potential in Britain. Practices which had their origin in the need to preserve the military power of the feudal barony had been prolonged into the present, where they had no justification apart from 'pride of family distinctions'. Primogeniture prevented the subdivision of landholdings through succession, entails through alienation or sale. Since 'the interest of the state requires that lands should be as much in commerce as any other goods', Smith reserved some of his strongest rhetoric for condemnation of these practices. They were not only a barrier to the efficient use of land by those who were most likely to improve it, and hence a curb on economic growth, but constituted a violation of natural justice between generations as well: 'They are founded upon the most absurd of all suppositions, the supposition that every successive generation of men have not an equal right to the earth, and to all that it possesses; but that the property of the present generation should be restrained and regulated according to the fancy of those who died perhaps five hundred years ago.'⁴⁶ In dealing with this subject in his lectures, Smith called on all the pejorative terms his vocabulary allowed: the law of primogeniture was 'contrary to nature, to reason, and to justice'.⁴⁷ America provided the virtuous contrast, a country where small proprietors, cultivating their own land with affection, succeeded 'not only in cultivating but in adorning it'.⁴⁸ Pennsylvania was commended for the complete absence of primogeniture, and the New England states for granting only a double share to the first-born. Even where primogeniture existed in the American colonies, it was not accompanied by entail, and therefore alienation and hence commercialisation was still possible.⁴⁹

From this it will be clear that on these matters Smith was thoroughly in sympathy with both Paine and Price. The former fully shared Smith's optimistic diagnosis of America's prospects based on its natural advantages in producing agricultural goods: 'The commerce by which she hath enriched herself are the necessaries of life, and will always have a market while eating is the custom of Europe.'⁵⁰ Although, in contrast with Smith, he maintained that these advantages could be

⁴⁶ *WN*, III,ii.6.

⁴⁷ *LJA*, p. 49.

⁴⁸ *WN*, IV.iv.19.

⁴⁹ *WN*, IV.ii.b.19.

⁵⁰ *LMW*, p. 18.

guaranteed only through self-government, there is a similarity in their respective diagnoses of the future prospects for America. Thus Smith recognised that while mercantile restrictions had not yet hindered American growth, they would do so in future. He might not, therefore, have had much difficulty in accepting the following statement by Paine: 'America doth not yet know what opulence is: and although the progress which she hath made stands unparalleled in the history of other nations, it is but childhood compared with what she would be capable of arriving at, had she, as she ought to have, the legislative powers in her own hands.'⁵¹ On primogeniture too, there was close agreement. Price explicitly advised that all vestiges of primogeniture should be removed in America, and Paine called for its abolition in the *Rights of Man*, thereby provoking Burke to give a thorough political defence of the institution.⁵² Since the laws of inheritance have a direct bearing on the relationship between 'natural' and landed aristocracy, further consideration of this will be held over to the next essay.

The position adopted towards America's economic prospects in the *Wealth of Nations* highlights an important difference between Paine and Price. On the subject of commerce and luxury, whereas Paine often appears as an enthusiastic supporter of the benefits of commercial development, Price made avoidance of foreign trade and luxury one of the most persistent themes in the advice he offered to the legislators of the new nation. Consider some typical warnings by Price on these subjects;

Although foreign trade has some beneficial tendencies, particularly in checking the more exclusive and isolationist forms of patriotism, and in promoting a sense of the interdependence of nations, yet it is to be feared because it opens the door to the corruption of manners. In addition to the threat that it brings to the simple and virtuous life, the growth of trade is dangerous because unfavourable trade balances mean a loss of specie, and the use of paper currency necessitated by such a loss brings with it the threat of bankruptcy.⁵³

The varied soil and climate of America, and its network of internal communications, made trade with Europe less necessary. Nevertheless, Price was aware of the pernicious attractions of foreign commerce to the new citizens, particularly in the cities of the Eastern seaboard. He trembled when he thought

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 41–2.

⁵² See p. 180 below.

⁵³ See *Richard Price and the Ethical Foundations of the American Revolution*, edited by Peach, pp. 267–8.

of that rage for trade which is likely to prevail among them. It may do them infinite mischief. All nations are spreading snares for them and courting them to a dangerous intercourse. Their best interest requires them to guard themselves by all proper means and, particularly, by laying heavy duties on importations. But in no case will any means succeed unless aided by manners. In this instance, particularly, there is reason to fear that an increasing passion for foreign frippery will render all the best regulations ineffectual. And should this happen, that simplicity of character, that manliness of spirit, that disdain of tinsel venality in which true dignity consists, will disappear. Effeminacy, servility, and venality will enter and liberty and virtue be swallowed up in the gulf of corruption. Such may be the course of events in the American states. Better infinitely will it be for them to consist of bodies of plain and honest farmers, than of opulent and splendid merchants.⁵⁴

Once more, Price's views on this are a mirror-image of his jeremiads on urban life, public debt, paper money, and general corruption in Britain, where he took the extreme view associated with John Brown's *Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times*: 'Here we see an old state, great indeed, but inflated and irreligious, enervated by luxury, encumbered with debts, and hanging by a thread.'⁵⁵ In Burke's eyes, as we have noted, Price might seem to be the consummate mathematical metaphysician on the subject of political and civil liberty, but his social and economic opinions were expressed in a warmer republican language. They rang a warning bell for several of the leading figures in the political life of the new republic, especially Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison, all of whom were anxious, in principle at least, to retain the agrarian basis thought necessary to republican virtue by avoiding the enervating luxury to which Britain had succumbed. Maintaining that stance in practice was to prove more difficult, leading to some awkward compromises with commercial realities.

Although Paine was always an enthusiastic supporter of commerce, it is also important to recall a feature of the debate on luxury considered in an earlier essay (number 3). Since the debate was not one that required participants to make an unqualified choice between opposites, there seems little reason why such a choice should now be forced on them by historians. Thus Paine, whose 'progressive', 'liberal', and *laissez-faire* beliefs have sometimes led him to be classified as a 'bourgeois' radical, could also share some of the fears expressed by men of Price's persuasion:

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

Tis a matter worthy of observation, that the more a country is peopled, the smaller their armies are. In military numbers, the ancients far exceeded the moderns; and the reason is evident, for trade being the consequence of population, men became too much absorbed thereby to attend to any thing else. Commerce diminishes the spirit both of patriotism and military defence. And history sufficiently informs us, that the bravest achievements were always accomplished in the non-age of a nation. With the increase of commerce England hath lost its spirit.⁵⁶

It will also be clear from the essays in the first part of this book that while Smith did not endorse the anxieties of more extreme opponents of luxury, he shared Paine's fears about the decline of martial spirit in Britain and could also understand the preference for agrarian pursuits.⁵⁷ With regard to America's economic prospects, however, Smith and Paine are closer to one another than either is to Price. Price's willingness to endorse fairly standard mercantile notions on the subject of protection and the balance of trade placed him in a different camp; he was espousing precisely the autarkic programme Smith warned against on the grounds that it would retard American progress. Smith seems to have had more confidence that having started out on the right path by giving priority to agriculture and the export of foodstuffs and raw materials, only extreme folly would tempt Americans into *premature* development of manufacturing. But it would be contrary to the open-ended character of Smith's dynamic approach to growth through trade to suggest that the resources at America's disposal in 1776 would remain unchanged. What he says about the benefits of trade between the provinces of empire, of course, rules out Price's vision of an America following a policy of self-sufficiency, of minimising the entanglements of foreign trade. If wise counsels prevailed on the subject of protection and other encouragements to manufacturing, America not only met, but would continue to meet, Smith's specifications for a 'flourishing' or 'happy' state. The majority of society, as represented by its wage-earners, shared fully in the benefits of economic growth and were not oppressed by landowners and employers – slavery always excepted.

On the subject that was prominent in the fears of Price and other oppositionist writers, namely public debt, Smith had acknowledged that its increase would 'in the long run probably ruin all the great

⁵⁶ *LMW*, p. 36.

⁵⁷ See pp. 84–5, 118–19 above.

nations of Europe'.⁵⁸ One purpose of his proposals on imperial taxation was to underline the need to choose between reality and a mere project or costly 'golden dream'. If the project could not be made to pay its way, it should be given up. Nevertheless, Smith took a less cataclysmic view of British prospects than many of his contemporaries.⁵⁹ This was certainly true of Price and Paine, who must be suspected of allowing their opposition to war against the American and French revolutions to colour their predictions of impending ruin. In making his case for believing that Britain's public finances were in such a parlous condition that ruin would occur within the lifetime of the present Prime Minister, Paine had called on Smith's authority and his estimates of the growth of national debt.⁶⁰ This provoked an immediate response from a mysterious character, Joerson, possibly the *nom de plume* of an early anti-jacobin author, who charged Paine with having perverted Smith's message by making use of 'some mutilated passages' from the *Wealth of Nations*. Joerson maintained that Smith's warnings about national debt were more applicable to France than to Britain, where prosperity rested on more solid moral and economic foundations. Paine was guilty of attempting to substitute factitious monetary explanations of decline for Smith's 'real' account of the sources of British growth in terms of the productivity of its labour force and capacity to add to its capital stock.⁶¹ Whatever his political motives in countering Paine's propaganda, Joerson was probably closer in spirit to Smith's opinions. We can certainly infer that Smith would have rejected Price's diagnosis and calculations of Britain's imminent decay. It was in an answer to one of Price's opponents, George Chalmers, an ex-Loyalist and the author of a libellous biography of Paine, that Smith expressed the unfavourable opinion on Price cited in one of the epigraphs to this group of essays. Chalmers was seeking Smith's help in compiling figures based on Scottish customs returns to support his attack on Price's conclusions. By collaborating with Chalmers's project, Smith revealed his own more sanguine, possibly more 'patriotic', position.⁶² Burke, as we shall see, was to condemn 'splenetic' views of

⁵⁸ *WN*, v.iii.10.

⁵⁹ See references on p. 117 above.

⁶⁰ See *The Decline and Fall of the English System of Finance*, 1796.

⁶¹ S. A. Joerson, *Adam Smith and Thomas Paine; A Critical Essay published in all languages*, Germany, 1796, especially pp. 4, 47, 53, and 76.

⁶² See G. Chalmers, *An Estimate of the Comparative Strength of Great Britain*, 1785, especially pp. 17, 76, 158, 164, 191 for recourse to Smith's authority in refuting Price. The biography of Paine written by Chalmers in 1792 appeared under the pseudonym of W. Oldys, of Philadelphia. For Paine's knowledge of the actual author of the attack see *Rights of Man* in *LMW*, p. 457.

Britain's prospects, and to reinforce Chalmers's position when calling on Britain to commit itself more wholeheartedly to war on the French revolution.

There are hints in the *Wealth of Nations* that Smith was critical of the American colonists for their over-eagerness 'to become excessively rich'. While this might seem to echo Price's 'republican' warnings on this subject, Smith's remarks were part of his case for fiscal union under the British crown; they were an answer to the colonists' objection (echoed by Price) that remittance of imperial dues would drain the colonies of precious metals. Not only did Smith believe that the colonies were sufficiently prosperous to purchase the required amounts of specie, but he felt that an additional advantage of insisting on specie as the means of remitting imperial expenses would be its effect in dampening 'the vivacity and ardour of their excessive enterprize in the improvement of land'.⁶³ Land ought to be the object of commercial transactions, but Smith did not believe that an unrestrained banking system, employing paper money, acted as sufficient restraint on 'projectors', whose failures harmed the public interest embodied in the idea of frugality *successfully* invested. Hence Smith's willingness to support legislative curbs on the rate of interest, the subject on which Jeremy Bentham was to enter economic debate in his *Defence of Usury* as a *plus royaliste* critic of his master. But nothing in Smith's remarks on America suggests that he would have shared Price's anxieties about the American dream becoming the European nightmare. It seems much more likely that he would have regarded Price's interventionist solutions as too close to the anti-libertarian aspects of Rousseau's republicanism for comfort.

IV

The end of that phase of empire which came with the creation of the United States of America meant that Smith's *politique coloniale* – French captures the combination of politics and policy recommendation better than English – had new tasks to perform for legislators on both sides of the Atlantic, sometimes by way of direct counsel, more often by setting a standard according to which alternatives could be judged. The founding fathers faced the problem of how to create political conditions that would ensure greater freedom of commerce between the thirteen

⁶³ *WN*, v.ii.87.

ex-colonies and enable the new nation to become a credible force in international commercial dealings. This was, of course, one of the chief aims of the move from ineffective confederation to more full-blooded federation that preoccupied the constitutional convention in 1787. In less obvious ways it was also the solution to the problem of factional rancour which Smith had predicted as America's fate and to which Madison devoted so much attention in Number 10 of the *Federalist Papers*. The political rationale behind what Smith recommended as an imperial solution, an incorporating union, bears a resemblance to Madison's domestic constitutional remedy for an extended federal republic. Both schemes involved constitutional machinery designed to curb and harness factions by encompassing a wide variety of interests, thereby creating an enlarged arena within which those interests could compete and hence counterbalance one another. What stance the new republic should adopt in international affairs, and whether, as Hamilton was to argue, it should aim to become a manufacturing power, also required taking a stand on issues on which the *Wealth of Nations* was now the recognised authority. The equivalent problem for British legislators was one of deciding whether and on what terms, if any, the ex-colonies should be readmitted to the old colonial trading pattern – a subject upon which Smith was either called upon directly to give advice of a practical nature to British legislators, or on which the protagonists of alternative solutions were keen to invoke his authority.

Smith could hardly be accused of encouraging excessive optimism on the subject of free trade: 'To expect, indeed, that the freedom of trade should ever be entirely restored in Great Britain, is as absurd as to expect that an Oceana or Utopia should ever be established in it. Not only the prejudices of the publick, but what is much more unconquerable, the private interests of many individuals, irresistibly oppose it.'⁶⁴ The advice he tendered after publication recognised that prejudice and private interests were the domestic constraints within which even statesmen, let alone politicians, had to operate. It was entirely in conformity with the principles which he believed should guide the conduct of legislators that he advised a gradual, even tactical movement towards the multilateral ideal. Thus when Henry Dundas and Lord Carlisle, President of the Board of Trade, consulted him on the appropriate response to Irish agitation in favour of freedom from mercantile restrictions during the American war of independence,

⁶⁴ *WN*, iv.ii.43.

Smith advised, first, that Irish manufactures constituted no threat, even in the long term, to their English and Scottish competitors; and, secondly, that 'to crush the Industry of so great and so fine a province of the empire, in order to favour the monopoly of some particular towns in Scotland or England, is equally unjust and impolitic'. Nor would greater freedom to import goods from cheaper sources of supply harm the general interest – that represented by Great Britain – though it would 'interfere a little with our paltry monopolies'. None of the Irish demands, in fact, was unreasonable, and if, as Dundas had suggested, the legislatures of England and Ireland could only be brought into alignment by 'the proper distribution of the Loaves and fishes', Smith was prepared to suggest the names of those who could be employed in the business of distributing them – the process known politely as 'management'. Smith had advocated union of the parliaments as the best means of overcoming the division of Ireland into 'two hostile nations, the oppressors and the oppressed, the protestants and the Papists'.⁶⁵ While that premonition proved over-sanguine, Smith's prediction that Irish manufactures would offer little threat to English ones, despite lower wages, proved closer to the mark.⁶⁶

Paradoxically, with regard to the problems created by American independence, Smith's authority could be cited in support of the two opposed lines of advance that occupied legislative attention in the 1780s. The first of these was that associated pre-eminently with Shelburne, who testified that he owed his knowledge of 'the difference between light and darkness' on free trade to a coach trip he had taken with Smith in 1761.⁶⁷ In 1783, Shelburne attempted to pass a bill that would have restored the position which the ex-colonies previously held within the old colonial system.⁶⁸ It would have regulated Anglo-American commercial relations on a reciprocal basis that could be seen as enacting Smith's advice, given during the American revolt, to acquiesce in separation and, by signing 'such a treaty of commerce as would effectually secure free trade', allow Britain's cantankerous ex-subjects 'to become our most faithful, affectionate, and generous allies'.⁶⁹ There

⁶⁵ See letters to and from Dundas, 30 October and 1 November, and letter to Lord Carlisle, 8 November 1779 in *Corr.*, pp. 239–44.

⁶⁶ On this question see R. D. C. Black, 'Theory and Policy in Anglo-Irish Trade Relations, 1775–1800', *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland*, 18 (1949–50), 1–13.

⁶⁷ See letter to Stewart cited in 'Account of the Life of Adam Smith', *EPS*, p. 347.

⁶⁸ The classic study of this period is by Vincent T. Harlow, *The Founding of the Second British Empire, 1763–1793*, in two volumes, London, 1952 and 1964; on Shelburne's policy of reciprocity see 1, pp. 448–92.

⁶⁹ *WN*, iv.vii.c.66.

was also, however, a Smithian warrant for a second course of action, that chiefly espoused by Lord Sheffield, William Eden, and George Chalmers, acting more or less in concert; and it was this course that prevailed in opposition to the more 'generous' initiatives of Shelburne and Pitt. In summary form, what this alternative entailed was standing by the Navigation Acts, which, under the new dispensation, denied American ships access to the West Indies trade, while allowing the direct trade between Britain and America to be regulated on a non-discriminatory basis, thereby finding its own 'natural' level as a result of mutual trading possibilities. The warrant for this approach to the problem created by American independence in the *Wealth of Nations* was twofold: Smith's defence of the *principle* behind the Navigation Acts; and his opinion that the old colonial system had encouraged the distant trade with America to grow at the expense of opportunities for investment at home and nearer home.

Neither of the alternatives that dominated parliamentary discussion seems to have fitted Smith's own priorities exactly. The Shelburne initiative placed greater stress on the importance of safeguarding existing Anglo-American trade patterns, and the Sheffield-Eden-Chalmers approach emphasised the need to reserve the West Indies trade for British shipping to a greater extent than Smith thought necessary. On the first of these points, Smith differed from Shelburne in believing that the loss of something that had been artificially swollen by mercantile regulations could be regarded in the same light as the benefit derived from something based on a more natural pattern of trading relationships. On the second point, and unlike those who argued for the need to restrict the West Indian trade on grounds of naval defence, it seems clear that Smith would have favoured a gradual movement towards free trade on this front as well. In the *Wealth of Nations* there is a clear hint that he wished to see 'some moderate and gradual relaxation of the laws which give to Great Britain the exclusive trade to the colonies, till it is rendered in a great measure free', though he was also aware of the disruptive effect of any such relaxation and therefore counselled a policy of gradual relaxation. How the colonial trade could be opened up to other nations was something that would have to be left 'to the wisdom of future statesmen and legislators to determine'.⁷⁰ By 1783, however, Smith was still in favour of allowing the United States access to the trade with the West Indies on the terms

⁷⁰ *WN*, iv.vii.c.44. Further evidence of Smith's advisory style on such matters will be considered on pp. 203-12 below.

that applied before the revolution, pointing out, quite rightly as things turned out in the case of the West Indies, that 'restraint of commerce would hurt our loyal much more than our revolted subjects'. He acknowledged, however, that 'some people' would find this a difficult proposition to accept.⁷¹

Sheffield, Eden, and Chalmers belonged to this group, and they proved successful in aborting the Shelburne–Pitt initiatives on precisely these grounds. Sheffield's *Observations on the Commerce of the United States with Europe and the West Indies*, an influential pamphlet that went through six editions between 1783 and 1784, was to provide the basis for the position William Eden later adopted as Secretary to the Board of Trade. Both authors revealed their indebtedness to Smith, arguing the case for exceptions to free trade on grounds that accepted its rationale. Smith's willingness to collaborate with Chalmers in rejecting Price's assessment of British prospects, as noted already, suggests some sympathy with Chalmers's priorities and tactics on commercial policy. The position which this group arrived at has been labelled 'neo-mercantilist' in recognition of their separation of arguments based on opulence from those concerned with defence or national power, as well as their opposition to the cruder forms of 'balance-of-trade' mercantilism.⁷² The label seems justified as a means of indicating that occupying a mercantilist stance *after* it had been characterised and attacked by Smith could never be quite the same for those who prided themselves, as the group in question did, on being *au fait* with the best 'liberal' ideas of their time.⁷³

The 'neo-mercantilists' do appear to have been a different breed from those Smith had attacked in the *Wealth of Nations*, and there was a

⁷¹ Letter to Eden, 15 December 1783 in *Corr.*, p. 271.

⁷² The term was employed by Vincent T. Harlow in his *Founding of the Second Empire*, but more extensive use is made by John E. Crowley: see his 'Neo-Mercantilism and the *Wealth of Nations*: British Commercial Policy After the American Revolution', *Historical Journal*, 33 (1990), 339–60; and *The Privileges of Independence*, Chapter 4.

⁷³ Thus William Eden spoke of 'our friend Mr Adam Smith, whom political science may reckon a great benefactor' in *Four Letters to the Earl of Carlisle, from William Eden*, London, 1780, pp. 102–3; see also references to Hume and, implicitly, Smith on pp. 77–8, 99, 152–77, 166. See too Eden's defence of the treaty he negotiated with France: 'I am satisfied by all the sound principles of national policy that I can trace in the writings of David Hume, Adam Smith, Lord Sheffield, M. Necker etc, that it would not only have been absurd but immoral in the extreme, to have declined the present experiment, great and precarious as it may be. In the present moment it gives bread and employment, and prosperity, to millions; and as to futurity, the prospects are, at least, as good as they were': Letter to Sheffield, February, 1787 in *Journal and Correspondence of William, Lord Auckland*, London, 1861, 1, pp. 402–3. Chalmers inserted a flattering reference to Smith in his *Estimate of the Comparative Strength of Britain*, 1782, p. 211.

Smithian licence for their hard-headedness and lack of overt sympathy with the Americans, post-independence. In 1780 Smith thanked Eden for publicly endorsing the position he had adopted in the *Wealth of Nations* towards the future of the American trade, and on the increase in revenue from duties that was likely to arise from abolition of export bounties and import prohibitions.⁷⁴ As far as Britain's trade with America was concerned, Smith also agreed in minimising the anxiety about its future: 'By an equality of treatment to all nations, we might soon open a commerce with the neighbouring nations of Europe infinitely more advantageous than that of so distant a country as America.'⁷⁵ This was one of the chief messages of Sheffield's *Observations*, though it was argued with an arrogance that, in attempting to boost British pride, seems to have been calculated to wound American susceptibilities, thereby helping to confirm suspicions that Britain was determined to pursue a punitive line in all trade negotiations.⁷⁶

Smith's appreciation of the priority of defence over opulence in the case of the Navigation Acts has ensured that his statement on this subject features in all accounts of his patriotic credentials, even to the point of making them nationalistic or imperialistic concerns.⁷⁷ Smith also addressed himself to the important second-best questions connected with life in an imperfect world in which nations were in conflict and possessed different weights in international trade and commercial diplomacy – the situation faced by American legislators after the break with Britain. For example, it would not be prudent, Smith felt, for small nations to make unilateral moves towards free trade when larger ones were not willing to take the lead: 'The very bad policy of one country may thus render it in some measure dangerous and imprudent to establish what would otherwise be the best policy in another.'⁷⁸ He

⁷⁴ In Eden's *Four Letters to the Earl of Carlisle*, see letter from Smith to Eden, 3 January 1780 in *Corr.*, pp. 244–6.

⁷⁵ See letter to Eden, 15 December 1783 in *Corr.*, pp. 271–2.

⁷⁶ For James Madison's reaction to Sheffield's pamphlet see letter to Edmund Randolph, 30 August 1783 in *The Writings of James Madison*, edited by Gaillard Hunt, New York, 1903, II, pp. 11–12; and Tench Coxe, *A Brief Examination of Lord Sheffield's Observations on the Commerce of the American States*, Philadelphia, 1791.

⁷⁷ The imperialist interpretations were more common at the end of the nineteenth century when the subject of imperial federation was once more on the British political agenda; see J. S. Nicholson, *A Project of Empire; A Critical Study of the Economics of Imperialism with special reference to the work of Adam Smith*, London, 1909. Modern interpretations of Smith based on the concept of 'free trade imperialism' can be found in B. Semmel, *The Rise of Free Trade Imperialism*; and M. Panic, *National Management of the International Economy*, London, 1988, Chapter 7, significantly entitled 'The Doctrine of Free Trade: Internationalism or Disguised Mercantilism'.

⁷⁸ *WN*, iv.v.b.39.

was also fully aware of the possibilities of using tariffs as a retaliatory device to force reductions by other countries – again a situation which had distinct bearing on the attempts of a new nation to counter the effects of finding itself excluded from the new colonial system being forged by British legislators.

That Smith's advice was not designed for an idealised world certainly sheds light on Hamilton's *Report on Manufactures* published in 1791. Hamilton paid Smith the supreme compliment of plagiarising him on all matters where his support could be mobilised: for example, in opposing physiocratic notions of the superiority of agriculture, and when urging the benefits of the division of labour and machinery in manufacturing. The flattery was no less evident in Hamilton's acceptance that Smith's statement of general cosmopolitan principles provided the appropriate background against which his own case for practical exceptions that fitted American circumstances should be argued.⁷⁹ Hamilton's performance was in these respects like that of the English 'neo-mercantilists' – not so much one that aimed at turning the clock back to a pre-*Wealth of Nations* form of mercantilism, as is often alleged, but a thoroughly post-Smithian position, even though his conclusions clashed with Smith's diagnosis of America's immediate natural advantages. This judgement applies equally to Friedrich List, a German admirer of Hamilton, whose *Outlines of a New System of Political Economy*, published not long after his arrival in America in 1827, became a dry run for a more famous work on *The National System of Political Economy* published in 1841. List sought to unmask the perfidious Albion origins and influence of Smith's thinking by arguing that Britain had achieved her national identity by free-trading means that denied it to others – the latecomers in the race to acquire the power that went with manufacturing capacity. Yet neither Hamilton's report nor List's book would be conceivable without their natural target and complement, what List described as Smith's 'cosmopolitical economy'.

Whatever his precise opinion on these subjects might have been, Smith would certainly have had less difficulty in understanding the dilemmas confronting his early American critics and admirers than he would if faced by their modern American equivalents, especially those who are anxious to claim that, particularly after 1800, Jeffersonian democracy was permeated by 'liberalism' of a Smithian or 'bourgeois'

⁷⁹ See Hamilton's *Report*, together with editorial selections of those parts of the *Wealth of Nations* which were being paraphrased, in *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, edited by Harold C. Syrett, New York, 1966, x, pp. 230–362.

variety.⁸⁰ Smith's support for 'regal government' and his lack of sympathy for some features of the form of government the Americans had espoused could also prove embarrassing to those late twentieth-century neo-liberal admirers who interpret the American constitution as the embodiment of *laissez-faire* principles.⁸¹ The only safe historical conclusion on such matters seems to be a negative one: for Smith himself there was no one-to-one relationship between the system of natural liberty and specific forms of government. The benefits of commerce could be achieved under either monarchical or republican governments, provided that basic issues of civil liberty, defined as security under the rule of law, were guaranteed. This was the only contribution that Britain had made to the founding of America, but it was also the most important one. Though lacking excitement as a conclusion, this conforms with the anti-utopian features of Smith's science of the legislator dealt with earlier. Consideration of the implications of the French revolution, along similar comparative lines, will make clear just how deep these features run in Smith.

There may also be room for a more positive conclusion. Political economy, as recently codified by the *Wealth of Nations*, provided a transatlantic *lingua franca* for articulating the dilemmas of the new nation – one that was not the exclusive property of 'liberals' or those who held what have come to be known for their 'republican' attitudes, where the latter turn on the preservation of republican 'virtue' and are best illustrated from what has been said above by Price's opinions. Keeping the 'liberals' and 'republicans' rigidly in the separate cages to which they have sometimes been assigned has proved increasingly difficult.⁸²

⁸⁰ The 'liberal' interpretation is most clearly represented in Joyce Oldham Appleby, *Capitalism and a New Social Order*; see also I. Kramnick, *Republicanism and Bourgeois Radicalism*, notably the essay on 'Republican Revisionism'; John R. Nelson, *Liberty and Property; Political Economy and Policy-Making in the New Nation, 1789–1812*, Baltimore, 1987; and, from a different political perspective, Thomas Pangle, *The Spirit of Modern Republicanism: The Moral Vision of the American Founders and the Philosophy of Locke*, Chicago, 1988.

⁸¹ See, for example, the public choice school of thought, best represented by J. M. Buchanan, who base their view of 'constitutional economics' on Smith; see Buchanan's article on this topic in *The New Palgrave Dictionary of Economics* edited by J. Eatwell, M. Milgate, and P. Newman, London, 1987. Neo-liberal contributions to the bicentennial celebrations of the constitution also stressed the affinities, as in the following claim: 'Smith's work provided the view of human nature that was the guiding vision for the Framers. His ideas exposed the possibilities for structuring a government that allowed the rational self-interest of the citizenry to act like an "invisible hand", through which individual economic actors facilitate the common good by pursuing their own goals'; see Jonathan R. Macey, 'Competing Economic Views of the Constitution', *George Washington Law Review*, 56 (1987), 54–5.

⁸² See for example John Ashworth's review article on 'Jeffersonians: Classical Republicans or Liberal Capitalists?', *Journal of American Studies*, 18 (1984), 425–35. Another recent study begins

All sides in the American debate employed the medium of political economy to explore the most basic questions surrounding national identity. It may also be worth pointing out that political economy performed similar functions in British debate, despite the fact that – Ireland partially excepted – national identity was not such a crucial issue. Madison and Jefferson, in common with Price, might see Britain, with its teeming manufacturing towns, as a negative image for America, but Madison in particular was willing to accept that this might eventually be America's fate, whatever was done to postpone the evil day.⁸³

As we shall see, such speculations about what history had in store were not confined to the new nation. The first four decades of American nationhood coincide with British attempts to come to terms with the puzzling signs that their own economic destiny was without historical precedent and possibly fraught with danger. The facts are familiar enough to us, but coming to terms with them was the main challenge to the first post-Smithian generation of political economists. Britain had become the world's leading commercial and manufacturing nation, with an increasing proportion of its population living in new urban centres. After the census evidence appeared in 1801, its population was revealed to be doubling every fifty-five years instead of the three to five hundred years that was believed to prevail a few decades earlier. At the same time it became clear that Britain was entering into the dangerous waters of becoming a net importer of basic foodstuffs – a fact of life, which, like that of the rate of population increase, Smith did not, and perhaps could not, encompass. Indeed, the change on this front was so slow and uneven, with importation often seeming to be only an extraordinary expedient during periods of scarcity, that contemporary comment on it is hard to find until the trend had been firmly established. Dependence on foreign supplies of food may have been true of some earlier commercial republics such as Venice, but these precedents were not comforting to a nation with Britain's agricultural potential and weight in international affairs. Add to this that Britain was almost continually at war for the period in which these trends were becoming known, placing an added burden on her public finances; and that rising population seemed to go hand in hand with increasing costs of producing food at home, a rapid rise in the

by abandoning the search for exclusive alternatives; see Cathy D. Matson and Peter S. Onuf, *A Union of Interests; Political and Economic Thought in Revolutionary America*, Lawrence, 1990.

⁸³ See Drew McCoy, *The Elusive Republic*, pp. 104–19, 128–32, 255–9.

proportion of her population in manufacturing employments, and steeply rising expenditure on pauperism under the Poor Laws, and it seems a gross understatement to say that the signs were puzzling.

Later essays will show that political economists were frequently divided between those who sought to embrace the new course on which Britain seemed to be embarked, and those, like Malthus, who saw it, at the beginning of his career at least, as the onset of 'premature old age'. Indeed, to anticipate a later argument, one could say that Malthus devoted a great deal of his effort as a political economist to thinking of ways of reinstating the world Smith had taken for granted. It will also be one of the underlying arguments in what follows that political economy served as more than a technocratic blueprint for achieving opulence – a mere calculus of economic costs and benefits that left the human or moral dimension to one side.⁸⁴ Although the amateur devotees of the science achieved credibility by tackling 'technical' questions connected with debt, taxation, and monetary and commercial policy, political economy would not have been responding to contemporary social and political concerns if it had not gone beyond such matters to encompass more profound issues of a moral kind. 'Virtue', and the conditions under which what Smith had referred to as 'character' could be preserved, was more frequently invoked in American debates – a reflection of the fact that, as Montesquieu and Rousseau had reminded the Americans, virtue had always been seen as the animating spirit of republics. But the idea expressed by virtue was not absent from British debates, despite the fact that her emergence as a manufacturing nation, virtually without parallel, made the use of classical models seem less relevant than they were to the nation that had recently – and in Smith's view, 'rashly' – abandoned its regal form of government.

⁸⁴ In this respect I am questioning the contrast between Britain and America erected by Joyce Oldham Appleby in *Capitalism and a New Social Order*, where she says that whereas Jeffersonians saw the *Wealth of Nations* as 'the blueprint for a society of economically progressive, socially equal, and politically competent citizens', in England, with its 'conspicuous social distinctions', political economy could serve only 'as a device for understanding how nations grow wealthy through trade'; see p. 60 and pp. 14, 50, 59–60.

Burke's creed: politics, chivalry and superstition

I beg leave to subscribe my assent to Mr. Burke's creed on the revolution of France. I admire his eloquence, I approve his politics, I adore his chivalry, and I can almost excuse his reverence for church establishments.

Edward Gibbon, *Autobiography*

I

Gibbon's finely honed appreciation of Burke's *Reflections* serves here merely as a convenient agenda. Does the evidence allow one to say that Smith would have joined Gibbon in assenting to Burke's 'creed' on the French revolution? Would he have supported Burke's 'chivalry'? Would he have shared Gibbon's reservations about Burke's enthusiasm for church establishments – what Gibbon referred to, in a less-guarded formulation, reflecting his own scepticism in religious matters, as Burke's 'superstition'?¹ Since Smith died just before the *Reflections* appeared, answers to such questions clearly involve conjecture. As in the previous essay, however, while some conclusions may have to remain speculative, the comparisons involved in reaching them have an interest of their own.

Before dealing with some aspects of Burke's well-known attack on the French revolution and its English supporters, an indirect entry into the subject can be made via Smith's extensive revisions to the fifth edition of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Smith began this process seriously in 1788 by taking four months' leave from his post as Commissioner of Customs. He first told his publisher that the most important additions would be to Part III on the sense of duty and the final part on the history of moral philosophy. By this time, aged sixty-

¹ 'I can even forgive his superstition'; see *The Letters of Edward Gibbon*, edited by J. E. Norton, 3 volumes, London, 1956, III, p. 216.

two, he regarded 'tenure of this life as extremely precarious', complaining that he had become 'a slow a very slow workman, who do and undo everything I write at least half a dozen times before I can be tolerably pleased with it'.² A year later he was still 'labouring very hard' on the revisions, and having damaged his health in the process had decided to return to the Customs House 'for the sake of relaxation and a much easier Business'. Going well beyond what he had earlier reported as his intention, he had now written a completely new part for the work (a new Part VI), which he described as 'containing a practical system of Morality, under the title of the Character of Virtue', the general effect of which was to stress the earlier treatment given to prudence, conscience, and self-command by according them more extensive and warmer treatment.³ The manuscript was sent to the publisher at the beginning of the winter of 1789 (no firmer date can be assigned), some months after the fall of the Bastille in July, and possibly after Richard Price's sermon was delivered in November. Smith could well have still been doing and undoing his work over this period, and it has been suggested that some paragraphs in Part VI can be read as commentary on French events in general and Price's sermon in particular.⁴

Given Smith's extensive French contacts and interests, it seems likely that he kept a close eye on the course of events in France. Although letters during this period are sparse, he received at least one from France that was optimistic about the likely outcome of commercial and other reforms undertaken during Calonne's ministry (1783-7) – reforms for which Turgot had laid a foundation when serving, apparently without permanent success, as Louis XVI's Comptroller-General of Finances in 1774-6. Dupont de Nemours, Turgot's confidant, was Smith's correspondent on this occasion. Enclosing a copy of his defence of the Anglo-French trade treaty concluded in 1786, and apologising for its modest aims, Dupont reported confidently on wider political

² Letter to Thomas Cadell, 15 March 1788, *Corr.*, p. 311.

³ Letter to Thomas Cadell, 31 March 1789, *Corr.*, p. 320. See editorial comment on this in *TMS*, pp. 18-20. Connected as they are with the problem of reconciling *TMS* and *WN*, the 1790 additions have become the subject of much scholarly debate; see Lawrence Dickey, 'Historicizing the "Adam Smith Problem": Conceptual, Historiographical, and Textual Issues', *Journal of Modern History*, 58 (1986), 579-609. D. D. Raphael's detailed response to Dickey's claims that the 1790 revisions represent a significant change of position expand on his editorial remarks in the introduction to *TMS*; see 'Adam Smith 1790: the Man Recalled; The Philosopher Revived', in P. Jones and A. S. Skinner (eds.), *Adam Smith Reviewed*, Edinburgh, 1992, pp. 93-118.

⁴ See editorial comments in *TMS*, pp. 18-19 and notes to pp. 229, 231.

developments as follows: 'Nous marchons avec rapidité à une bonne constitution, qui contribuera ensuite à perfectionner même celle de votre Patrie; et les bons principes après être quelques tems concentrés entre les États unis d'Amérique, la France et l'Angleterre, se répandront enfin jusques sur les autres nations.' Dupont ended on a complimentary note by telling Smith that, along with Turgot and the *économistes*: 'Vous avez beaucoup hâté cette utile revolution.'⁵

There was certainly a good deal of French interest shown in Smith's works immediately before and after his death in July 1790, close to the first anniversary of the fall of the Bastille and not long after the sixth edition of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* appeared. A second French translation of the *Wealth of Nations* was begun in 1790, which went into a second edition just as a third translation was begun by Germain Garnier four years later. Condorcet – whose wife, Sophie de Grouchy, had begun her translation of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* in 1786 – prepared a lengthy summary of the *Wealth of Nations* that was published in 1791. A more extensive commentary by Condorcet was promised at the same time, but never delivered.⁶ By contrast, to judge from a sneering obituary of Smith that appeared in *The Times*, the London response was far cooler than that of Paris, especially, perhaps, in those circles that had been offended by Smith's revelation of his sympathy for Hume's scepticism in religious matters and his attack on the University of Oxford in the *Wealth of Nations*.⁷ *The Times* obituarist made a special point of stressing irreligion by saying that Smith 'had early become a disciple of Voltaire in matters of religion' – a remark that was perhaps not quite as innocuous in 1790 as it might have been a few years before.

The English reaction to abstract principles as a guide to legislative conduct was to become even cooler as the turn of events in France appeared to confirm Burke's predictions. The British response took a

⁵ Letter to Smith, 19 June 1788, *Corr.*, p. 313.

⁶ For an account of the French reception and use of the *Wealth of Nations* involving Condorcet in particular see the contributions by Daniel Diatkine and Takaho Ando to a conference held in 1990, now published as H. Mizuta and C. Sugiyama (eds.), *Adam Smith; International Perspectives*, London, 1993, pp. 199–213.

⁷ Thus on 4 August, *The Times* obituarist spoke of Smith's 'laboured eulogium on the stoical end of David Hume', and, on 14 August, of the 'liberality with which [Smith] *thought* himself treated at Balliol College' (emphasis added), going on to stress the advantages that Smith's education in England had conferred on him. Smith's knowledge of the French *encyclopédistes*, admiration for Hume, and denigration of Johnson was treated as typical of the 'opinions, or rather prejudices' common in Scotland, which had 'conspired with Dr. Smith's merit, in rendering him a very fashionable Professor'. As we have noted, Smith's criticism of Oxford was one of the reasons given by Boswell for breaking off relations with Smith; see n. 12 p. 39 above.

more critical turn after the September massacres in 1792, followed by the execution of Louis XVI in December, and by the declaration of war in the following February. Condorcet was thought to be implicated in the September massacres, and Dugald Stewart found himself under pressure to withdraw the favourable mention he had given to Condorcet's *Life of Turgot* in his writings. While Stewart made apologies, he did not fully comply with this request; he also retained the doctrine of 'perfectibility' pretty much in the form given to it by Condorcet, upholding it as an ideal that should act as a guide to long-term legislative goals and aspirations.⁸ Nevertheless, public pressures did lead Stewart to curtail part of his memoir on Smith delivered in 1793 for reasons that he felt able to acknowledge only much later.

when this memoir was read before the Royal Society of Edinburgh, it was not unusual, even among men of some talents and information, to confound, studiously, the speculative doctrines of Political Economy, with those discussions of first principles of Government which happened unfortunately at that time to agitate the public mind. The doctrine of a Free Trade was itself represented as of a revolutionary tendency.⁹

Stewart, the first public teacher of political economy in Britain, was to lead a strategic retreat in the face of such hostility by distinguishing between 'plans of new constitutions' and 'enlightening the policy of actual legislation', and by claiming that concern with the latter conformed with the priorities of Smith's science of the legislator. In the hostile climate created by the French revolution it may have been prudent for Stewart to adopt this strategy. Speaking for those who adopted a less prudent, more revolutionary point of view, Paine had criticised Montesquieu, Quesnay, and Turgot (and possibly Smith, by implication) for following this line: 'their writings abound with moral maxims of government, but are rather directed to economise and reform the administration of the government, than the government itself.'¹⁰ Under the watchful eye of Napoleon, Jean-Baptiste Say, who was to become Smith's leading French disciple, had formally announced the divorce between politics and political economy.¹¹ Although the decree *nisi* never became absolute, some of Smith's

⁸ This episode is dealt with at greater length in Collini *et al.*, *That Noble Science of Politics*, pp. 32-44.

⁹ See 'Account of the Life of Adam Smith' in *EPS*, p. 339.

¹⁰ *Rights of Man* in *LMW*, p. 299.

¹¹ 'On a long-temps confondu la *Politique* proprement dite, la science de l'organisation des sociétés, avec l'*Économie politique* qui enseigne comment se forment, se distribuent et se consomment les richesses. Cependant les richesses sont essentiellement indépendantes de

English successors were attracted, for methodological if not prudential reasons, to a narrower version of the scope of political economy, as well as to a judicious separation of questions of 'science' from those involved in the 'art' of legislation.¹² That such a move would not have commended itself to Smith is obvious from everything said so far. Maintaining, on substantive or empirical grounds, that economy and polity were not irrevocably bound to one another when dealing with forms of government in which security under the rule of law was guaranteed did not require acceptance of this non-substantive (methodological) edict. Nevertheless, it is still worth returning to the hints of what Smith's position might have been on the French revolution to gauge how far Stewart was reflecting Smith's own priorities rather than revealing his own apprehensions under unpropitious circumstances.

The firmest hints relate to Price. In 1785, as we have noted, Smith's verdict on Price had been unfavourable on all counts. Smith possessed many of Price's writings on morals, politics, and the political arithmetic of national debt and population. His criticism of Price's factiousness as a citizen could well have been a general comment on Price's *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty* or his *Two Tracts on Civil Liberty*, works published during the American crisis which were bound together in Smith's library. This conforms with what we know about Smith's views on the constitutional questions raised by the American revolt, and it establishes a potential bond with Burke on the equivalent issues raised by the French revolution. As we have seen, long before the revolutions in America and France had lent political significance to Price's opinions, Burke and Smith were united in opposing the kind of rationalism in morals that Price espoused. Burke had upheld the view that 'the senses are the great originals of all our ideas' in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* in 1757, and continued to follow Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume, and Smith in maintaining that the passions and instincts were superior to reason as a guide to moral judgement and conduct. This accounts for the enthusiasm with which he greeted Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* when it was first published; he described it as 'one of the most beautiful fabrics of moral theory, that has perhaps ever appeared'.¹³ Clearly, agreement

l'organisation politique. Sous toutes les formes de gouvernement, un état peut prospérer, s'il est bien administré.' See *Traité d'économie politique*, 1803, Discours préliminaire, p. ix.

¹² See Collini et al., *That Noble Science of Politics*, pp. 67-89; and T. W. Hutchison, *'Positive' Economics and Policy Objectives*, London, 1964, Chapter 1.

¹³ Burke's review of *TMS* appeared in the *Annual Register*, 1759; see also the letter he wrote to Smith, 10 September 1759 in *Corr.*, pp. 46-7.

between Smith and Burke on such matters could be of some consequence to their reactions to what the latter described as Price's 'porridge of various political opinions'. Thus in addition to rejecting Price's historical interpretation of the English constitution established in 1688 as conferring a popular right to cashier kings and make and unmake governments, Burke was pursuing the attack on a political view of human nature which he had begun in his *Letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol*. The simplicity or self-evident character of the moral truths enshrined in Price's account of the rights of man were *merely* speculative – 'metaphysically true, they are morally and politically false'.¹⁴ In a larger sense, of course, Burke's entire position in the *Reflections* was a defence of those generous natural instincts, sympathies, and prejudices that supported the present order and were threatened by the abstract, metaphysical mentality of the French reformers and their English supporters – with the latter being held guilty of attempting to import alien ideas into the discussion of English affairs during a period when they could be regarded as factious at best and seditious at worst.¹⁵

Smith's general antagonism to Price as a moralist can be extended to cover a difference of emphasis in their respective accounts of patriotism. For Price, the Christian doctrine of universal benevolence or international brotherhood took precedence.¹⁶ Any partiality towards our own country should be qualified by the application of universal notions of right and liberty that made it a citizenly duty to criticise defects in national institutions. Even if Smith was not in fact responding to Price's sermon on *Love of our Country* in the 1790 additions, reacting to the particular application it had as part of a welcome to events in France, there can be no question of his sharing Price's views on this matter: 'We do not love our country merely as a part of the great society of mankind: we love it for its own sake, and independently of any such consideration.' Smith was not, of course, commending 'national prejudices and hatreds', but he was maintaining that the

¹⁴ See *Reflections* in *WS*, VIII, p. 112.

¹⁵ 'We ought not, on either side of the water, to suffer ourselves to be imposed upon by the counterfeit wares which some persons, by double fraud, export to you in illicit bottoms as raw commodities of British growth, though wholly alien to our soil, in order afterwards to smuggle them back again into this country, manufactured after the newest Paris fashion of an improved liberty': *Reflections* in *WS*, VIII, p. 76.

¹⁶ 'I have observed at the beginning of this discourse that [Christ] did not inculcate upon his hearers the love of their country or take any notice of it as a part of their duty. Instead of doing this, I observed that he taught the obligation to love all mankind and recommended universal benevolence as (next to the love of God) our first duty': see *A Discourse on the Love of our Country* in *Richard Price: Political Writings*, edited by D. O. Thomas, p. 194.

interests of the wider community of mankind were better served 'by directing the principal attention of each individual to that particular portion of it, which was most within the sphere both of his abilities and of his understanding'.¹⁷ On this matter at least, Smith and Burke were at one in rehearsing issues that were to become prominent in the post-revolutionary debates provoked by Godwin's version of Price's doctrines of rational and universal benevolence.¹⁸

Confirmation of Smith's opposition to Price's neo-Lockean stress on rights of resistance, noted in the previous essay, can be found in other statements which appeared in all editions of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. For example, it can be seen in Smith's account of the natural sympathy evinced by the fortunes and misfortunes of monarchs: 'That kings are the servant of the people, to be obeyed, resisted, deposed, or punished, as the public conveniency may require, is the doctrine of reason and philosophy; but it is not the doctrine of Nature.'¹⁹ With a good deal more pathos added, this could have served as the basis for Burke's rhetorical treatment of the injuries suffered by Marie Antoinette and the French royal family, with its condemnation of Price and others for their failure to show natural sympathy towards the victims of revolutionary violence. Smith's 1790 additions stress the corruption of our moral sentiments entailed in deference toward the rich and powerful, but they also repeat and emphasise that:

Nature has wisely judged that the distinction of ranks, the peace and order of society, would rest more securely upon the plain and palpable difference of birth and fortune, than upon the invisible and often uncertain difference of wisdom and virtue. The undistinguishing eyes of the great mob of mankind can well enough perceive the former: it is with difficulty that the nice discernment of the wise and virtuous can sometimes distinguish the latter.²⁰

Any rapid equation of Smith's 'great mob of mankind' with Burke's 'swinish multitude' would be gratuitous. From what has been said earlier, however, it is clear that any egalitarian stress on the natural rights of individuals in Smith has to be sought in his natural jurispru-

¹⁷ *TMS*, vi.ii.2.4.

¹⁸ See pp. 251, 257-8, 259-60 below.

¹⁹ *TMS*, i.iii.2.3. Compare this with Burke's statement that 'we look up with awe to kings, with affection to parliaments, with duty to magistrates, with reverence to priests, and with respect to nobility. Why? Because when such ideas are brought before our minds, it is *natural* to be so affected; because all other feelings are false and spurious and tend to corrupt our minds.' *Reflections* in *WS*, viii, pp. 137-8.

²⁰ *TMS*, vi.ii.1.20, which can be compared with i.iii.3, another chapter added in 1790 to stress the corruption involved in the disposition to admire the rich and powerful.

dence rather than in his view of forms of government and the means for their preservation.

The 1790 additions also describe the 'constitution' of any state in kinetic terms, as a shifting balance that has to be struck between the different 'orders and societies' of which it is composed, with the ability of each order 'to maintain its own powers, privileges, and immunities, against the encroachments of every other' having a major part to play in determining its stability. Although the partiality we feel for our own order 'may sometimes be unjust' and obstructive of improvements, by checking 'the spirit of innovation' this disposition contributes to 'the stability and permanency of the whole system'.²¹ It does not seem to be straining one's hearing to find echoes of this in Burke's praise for the 'little platoons', and his treatment of the preservative properties of prejudice in the *Reflections*.²²

Smith's train of argument continues by stating that our love of country depends on two principles which 'in peaceable and quiet times' are in harmony: 'a certain respect and reverence for that constitution or form of government which is actually established', and 'an earnest desire to render the condition of our fellow-citizens as safe, respectable and happy as we can'. These principles of authority and a sense of public utility are the ones that Smith, following Hume, employed as more soundly based experiential alternatives to the presuppositions of the idea of an original contract. Normally they supported one another, but in 1790 Smith envisaged conflict during periods of 'public discontent, faction, and disorder', when 'even a wise man may be disposed to think some alteration necessary' in order 'to maintain the public tranquillity'. (Note the 'even' here, suggesting the proverbial rushing tendencies of fools.) Under such conditions 'it often requires the highest effort of political wisdom to determine when a real patriot ought to support and endeavour to re-establish the authority of the old system, and when he ought to give way to the more daring, but often dangerous spirit of innovation'. The choice made by Burke in these circumstances is obvious. Smith did not live to make the same choice, and might not have felt called upon as philosopher to defend his position publicly had he done so. Against this, however, must be noted

²¹ *TMS*, vi.ii.2.7-9.

²² Compare the quotations from *TMS* in the text with the following statement in the *Reflections*: 'To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle of public affections. It is the first link in the series by which we proceed toward a love to our country and to mankind'; see *WS*, viii, pp. 97-8.

another feature of the 1790 additions: Smith's stress on the 'superior prudence' of 'the great general, of the great statesman, of the great legislator' – of those qualities, in short, that could be acquired and displayed only in public life. With this as background, the following statement – also part of the additions – takes on added point: 'The most sublime speculation of the contemplative philosopher can scarce compensate the neglect of the smallest active duty.'²³ Smith might not be able to share Ferguson's zeal in political and military affairs, but he was by no means indifferent to public roles, especially during times of discontent.

Resolution of the dilemma posed by conflict between the authority and utility principles – if resolution is not too strong a word – comes in the well-known peroration cited earlier, but which bears repetition in this context. Smith makes a favourable contrast between the man of 'public spirit' who respects the 'established powers and privileges even of individuals, and still more those of the great orders and societies, into which the state is divided', even when he regards them as 'in some measure abusive', and the 'man of system' who arrogantly attempts to implement his 'ideal plan of government' in every detail, without regard to 'the great interests, or to the strong prejudices which may oppose it'.²⁴ It has been suggested by Smith's editors that Price, once more, could have been Smith's target when writing this passage. What makes the identification of Price as Smith's target difficult to sustain, however, is the succeeding and concluding paragraph, where Smith shifts from 'the legislature' to 'royal reformers' and 'sovereign princes' as the most dangerous kind of 'political speculators'.²⁵ They are most prone to arrogance in attempting to remove all obstructions to their plans of reform. The reference to 'the authority of the nobility', and taking away 'the privileges of cities and provinces', seems to shift the focus of attack towards exactly those reforms which centralising monarchs, adopting the advice of philosopher-administrators such as Turgot, had attempted in France during the previous two decades. On the basis of this paragraph alone, one could be forgiven for thinking that Smith was defending Montesquieu's *thèse nobiliaire*. Alternatively, the remarks seem equally consistent with the view that Smith was

²³ *TMS*, vi.i.3.6. On 'superior prudence' see vi.i.15.

²⁴ *TMS*, vi.ii.2.11–17.

²⁵ These references have been noted as a source of 'ambiguity' in Smith's position by D. D. Raphael in a later work on 'Enlightenment and Revolution', in N. MacCormick and Z. Bankowski (eds.), *Enlightenment, Rights, and Revolution; Essays in Legal and Political Philosophy*, Aberdeen, 1989, pp. 12–13.

upholding the claims of those aristocratic and clerical orders that had successfully called for the first States-General in France – the body that was quickly swallowed up in the National Assembly whose measures were to be anatomised and anathematised by Burke.

These speculations are merely that: they are mentioned only to show that it is impossible to infer anything about Smith's views on current affairs from these parts of Smith's text. Nevertheless, even if we suppose that Smith was *not* writing with contemporary French events in mind when he composed this section, attentive readers could hardly derive much support for radical constitutional change or experimentation. They might even conclude that Smith had become thoroughly 'illiberal' in his final years, but only by ignoring the fact that he was merely emphasising long-held opinions. Bearing in mind Smith's description of the new part added to the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* as 'a practical system of Morality', it would seem that Stewart, in cautious vein, was not misrepresenting Smith's priorities, and that those who stress the connections between Smith and Burke are on safer ground than those who wish to emphasise the 'liberal', radical, or pro-revolutionary affiliations of some of Smith's English and French admirers. Smith was completing his revisions at the same time Burke was composing his *Reflections*. The difference between Smith's irenic concern for balance and Burke's passionate denunciation of the revolution could hardly be more marked. Yet both texts contain the same attitude towards those who sought to remodel political institutions on the basis of rationalistic notions of right, without regard for existing interests. Perhaps the two men really did see eye to eye without communication – on 'first principles' and what Burke called the 'science of constructing a commonwealth' at least.

II

Before one can assess whether Smith would have joined Gibbon in admiring Burke's 'chivalry', of course, another issue stands in the way: what did Gibbon mean by the term? Like so many readers of the *Reflections*, then and now, he could simply have been impressed by the extravagance of the sentiments expressed in Burke's set-piece on the unchivalrous indignities inflicted on Marie Antoinette. Gibbon had some personal reasons for feeling threatened by Parisian events, living as he did among aristocratic *émigrés* in Lausanne. At a more profound level, he could readily equate these events with the barbarism and

fanaticism which he had recorded as both cause and legacy of the end of Rome's empire.²⁶ Gibbon also probably recognised that one aspect of Burke's invocation of chivalry was derived from those histories of politeness and civility pioneered by Scottish historians. Gibbon had modelled himself to some extent on Hume and William Robertson as historians, flattering them by not *presuming* to be the third element in this triumvirate.²⁷ As he wrote to Adam Ferguson from London on one occasion: 'I have always looked up with the most sincere respect towards the northern part of our island, whither taste and philosophy seemed to have retired from the smoke and hurry of this immense capital.'²⁸

Burke was acquainted with the same sources, having probably reviewed Robertson's works in the *Annual Review* and corresponded with him on matters of historical interpretation.²⁹ In the *Reflections* Burke could have been recalling a theme that featured in Robertson's *View of the Progress of Society in Europe* (1769) in particular, but was also stressed by John Millar in his *Origin of the Distinction of Ranks* (1771), in which the treatment of women was made the touchstone for improvements in manners. The theme was specific to the European experience of feudalism, namely the refinement of feeling, especially as revealed in knightly conduct towards women, during the late chivalric period of feudalism. For Burke, therefore, 'ancient chivalry' connoted that 'mixed system of opinion and sentiment' which had 'given its character to modern Europe'. It had been expressed in the 'old feudal and chivalrous spirit of fealty', and was still to be found in the 'spirit of a gentleman and the spirit of religion'.³⁰ It has been convincingly argued that the specifically Burkean twist to this appeal to feudal origins lay in the suggestion that those other civilising agencies celebrated by Scottish historians, namely commerce, manufacturing, and the rise of the arts and sciences, might not survive the onslaught being mounted on them across the Channel.³¹

Smith's role in all this as historian of civil society is at once central and problematic. Millar's inspiration can almost certainly be attributed

²⁶ See *Letters of Gibbon*, III, p. 321; Burrow, *Gibbon*, pp. 15, 65; and P. B. Craddock, *Edward Gibbon, Luminous Historian, 1772-94*, Baltimore, 1989, pp. 292, 312-13.

²⁷ See Gibbon's *Memoir of my Life and Writings*, edited by G. A. Bonnard, London, 1966, p. 158.

²⁸ *Letters of Gibbon*, II, p. 100.

²⁹ See especially letter to Robertson, 9 June 1777 in Burke, *Corr.*, III, pp. 350-3.

³⁰ *Reflections* in *WS*, VIII, pp. 127-30.

³¹ The argument is that of J. G. A. Pocock; see *Virtue, Commerce and History*, pp. 196-9; and his introduction to *Reflections*, pp. xxxii-xxxiii.

to Smith's lectures on jurisprudence which he attended as a student at Glasgow. Before the discovery of student notes on these lectures, Millar's account was the main source for understanding how Smith had gone about his task.³² In a less obvious way, Smith may also have played a part in Robertson's *View of the Progress of Society*: he certainly charged Robertson with borrowing his ideas without adequate acknowledgment.³³ We can also infer from Gibbon's use of Smith's arguments in Book III of the *Wealth of Nations* that this part of the work had become a repository for a particular kind of interpretation of the impact of commercial luxury on feudalism.³⁴

Nevertheless, the theme of chivalric manners does not feature in any version of Smith's history of the feudal episode in European history. Nor, as we shall see in the next section, does clerical support for the revival of learning play a part in Smith's parallel account of the history of church establishments. In plain summary form, the two main arguments Smith advances in Book III are, first, on the slow progress of opulence, a demonstration of how feudal dependency and the laws of primogeniture retarded agricultural improvement, creating circumstances in which commerce could not thrive; and, secondly, how the rivalry between the feudal barony and the monarchy for power had disturbed domestic peace and made it impossible to establish and administer the rule of law impartially – with Hume's *History of England* being credited as the best treatment of the second theme. It was not until the power of the feudal barony was undermined through the spread of commerce and manufacturing, leaving the field clear for absolute monarchy, that the peace and prosperity first experienced in the towns, partly as a result of royal patronage, was extended to the countryside. The Mandevillian irony employed by Smith in telling this story left little room for improvements in manners of the type Burke was invoking in the *Reflections*. There is a reference in the lectures to 'military manners' involving improvements in the treatment of prisoners of war, but feudalism is chiefly associated with 'disorderly manners' and 'servile dependency upon ... superiors'.³⁵ Feudal aristocracy had no redeeming features: it was consistently treated by Smith

³² See the letter from Millar to Stewart cited in the 'Account of the Life and of Adam Smith' in *EPS*, pp. 273–6, and the quotation in p. 275n. for Millar's acknowledgment of Smith's influence on his own work.

³³ See W. R. Scott, *Adam Smith as Student and Professor*, pp. 55–6, 117–18.

³⁴ On Gibbon's qualified use of the Smithian approach see pp. 65–6 above.

³⁵ In *LJB* a 'superior degree of humanity' in war was attributed to 'the time of the popery' (p. 549). On servile dependency see *WN*, III.iv.4 and *LJA*, p. 333.

as the worst form of European oppression, and its absence in North America was a source of congratulation.³⁶ Gibbon found Smith's account of the revolution associated with commerce excessively 'severe' in its demonstration that 'the most salutary effects have flowed from the meanest and most selfish causes'. His 'adoration' of Burke's chivalry reveals his preferences in such matters.

Yet, as we have also seen, the end of dependency, though crucial to Smith's view of the connection between commerce and liberty, did not mark the end of deference within a system of social ranks based on tangible forms of wealth. In dealing with the natural propensity to sympathise more readily with the feelings of those above us in the social scale – a propensity that reaches its apotheosis in feelings towards royalty – Smith emphasised the difference between this propensity and dependence: 'Our obsequiousness to our superiors more frequently arises from our admiration for the advantages of their situation, than from any private expectations of benefit from their goodwill. Their benefits extend but to a few but their fortunes interest almost everybody.'³⁷ Deference to established authority, as represented by superior wealth and power, as we have noted, was one of the twin psychological principles meant to replace the doctrine of original contract.

Burke, too, rejected the whole apparatus of the original contract and *a priori* notions of the natural rights of pre-civil social man, including the rights of resistance that went along with them. In condemning loss of chivalry he was also condemning the signs that deference was under severe threat in France, upholding its continuation in England as a mark of superiority. By contrast, Smith employs a plainer language of social observation that allows him to speak of deference as a normal characteristic of human behaviour, while at the same time permitting him to notice how it was capable of being corrupted into fashionable adulation – a view that was expressed more strongly when dealing with conscience in the 1790 additions to the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. The challenge to self-command, a personal attribute that enabled its possessors to discriminate between genuine merit and mere riches and power, also takes on added significance when it is posed as a matter

³⁶ 'For nobility are the greatest opposers and oppressors of liberty that we can imagine. They hurt the liberty of the people even more than an absolute monarch.' See *LJA*, p. 264. On America's freedom from this oppression see *WN*, v.iii.90.

³⁷ *TMS*, 1.iii.2.3. The *LJ* version of this is given when dealing with wealth as a claim to authority: 'This proceeds not from any dependence that the poor have upon the rich, for in general the poor are independent, and support themselves by their labour, yet tho' they expect no benefit from [the rich] they have a strong propensity to pay them respect.' See *LJB*, p. 401.

of psychological observation and diagnosis, remembering that self-command was another subject to which Smith devoted more attention in the 1790 additions. Even so, the contrast with Burke's more obviously normative deployment of the same language should not be exaggerated. If English habits of deference remained natural or normal, just as similar French habits had been under the *ancien régime*, the pathological aspect of their disappearance after 1789 stands out more clearly, underlining Burke's attention to the peculiar objective circumstances that had brought this about. As we have seen, Smith would have agreed with Burke in opposing the violence and arrogance of disregarding established interests and orders within society. Agreement on this, and a shared antagonism to neo-Lockean versions of natural right and contractual obligation, however, did not require Smith to endorse Burke's historical account of chivalry, or share Burke's premonition that a world constructed on commercial foundations was vulnerable to the demise of the 'spirit of a gentleman and the spirit of religion'.

While the origin of this spirit might be feudal and chivalric, its current significance, as Burke was anxious to show in his critique of the motley composition of the French National Assembly, and in his denunciation of its expropriatory measures, derived from the hereditary principle, and more especially from inherited property in land. In the *Reflections*, Burke defended not merely 'the sacredness of an hereditary principle of royal succession' as it had been repaired in 1688, or even the image of British liberties as 'an *entailed inheritance* derived to us from our forefathers', but the specific institution of an hereditary aristocracy.³⁸ At the lowest estimation, it was this institution that lent ballast to the English system of representation; it provided the setting within which men of ability could prove themselves and in so doing add an active element to what would otherwise be 'sluggish, inert and timid', *merely* preservative. The landed interest provided the stability that no other order within society, mercantile, monied, or professional, acting together or separately, could furnish. Moreover, given the envy aroused by large properties, land had to be represented 'in great masses of accumulation, or it is not rightly protected'.³⁹ In all these respects there was a striking contrast with France's new 'stock-jobbing constitution', increasingly at the mercy of the monied interest, in which mediocrities drawn from the third estate, ambitious men 'of

³⁸ See *Reflections* in *WS*, VIII, pp. 72, 83.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

litigious dispositions and unquiet minds', had swamped the other orders in forming the National Assembly.⁴⁰

In *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*, published a year after the *Reflections*, Burke went further in the same direction by defining 'true natural aristocracy' as more than a major separate interest; it comprised that leading group within society which integrated all other interests, without which, indeed, the multitude could 'scarcely be said to be in a civil society'.⁴¹ It was in this work too that Burke took up Paine's challenge to him in the *Rights of Man* to defend the law of primogeniture upon which the aristocratic edifice was constructed.⁴² Burke had made some progress in undertaking this task in the *Reflections* as an incidental aspect of his defence of church property in France: 'No excess is good; and, therefore, too great a proportion of landed property may be held officially for life; but it does not seem to me of material injury to any commonwealth that there should exist some estates that have a chance of being acquired by other means than the previous acquisition of money.'⁴³ He now went on to argue that the law governing inheritance was part of that 'state of habitual social discipline in which the wiser, the more expert, and the more opulent conduct, and by conducting enlighten and protect, the weaker, the less knowing, and the less provided with the goods of fortune'. At this point, Burke seems to have embraced the Mandevillian version of the ignoble lie, the idea that public morality requires an element not merely of mystery, but of mystification.⁴⁴ This was certainly one of the charges made against Burke by later radicals of a rationalist turn of mind, such as William Godwin, and it will feature in later essays when considering Burke's ideas on religion.

At this juncture then, it becomes essential to consider Smith's attitude to 'natural aristocracy' and the laws of primogeniture and entail which underpinned the landed variety, where his position can be described, once more, as both central and problematic. With

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

⁴¹ *WS*, VIII, p. 60.

⁴² Burke quoted from the *Rights of Man* on primogeniture without naming the author. Paine's challenge to Burke came a little further on: 'Here lies the monster; and Mr. Burke, if he pleases, may write its epitaph.' See *LMW*, pp. 288, 439.

⁴³ *WS*, VIII, p. 212.

⁴⁴ Burke's 'Mandevillism' is most in evidence, however, when he points out the dangerous consequences of drawing attention to the arbitrary feudal origins of property rights: French peasants might well repay the 'coin of sophistic reason' by maintaining that all property rights belong to the cultivator rather than those who have obtained it merely through succession or revolutionary appropriation; see *ibid.*, pp. 269-71.

regard to existing laws of inheritance, Smith's position may seem obvious from what has been said earlier in an American context.⁴⁵ Paine's remarks on the origins of primogeniture in military conquest and the 'waste of national property' involved in large estates might well have been taken from the pages of the *Wealth of Nations*. This feudal relic prevented land from becoming the subject of commerce, and hence from falling into the hands of those who would most benefit the public by making productive use of it. It had not only retarded the progress of opulence, but constituted a major source of injustice between generations. We are not dealing, therefore, with a simple case where Smith is solely concerned with economic efficiency, while Burke is taking account of political stability. The injustices stressed by Smith are a form of political disorder involving the oppression of one group by another, against which it was one of the main duties of the legislator to guard. The only justification for primogeniture was 'pride of family distinctions', and Smith added that 'nothing can be more contrary to the real interest of a numerous family, than a right which, in order to enrich one, beggars all the rest of the children'.⁴⁶ Moreover, what Smith says on the related subject of entails is incapable of being reconciled with anything in Burke: 'Entails are thought necessary for maintaining this exclusive privilege of the nobility to the great offices and honours of their country; and that order having usurped one unjust advantage over the rest of their fellow-citizens, lest their poverty should render it ridiculous, it is thought reasonable that they should have another.'⁴⁷

Burke's 'great oaks' could not have become great without these laws. When speaking of Scottish great oaks, Smith had no doubt that their behaviour should be condemned:

We have in Scotland some noblemen whose estates extend from the east to the west sea, who call themselves improvers, and are called such by their countrymen, when they cultivate two or three hundred acres round their own family seat while they allow all the rest of their country to lie waste, almost uninhabited and entirely unimproved, not worth a shilling the hundred acres, without thinking themselves answerable to God, their country and their Posterity for so shameful as well as so foolish a neglect.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ See pp. 150–2 above.

⁴⁶ *WN*, III.ii.4. Paine's pithiest version of the same idea was that: 'Aristocracy has never more than *one* child.' See *LMW*, p. 288.

⁴⁷ *WN*, III.ii.6.

⁴⁸ Letter to Lord Shelburne, 4 April 1759 in *Corr.*, p. 32.

Yet deference to established (as opposed to 'upstart') wealth represented social and psychological reality for Smith. A system of ranks based on wealth was a fact of social life that could be observed as much in America as in Europe with its feudal relics. The system generated net benefits for society even when it corrupted the moral sentiments of some, perhaps most individuals ('the great mob of mankind'). For reasons that will become obvious shortly, however, Smith would not have joined Burke in so firmly associating possession of landed wealth with legislative wisdom and expertise. Yet this difference of emphasis too can be minimised by noting Smith's observation that 'even in monarchies, the highest offices are generally possessed, and the whole detail of the administration conducted, by men who were educated in the middle and inferior ranks of life, who have been carried forward by their own industry and abilities'.⁴⁹ Burke portrayed himself in this meritocratic light in his *Letter to a Noble Lord* (1796), when stung to do so by attacks on the pension he was granted late in life. It was one of his claims on behalf of British arrangements that men of merit were allowed to prove themselves and make their contribution to public life under the protection of landed wealth. Smith counselled those not born to them against regarding the 'drawing rooms of the great' as places where they could shine. When he employs the concept of a *natural* aristocracy, as he does on a couple of occasions, we are justified in thinking that it is not synonymous with *actual* aristocracy: the former would entail a larger element of leadership based on genuine achievement. This may not seem to be borne out in another case: Smith's account of the safeguards attached to standing armies in Britain, where the officers were drawn from 'the principal nobility and gentry of the country' and therefore represented a counter-weight to the possible ambitions of monarchs.⁵⁰ Once more, however, Smith was registering an opinion based on the checks and balances of various interests which British social and institutional arrangements actually contained; he was simply recording facts rather than engaging in apologetics or advocacy.

In the light of Smith's highly sympathetic treatment of landowners as a corporate interest within the body politic in the *Wealth of Nations*, this might seem to be an understated, even evasive conclusion. There are good reasons why Smith's political animus towards the exclusive privileges obtained by merchants and manufacturers is far better

⁴⁹ *TMS*, I.ii.2.5.

⁵⁰ *WN*, v.i.a.41.

known than his views on the comparable injustices associated with large landownership. Ownership of land – he argued, along traditional lines – entailed citizenship in a way that was denied to more mobile forms of property.⁵¹ The wealth of a nation was placed on a more secure basis when reinvested in land. Moreover, since the share of annual income going to rent rises with the progress of opulence, the landowning interest, like that of wage-earners, is ‘strictly and inseparably connected with the general interest of the society’.⁵² This carried with it political advantages: ‘When the publick deliberates concerning any regulation of commerce or police, the proprietors of land never can mislead it, with a view to promote the interest of their own particular order.’ But Smith completes this statement with a significant qualification: ‘at least, if they have any tolerable knowledge of that interest’. Landowners enjoy a situation in which their income involves ‘neither labour nor care’. Smith also makes use of a more subversive biblical version of this idea when he connects rent with the private appropriation of land by saying that it shows that landlords, ‘like all other men, love to reap where they never sowed’.⁵³ The indolence associated with the manner in which their incomes are received prevents them from acquiring that application which is a prerequisite for understanding the consequences of any ‘publick regulation’. Nevertheless, Smith’s indulgence is shown in his opinion that since they cannot combine as easily as those living in urban settings, ‘country gentlemen and farmers are, to their great honour, of all people, the least subject to the wretched spirit of monopoly’.⁵⁴ They do not limit the market or raise prices; and they ‘are generally disposed rather to promote than to obstruct the cultivation and improvement of their neighbour’s farms and estates’, sharing knowledge that will benefit improvement. It is a matter of regret, therefore, that they ‘so far forgot the generosity which is natural to their station’ as to acquire a monopoly in corn and meat.

Compared with the organised conspiracies of merchants, landowners, one might say, were enemies to the public interest only through ignorance. Smith adopts the same basic attitude to the wage-earner: although his interest is inseparable from that of society at large, he is

⁵¹ The landowner is ‘necessarily a citizen of the particular country in which his estate lies’, whereas the ‘proprietor of stock is properly a citizen of the world, and is not necessarily attached to any particular country’. See *WN*, v.ii.f.6.

⁵² *WN*, i.xi.p. 8.

⁵³ *WN*, i.vi.7.

⁵⁴ *WN*, iv.ii.21.

‘incapable either of comprehending that interest, or of understanding its connexion with his own’.⁵⁵ In both cases, however, to judge from Smith’s educational proposals considered in an earlier essay (number 4); the ignorance of high and low was in principle curable. To some later political economists faced with the more determined use of aristocratic political influence to preserve the protection provided by the Corn Laws during and after the Napoleonic wars, Smith’s indulgence towards the landowning interest seemed naive and decidedly out of place.⁵⁶

Even on the subject of primogeniture, and certainly when judged by Paine’s standards, Smith could be variously read as world-weary or prescient.⁵⁷ Wrong-headed though primogeniture was on all counts, his opinion was that the institution was ‘likely to endure for many centuries’. Presumably, it was one of those privileges attaching to membership of a particular order that had to be endured, despite being ‘in some measure abusive’. There remains, however, an unbridgeable gap between Smith and Burke on this matter. Far from tolerating the behaviour of large landowners in neglecting their estates, Smith proposed an interventionist device in the shape of a tax designed to encourage cultivation by the landowner – an idea that Paine may have appropriated when he made similar proposals in the second part of his *Rights of Man*.⁵⁸ As we shall see in the succeeding essay, Burke opposed all intervention in matters of agriculture on fundamentalist lines that made landownership an essential link in a divine chain of command. Whereas for Burke, primogeniture represented at worst a case where it was possible to have too much of a good thing, it was always a bad thing to Smith – an injustice as well as an impediment to the progress of opulence. Although primogeniture might have to be tolerated, there was no question of its being the essential bedrock of political life. Smith could calmly contemplate a world in which established fortunes and families came and went, provided, of course, that the coming and going was the natural outcome of commercial change, occurring under a regime of fair play.⁵⁹ Unlike his pupil, Millar, Smith did not make

⁵⁵ *WN*, I.xi.10.

⁵⁶ See pp. 351–2 below.

⁵⁷ Others have found Smith’s position ambiguous; see U. Vogel, ‘When the Earth Belonged to All; the Land Question in Eighteenth-Century Justifications of Private Property’, *Political Studies*, 36 (1988), 102–22.

⁵⁸ *WN*, v.ii.c.15; see also the preceding paragraphs for other proposals to prevent landowners from benefiting at the expense of their tenants. For Paine’s progressive estate tax proposal see *LMW*, pp. 434–9.

⁵⁹ ‘In commercial countries riches, in spite of the most violent regulations of law to prevent their dissipation, very seldom remain long in the same family.’ See *WN*, III.iv.16.

'fluctuations of fortune' part of an optimistic diagnosis of the likely political benefits associated with commercial opulence. It might have featured in the unfinished history and theory of law and government, but, equally, Smith's caution in making predictions based on assumptions of improved behaviour, unrelated to changes in institutional machinery, could well have ruled it out.

III

Finally, what can be learned from a comparison of Burke's defence of church establishments in the *Reflections* with Smith's treatment of the same subject in the *Wealth of Nations*? Although Gibbon, against the background of his general admiration for the *Reflections*, could almost forgive Burke's 'reverence' or 'superstition', it seems highly unlikely that Burke, in post-revolutionary mood at least, would have paid the compliment in reverse by forgiving the tone or content of Smith's position on church establishments. Indeed, one reading of what Smith had to say on this subject would have been far more comforting to Price and other non-Trinitarian dissenters who treated the American and French revolutions as opportunities not merely for eliminating religious tests but for separating church and state completely. What Smith advocated, in short, was a policy of 'no ecclesiastical government', coupled with active encouragement of the proliferation of religious sects. At an early point in the *Reflections* Burke had ridiculed Price's advice to his audience, as Burke put it, 'to improve upon non-conformity and to set up, each of them, a separate meeting house upon his own particular principles'.⁶⁰ That sounds quite like Smith's proposal, though unlike Price, Smith's reasons for making it were purely secular. Burke could make allowance for Smith's act of impious piety towards Hume in 1776: he might have taken a different line after 1790 when contemplating the damage threatened or inflicted – or so he thought – by radical Unitarians at home and the deism and atheism of men of letters across the Channel.

Burke had acquired a justifiable reputation for supporting religious toleration before the French revolution, and he made a distinction in his *Reflections* between those who tolerate divergent opinions in matters of religion, believing 'none to be of estimation', and those whose toleration was based on 'zeal' rather than 'contempt'.⁶¹ One wing of

⁶⁰ *Reflections* in *WS*, VIII, p. 63.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 142, 199.

Burke's attack was directed at that dangerous class of men which had arisen in France, 'the political men of letters' who were setting the revolutionary pace. This class had formed 'a regular plan for the destruction of the Christian religion'; they constituted a cabal of 'atheistical fathers' who have 'learned to talk against monks with the spirit of a monk'.⁶² By associating Price and other Unitarian radicals, such as Priestley, with French atheism and deism, therefore, Burke was casting them in the role of those who based their plea for tolerance on an indifference that bordered on contempt. Whatever view we take of the nature and depth of Burke's personal religious convictions, it seems essential to recognise the limits that *genuine* 'zeal' placed on his willingness to tolerate differences of opinion on matters of fundamental belief: neither deism nor Unitarianism were acceptable systems of belief in a Christian nation.⁶³ It was the further implied aim of separating church and state, however, that drew most of Burke's fire. This constituted an attack on that spirit of religion which lay at the basis of civil society. An infusion of 'sublime principles' was necessary to reinforce 'the rational and natural ties that connect the human understanding and affections to the divine'.⁶⁴ Hence 'the consecration of the state by a state religious establishment is necessary, also, to operate with a wholesome awe upon free citizens'. The power that came with freedom required a religious sanction for the idea of trust, a persistent reminder that power 'to be legitimate must be according to that eternal, immutable law in which will and reason are the same'. In recognising this decisive role for an established church, the state should protect its corporate identity by defending church property as rigidly as any other separate estate, the fortunes of which were entwined with that of all others. By following this course, England had arrived at a compromise between making its clergy mere 'ecclesiastical pensioners of the state' and courting the 'disorders of a factious clergy' dependent for its income on sources other than the crown.⁶⁵ Another mark of Anglican wisdom in such matters was recognition that the pastoral and educational purposes of the Church in a society of ranks based on wealth could best be met by tolerating an inequality in the incomes of its clergy which shadowed that of society at large. Once more, what

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 160–1.

⁶³ See F. Dreyer, 'Burke's Religion', *Studies in Burke and His Time*, 17 (1976), 199–211 for the argument that Burke should be regarded as an Anglican with orthodox latitudinarian sympathies.

⁶⁴ *Reflections in WS*, VIII, p. 143.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

was happening in France – the confiscation of church property and the equalisation of clerical incomes – showed what might happen in Britain if radical dissent had its way.

There is, as one might expect, a marked contrast between this central theme in the *Reflections* and the secular tone of Smith's treatment of religious establishments in Book v of the *Wealth of Nations*. Earlier in the same book, Smith had pronounced his controversial verdict on the English universities, especially Oxford, as clerical institutions in which learning had ossified and the interests of students had been sacrificed to the comfort of teachers whose incomes were paid regardless of performance.⁶⁶ Gibbon, writing his autobiography in the 1790s, cited and endorsed Smith's verdict on the basis of his own experience at Oxford.⁶⁷ Burke, writing at much the same time, was extolling the virtues of the 'old ecclesiastical modes and fashions' of English universities, proclaiming the compatibility of 'Gothic and monkish education' with modern discoveries in the arts and sciences.⁶⁸ Given what we know of 'the infection of Hume's society', and the fact that Smith quotes extensively from Hume's *History*, describing its author as 'by far the most illustrious philosopher and historian of the present age', the reader needs to be aware that Humean irony towards religion is being deployed throughout. Smith even manages to cite his favourite French author, Voltaire, in a manner that did not commend itself to his obituarist in *The Times*, and would certainly not have commended itself to Burke in 1790.⁶⁹

Smith's discussion of religious establishments takes place under the formal heading of how the pastoral and teaching activities of the Church have been financed throughout its history, and how they ought to be financed in well-regulated states – whether by voluntary subscription, by landed estates, tithes, or stipends paid by the state to an established clergy. The social and political consequences of different arrangements are the focus of attention, with the history of the Church being accorded a treatment which exactly parallels that given to the fall of the feudal barons in Book III. In both cases, a revolution of public importance is achieved unintentionally, without rational plan. Luxury expenditure connected with the rise of commerce and manufactures

⁶⁶ *WN*, v.i.f.6–9.

⁶⁷ *Autobiography*, p. 42.

⁶⁸ *Reflections in WS*, VIII, p. 150.

⁶⁹ 'we are not the disciples of Voltaire ... Atheists are not our preachers' (*ibid.*, p. 137). In his letter to the *Edinburgh Review*, 1755, Smith had described Voltaire as 'the most universal genius perhaps which France has ever produced'; see *EPS*, p. 254.

undermines the privileges and temporal powers of the clergy, just as it had undermined the military powers of the barony. In the case of the Church, however, the story of how luxury enfeebles is repeated every time the clergy of a well-endowed church adopt the manners of gentlemen and are consequently threatened by competition from sects led by more zealous clergy in closer contact with the 'inferior ranks of people'. In its enfeebled state(s), the Church was forced (or constantly tempted) to call on the support of the civil magistracy to combat the threat to their comfort and authority posed by these sects, thereby creating established churches claiming privileged status for their doctrines.

Smith cites Hume's analysis and conclusion on the merits of establishment as opposed to independency: Hume's advice to the 'wise legislator' was that establishment, though costly to the public, was a worthwhile investment designed to overcome the 'superstition, folly, and delusion' propagated by a clergy bidding for and dependent upon popular support. Purchasing clerical 'indolence' was advantageous 'to the political interests of society'. Though clearly sympathetic to the diagnosis, Smith took the alternative position favouring independency. The causal relationship between religious and political strife had worked both ways: 'But if politicks had never called in the aid of religion' there would have been scope for allowing 'every man to chuse his own priest and his own religion as he thought proper', thereby giving rise to 'a great multitude of religious sects', estimated at two or three hundred.⁷⁰ Such a state of affairs would have the desired effect in diluting the troublesome effect of 'interested and active zeal'. Competition and the loss of special privileges would make it impossible for any single sect to dominate or 'disturb the publick tranquillity'. In this way moderation would rule, so that in time the doctrines of the sects would be smoothed towards 'that pure and rational religion, free from every mixture of absurdity, imposture, or fanaticism, such as wise men have in all ages of the world wished to see established'.⁷¹

Smith proposed other safeguards that were also framed with the political interests of society in view. The value of popular sects lay in providing a 'respectable society' within which the behaviour of urban workers could be observed and elevated by fellow sectarians. In this respect, Smith's proposals were part of the larger educational remedy he advanced to deal with the drawbacks associated with the division of

⁷⁰ *WN*, V.i.g.8.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

labour in commercial and increasingly urbanised societies.⁷² The chief disadvantage of the sects was the austerity of the systems of morals which they usually practised. The remedies Smith proposed for the 'disagreeably rigorous and unsocial' habits of the sects were two-fold: tests for admission into the liberal professions that encouraged the possession of knowledge among the middle and upper ranks; and 'frequency and gaiety of publick diversions' for the lower ranks of society. Since knowledge or science was 'the great antidote to the poison of enthusiasm and superstition', education of the middle and higher ranks would have an exemplary effect on their inferiors. Public support for painting, poetry, and the performing arts would have the desired softening effect on the morals of the lower ranks, particularly if drama took the form of good-humoured satire directed against religious fanaticism.⁷³

Smith's endorsement of independency as a solution to the problem of church government – a solution advocated, as he admitted, by some 'very wild enthusiasts' during the civil war in England and only currently in operation in Pennsylvania – might seem at odds with the usual anti-utopian cast of his thinking. After outlining the 'natural' course that might have been adopted in religious affairs, however, Smith proceeded to consider what should be done where an established church already existed – episcopal or presbyterian, as in the cases of England and Scotland. With an established church, Smith's advice was that the sovereign should retain control over the means of preferment so as to prevent the development of a state within the state – a concession to Hume's fears that was also a gesture in Burke's direction. Again, it comes down to 'management and persuasion' as a means of overcoming other institutional shortcomings.⁷⁴ Scotland's presbyterian solution, coupled with rough equality in clerical incomes, however, clearly represented the best of the second-best solutions. Just as her universities were superior to the English in making the income of teachers depend in part on performance, so, in common with other nations blessed with a presbyterian clergy, its ecclesiastical institutions provided the best outcome at least public cost – remembering that all expenditure under this heading was 'unproductive' in Smith's terminology. The moderate incomes available to the clergy not only made them diligent in performing their pastoral duties, but the absence of

⁷² See pp. 118–21 above.

⁷³ *WN*, v.i.g.11–15.

⁷⁴ See for example, *WN*, v.i.g.19.

large benefices had a valuable by-product: it made learning and careers as university teachers attractive to able men.⁷⁵ It was at this point that Smith cited Voltaire on the absence of literary and philosophical eminence among the ranks of teachers in the universities of catholic countries, pressing home his earlier attack on Oxford by extending the conclusion to England, where 'an old college tutor, who is known and distinguished in Europe as an eminent man of letters, is as rarely to be found there as in any Roman catholick country'.⁷⁶

The differences between Burke and Smith on these matters are simply what we might expect on the basis of what is known about their religious beliefs, personal experience, and national sympathies. A positive interpretation of the 'spirit of religion' is not something we associate with Smith (any more than with Hume or Gibbon), for whom the 'monkish virtues' are more likely to be ridiculed than praised.⁷⁷ Anti-papism (Smith was clearly a *protestant* sceptic) plays its part here, but religion in general is usually equated with fanaticism – with political factions based on religious enthusiasm representing the worst kind of political disorder.⁷⁸ Despite Smith's persuasive appeal to 'rational religion' (itself a rather suspect term in the eyes of the faithful in the 1790s), and what wise men in all ages had believed, such opinions are no more or less representative of eighteenth-century thinking than Burke's 'superstition'.⁷⁹ Indeed, there is a good deal of evidence to show that Smith's views were not typical of his friends within the moderate wing of the Scottish church, even if he did not flaunt them in Hume's manner.⁸⁰ Burke's zeal may have increased

⁷⁵ 'There is scarce perhaps to be found any where in Europe a more learned, decent, independent, and respectable set of men, than the greater part of the presbyterian clergy of Holland, Geneva, Switzerland, and Scotland.' See *WN*, v.i.g.37 and 41.

⁷⁶ *WN*, v.i.g.39. Compare this with Burke's argument that equalisation of benefices in France had 'left no middle class at their ease, in future nothing of science or erudition can exist in the Gallican church'. See *Reflections* in *WS*, VIII, p. 196.

⁷⁷ See for example *TMS*, III.2.35 on the 'futile mortifications of the monastery'; and *WN*, v.i.e.29 comparing the 'austerities and abasement of a monk' with the 'liberal, generous and spirited conduct of a man'.

⁷⁸ For Hume's fear and antagonism to factions based on religion see K. Haakonssen, 'The Structure of Hume's Political Theory' in Norton (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, pp. 182–221. The same sentiment underlies Smith's view of Ireland, where 'the most odious of all distinctions, those of religious and political prejudices; distinctions which more than any other, animate both the insolence of the oppressors and the hatred and indignation of the oppressed, and which commonly render the inhabitants of the same country more hostile to one another than those of different countries ever are'; *WN*, v.iii.89.

⁷⁹ See Burke's perceptive remark cited on p. 39 above to the effect that those who have no church use more art to praise its virtues.

⁸⁰ Hugh Blair predicted in 1776 that Smith's chapters on church establishments and universities would raise up 'very formidable adversaries who will do all they can to decry you'. He was

with his other apprehensions, but that does not make his defence of British ecclesiastical arrangements unusual.⁸¹ Hume, speaking an entirely secular language, could have agreed with Burke's conclusion on church establishments, and Smith could appreciate the logic of the Anglican system – even if he thought it markedly inferior to the Scottish alternative.

There *was* something remarkable, however, about that other *tour de force* in the *Reflections*, Burke's attack on the confiscation of church property in France. That Burke should have defended church property follows from what has been said above, but there are some special features of his defence that are not directly connected with the spirit of religion, church and state, or with his opposition to the avowed purpose of confiscation, namely to provide a backing for a new paper currency – a subject which, along with the dangers of the monied interest in France, has rightly been the subject of extensive comment.⁸² The peculiarity of Burke's defence can best be appreciated against the background of the pattern of ideas already encountered when dealing with the 'oeconomy of greatness', to which he gave an alternative label, 'the great wheel of circulation'. The defence raises questions concerning the relationship between riches and poverty that will be considered in the succeeding essay, alongside Burke's economic opinions on the legitimate expectations of the poor.

IV

The comparison with Smith's position that Burke's 'creed' on the French revolution invites cannot be taken much further here. Nevertheless, as a postscript, another contributor to the debate aroused by French events can be introduced: Smith's pupil, John Millar, a Foxite Whig whose professional duties as Professor of Civil Law at Glasgow provided him with an opportunity to lecture on the significance of

also critical of Smith's proposal for 'independency' and proliferation; see *Corr.*, p. 188. On the religion of the Scottish moderate literati in general see Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment*.

⁸¹ Indeed, some would now argue that it was an entirely conventional defence of the Anglican *ancien régime*, to which Burke was a somewhat belated convert; see J. D. C. Clark, *English Society, 1688–1832*, Cambridge, 1983, pp. 249–58.

⁸² It is central to J. G. A. Pocock's interpretation of the *Reflections*; see *Virtue, Commerce and History*, pp. 200–9. For Pocock's latest contribution to this subject see 'Edmund Burke and the Redefinition of Enthusiasm: The Context as Counter-Revolution' in F. Furet and M. Ozouf (eds.), *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, 3 volumes, Oxford, 1989, III, pp. 19–43.

French developments as they were occurring.⁸³ Millar was also a political activist during the 1790s, supporting reform of representation and repeal of the Test Acts, and writing or sponsoring political tracts that were less judicious than his *Historical View of the English Government*.⁸⁴ In other words, Millar did not adopt the prudential course taken by Dugald Stewart in retreating from engagement with the more overtly political issues of the period. Although we know that on at least one crucial issue Millar was not convinced by Smith's unqualified support for free trade, his credentials as a spokesman for a Smithian, if not Smith's own, point of view on jurisprudential and constitutional questions are impeccable enough to warrant some attention.⁸⁵

Millar fully endorsed the Hume–Smith critique of contractual modes of justifying natural rights, upholding their position on the joint role of a sense of public utility and deference to authority in sustaining political obligation. We can infer from this, and other explicit statements on the subject, that Millar, like Smith, was not sympathetic to the line adopted by Price, Paine, and Priestley in supporting the French revolution. As his first biographer stated, Millar

treated with the utmost contempt all assertion of metaphysical Rights, inconsistent with practical utility: But, while he ridiculed the idea of imprescriptible, indefeasible, right in the people, to conduct the affairs of Government, he was aware that the doctrines then afloat were of a popular nature, and he thought the best and only solid refutation of them, was such a reform of parliament, as, in itself highly desirable, had now become almost necessary, to rally the great body of the nation around the constitution.⁸⁶

Nevertheless, this lack of sympathy with Burke's opponents did not entail acceptance of Burke's stance in the *Reflections* and subsequent

⁸³ I am grateful to Knud Haakonssen for supplying me with copies of the notes on Millar's lectures on the French revolution which are housed in Glasgow University Library, MS 180, (1–3), Volume II.

⁸⁴ The last two volumes of the *Historical View* were posthumously published in 1812. The best contemporary account of Millar's opinions can be found in John Craig's biography which was added to the 1806 edition of the *Origin of Ranks*. As far as the French revolution is concerned, the most extensive evidence of Millar's views can be found in *Letters of Crito*, London, 1796, an anonymous tract that is now accepted as his work. More controversy surrounds attribution to him of another pamphlet, *Letters of Sidney*, London, 1796. My citations are to the edition of both of these tracts edited by Vincenzo Merolle and published by Giuffrè Editore for the University of Rome in 1984. Merolle advances a great deal of circumstantial evidence to show that both works were written or inspired by Millar.

⁸⁵ For a more detailed study of Millar's jurisprudence and politics see K. Haakonssen, 'John Millar and the Science of a Legislator', *Juridical Review*, 1985, 41–68. On the free trade issue see Millar's undated letter to Hume in *Letters of Eminent Persons addressed to David Hume*, edited by J. H. Burton, London, 1849, pp. 315–17.

⁸⁶ J. Craig, *Life of John Millar* in *Origin of Ranks*, London, 1806, pp. cxiv–cxv.

writings. Here, for example, is an extract from a letter written by Millar at an early stage in the emerging rift in the Whig party caused by Burke's writings and speeches:

The truth is, it grieves me to differ from so excellent a man as Burke, but I do not see in this instance how he can be vindicated. He is an enemy to the reform of parliamentary representation and to the repeal of the test-act – and seeing that the revolution in France is likely to forward both of the measures, he chooses to take the first word in declaiming against that revolution. It is all in vain however. The system established in France will have the effect of reflecting upon this country some of those rays which have been received from her through the medium of America.⁸⁷

Like most other people, Millar was forced to modify his opinions after the September massacres and the execution of Louis XVI. His public pronouncements became more critical of Burke and less uncritical when dealing with the excesses of the French revolution. Thus Burke was treated by Millar as an 'alarmist' whose distinction between old and new Whigs was a smokescreen behind which 'the desertion of his former tenets' could be engineered.⁸⁸ This desertion was imputed more to 'general aristocratic prejudices' than to love of fame or power, but it did not rule out familiar partisan charges linking Burke's pension to his apostasy.⁸⁹ This was standard Foxite Whig rhetoric, but Millar also gives more interesting reasons for his divergence from Burke. He supported the abolition of clerical and noble privileges in France (though not the titles), and the early attempt of the 'first revolution' to create a limited monarchy. He was also anxious to make use of French developments to extend the case for domestic reforms in the system of representation that would curb the royal prerogative by undermining the influence it exerted through 'pecuniary interest'. As far as the 'second' French revolution was concerned, the establishment of a republic by violent measures, Millar, while condemning the outcome and methods, attributed the turn of events to hostility from those external enemies of France which had attempted to

⁸⁷ Letter to Samuel Rose, 16 February 1790, Glasgow University Library. I am grateful to David R. Raynor for having generously given me a copy of this and other unpublished Millar letters.

⁸⁸ *Historical View of the English Government*, 4 volumes, London, 1812, IV, pp. 307–10.

⁸⁹ 'Even the fanciful admirer of the age of chivalry, who appears to have formerly displayed the gilded colours of liberty as a mere light horseman of aristocracy, now forgetting *the sublime and the beautiful*, was glad to retire upon a most extravagant pension; and had the effrontery to laugh at his former professions, by stating the price of his apostacy as the reward of his services': *Letters of Criso e Letters of Sidney*, edited by V. Merolle, p. 79; see also pp. 42, 113, 129 for other incidental references to Burke.

restore the old form of monarchy.⁹⁰ Irreligion and scepticism among French men of letters was not characteristic of the nation as a whole, and could not justify alarmism on these grounds abroad. Having said this, however, Millar announced himself to be convinced by the merits of the system of 'independency' adopted in France and North America, the system Smith also had endorsed.⁹¹ As far as the dangers of introducing reforms at home were concerned, Millar treated Burke's fears as a sign of weakness:

Is our Constitution so crazy and rotten, that it will not bear the handling? Is our limited monarchy, of which we have so long boasted, and which has been purchased by the blood of our forefathers, so little consonant to the principles of true liberty; so ill adapted to the state of the community, that we dare not bring it to the test of reason? Is it so ill contrived, that it requires a mysterious veil to cover its defects?⁹²

Although remaining within the realm of party rhetoric, that of a 'determined Whig' and an opponent of Pitt's policy in pursuing the war against France, the last statement brings us closer to an important underlying difference between Millar and Burke. Millar was advancing the view, for which there is no clear warrant in Smith's writings, that with the diffusion of knowledge in modern commercial societies the principle of utility was gaining strength at the expense of blind deference to established authority as the chief source of political obedience and legitimacy. Once the 'fashion of scrutinizing public measures by the standard of their utility' became more widespread, it was inevitable that 'the disposition to pry into the abuses of government [was] likely to suggest limitations in the power of rulers; and when a people at large employ themselves in discussing the political advantages arising from different political arrangements, they must feel a bias in favour of that system, which tends to the equalization of ranks, and the diffusion of popular privileges'.⁹³ In France the 'lights of science' had eventually triumphed over custom, allowing men to discover 'the rights of man, and the true principles of government'. Unfortunately, the enthusiasm with which these rights were pursued

⁹⁰ 'Had the French been left to settle their own government according to their own ideas of expediency, the mild and inoffensive character of their sovereign would, probably, never have rendered him the object of their distrust and resentment; and the form of government, suggested and established by their own free choice, would have remained with little alteration or disturbance'; *ibid.*, pp. 73-4.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 93-7.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 86.

⁹³ *Historical View*, III, p. 305; IV, pp. 307-9.

matched the earlier superstition and repression. In sweeping away corrupt institutions, the revolution 'overthrew those banks and landmarks, which while they defended the civil rights of the inhabitants, might have contributed to direct and regulate the new establishment'. What distinguishes Millar's position from that of Paine radicals, as well as later Benthamite utilitarians, therefore, is his acceptance that deference to established authority still had a part to play alongside the principle of utility:

From the disposition of mankind to pay respect and submission to superior personal qualities, and still more to a superiority of rank and station, together with that propensity which every one feels to continue in those modes of action to which he has long been accustomed, the great body of the people, who have commonly neither leisure nor capacity to weigh the advantages of public regulations, are prevented from indulging their unruly passions, and retained in subjection to the magistrate. The same dispositions contribute in some degree to restrain those rash and visionary projects, which proceed from the ambition of statesmen, or the wanton desire of innovation, and by which nations are exposed to the most dreadful calamities. Those feelings of the human mind, which give rise to authority, may be regarded as the wise provision of nature for supporting the order and government of society; and they are only to be regretted and censured, when by exceeding their proper bounds, they no longer act in subordination to the good of mankind, but are made, as happens, indeed, very often, the instruments of tyranny and oppression.

Without such safeguards, nations were exposed to the 'most dreadful calamities' of the kind witnessed in France. In other words, Millar was still trying to achieve the kind of balance about which Smith had written when dealing with the man of public spirit in his 1790 additions to the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

What further light does Millar's 'new Whig' interpretation of modern politics – with its hopeful projection of enlightenment based on considerations of utility – shed on Burke's 'old Whig' position? What, in turn, does it tell us about Smith's brand of Whiggism? Smith had this in common with Millar: he treated the sense of public utility as a principle of obedience more usually associated with Whigs, whereas deference to authority appealed more to Tories.⁹⁴ From this perspective, it might be tempting to say that Burke's stress on authority and the prescriptive status of property and established political institutions represented a shift within or beyond the Whig

⁹⁴ *LJA*, pp. 319–20, 402.

position in a 'Tory' direction. When claiming 'old' Whig status for his principles, however, Burke vigorously and properly rejected any such diagnosis. There may be some novel 'conservative' elements in Burke, but their very novelty requires us to go beyond the Tory label. Many of those who have sought in Burke the foundations for a conservative ideology have stressed the organic, corporatist, and natural law features of his thinking, where these are seen as fundamentally at odds with individualistic and utilitarian arguments.⁹⁵ Such interpretations fly in the face of the evidence that shows how much weight Burke attaches to considerations based on expediency, treated simply as a practical regard for consequences.⁹⁶ What may have been distinctively conservative about the *Reflections* was the way in which Burke fused authority and utility by making heavy use of an idiosyncratic version of the natural law doctrine of prescription.⁹⁷ On this topic, Smith followed conventional natural law usage by placing stricter limits on claims to just title based on prescription alone: mere antiquity could never serve as the moral basis for claims to right. If Smith had accepted such a position he would have undermined the critical content of his natural jurisprudence by making it impossible for him to speak of infringements of rights.⁹⁸

Millar gives us some idea of how a fairly advanced 'new' Whig interpreted the apparent change of emphasis within Whiggism introduced by Burke. In part, of course, Millar is deploying the 'progressive', almost Painite, strategy of convicting Burke of failure to understand the tide of history, a tide that grants to public utility greater importance with more people, while still not abolishing deference to authority. Whereas Burke maintained that the twin principles have a providential origin and are mutually supportive, indicating that they should never be allowed to come into conflict, particularly during periods of public discontent, Millar built on and broadened the inevitable split noticed by Smith when speaking precisely about such periods. It is possible to infer that Smith would have occupied a position closer to Burke than to his radical opponents, but it is far more

⁹⁵ The most determined attack on utilitarian interpretations of Burke's thinking from a conservative perspective is P. J. Stanlis, *Edmund Burke and the Natural Law*, Ann Arbor, 1958.

⁹⁶ In saying this I follow the lines of J. R. Dinwiddy's response to Stanlis in his 'Utility and Natural Law in Burke's Thought: A Reconsideration' and 'Burke and the Utilitarians: A Rejoinder', both now reprinted in his *Radicalism and Reform in Britain, 1780-1850*, London, 1992, pp. 229-52, 265-72.

⁹⁷ See P. Lucas, 'On Edmund Burke's Doctrine of Prescription; Or, An Appeal from the New to the Old Lawyers', *Historical Journal*, 11 (1968), 33-63.

⁹⁸ See Haakonssen, *Science of a Legislator*, pp. 108-9, 132.

difficult to gauge whether Smith would have been an 'old' or a 'new' Whig – as Burke defined these terms – on the French revolution. Millar's version of Foxite Whiggism had at least as much claim to represent a Smithian point of view as Burke's rage over France and the dissenters.

The labouring poor

We have heard many plans for the relief of the 'labouring poor'. This puling jargon is not as innocent as it is foolish. In meddling with great affairs, weakness is never innoxious. Hitherto the name of poor (in the sense in which it is used to excite compassion) has not been used for those who can, but for those who cannot, labour – for the sick and infirm, for orphan infancy, for languishing and decrepit age; but when we affect to pity, as poor, those who must labour or the world cannot exist, we are trifling with the condition of mankind. It is the common doom of man that he must eat his bread by the sweat of his brow, that is, by the sweat of his body, or the sweat of his mind. If this toil was inflicted as a curse, it is – as might be expected from the curses of the Father of all blessings – it is tempered with many alleviations, many comforts . . . This affected pity only tends to dissatisfy [the poor] with their condition, and to teach them to seek resources where no resources are to be found, in something else than their own industry, and frugality, and sobriety.

Edmund Burke, *Letters on a Regicide Peace*, 1797

I

These remarks, dismissing a term that had been gaining currency during the period of acute grain scarcity in 1795–6, did not arouse as much indignation at the time as Burke's reference to 'a swinish multitude' in his *Reflections*. They belong, nevertheless, to the same final period of Burke's life, when he was also conducting, from country retirement, a campaign against any legislative meddling with wages or the market for provisions. Burke's views on this subject were later to appear in *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*, which was assembled by his literary trustees as evidence of the author's prowess in political economy and as a contribution to a debate that had been revived by the return of food scarcity in 1799–1800. When Arthur Young,

Secretary to the Board of Agriculture, visited Burke in 1796 to discuss the possibilities of incorporating Burke's opinions in a chapter on wages and provisions for a report being prepared by the Board, he found his host in poor mental and physical condition: 'His conversation was remarkably desultory, a broken mixture of agricultural observation, French madness, price of provisions, the death of his son, the absurdity of regulating labour, the mischief of our Poor-laws, and the difficulty of cottagers keeping cows.'¹ This is not a bad description of the style and even content of *Thoughts and Details*, and it explains why Young felt there was little hope of Burke publishing his views in the near future.

As was noted in the Prologue to this book, however, once Burke's 'conservative' reputation had been established on the basis of the *Reflections*, his trenchantly expressed views on the impossibility – even, as we shall see, blasphemy – of remedying the situation of the poor through any form of intervention took on weightier ideological significance. The parallels between the views of Smith and Burke – to whom can be added the Prime Minister, William Pitt, and other parliamentary opponents of legislative intervention in the domestic market for grain during the second half of the 1790s – have also seemed so striking that they provide the main support for saying that it was here that Smith's political economy achieved its first major victory as a guide to legislative action. This triumph has also been described as marking the end of a paternalistic 'moral economy' that operated on behalf of the poor during the eighteenth century.² Proving or disproving intellectual influence on public policies and attitudes is never a simple task. Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that Smith's position on free trade in foodstuffs was a matter of considerable importance to him; that it was a subject on which his authority was frequently cited during the periods of acute scarcity at the turn of the century; and that when his own writings are considered carefully, they provide good examples of his approach to the science of legislation and its practical application as legislative art. However, in view of the number of additional, even gratuitous, elements that have by now been introduced into the picture, it seems necessary to begin any comparison

¹ *Autobiography of Arthur Young*, edited by M. Betham-Edwards, London, 1989, pp. 257–8; see also Burke, *Corr.*, VIII, p. 454 for earlier correspondence with Sir John Sinclair on the subject.

² Notably by E. P. Thompson in 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in his *Customs in Common*, pp. 185–351.

between Smith and Burke on wage and subsistence issues by returning to Burke's precise reasons for putting pen to paper on this occasion.

II

Burke was initially responding to a request for guidance from Pitt on 'the subject of Provisions'.³ The King's speech in October 1795 had expressed concern over high food prices, a Select Committee had been appointed to inquire into the subject, and Pitt later told the House of Commons that he had 'endeavoured to collect information from the best sources'.⁴ As one of these sources, presumably, Burke despatched a response on 7 November that allowed him to incorporate various comments on points raised in the House of Commons debate held on 3 November. At this stage the remedies being canvassed centred on changes in the law relating to the Assize of Bread and other administrative measures designed to conserve grain. This was the burden of the report of the Select Committee, which Burke judged to be 'all that it can be', adding that the danger lay in going any further.⁵ It is possible to reconstruct Burke's original memorandum by subtracting the sections added later by his editors.⁶ Once this is done, we see that in November Burke mainly denounced the impolicy of intervention in the market for provisions, defended farmers and middlemen from the usual charges of profiteering, and attacked such solutions as public granaries as impractical. By reference back to the debate held on 3 November, one can establish that Burke's main target was Charles James Fox, whose speech, on that occasion at least, is chiefly remarkable for its agreement with Pitt in rejecting 'the propriety of resorting to any system of coercion'.⁷ Nevertheless, Fox made one remark that was to become significant later: he agreed 'with those who think that the price of labour ought to be advanced, and the great majority of the people of England freed from a precarious and degrading dependence'. This could be read as a reference to the inferiority of giving assistance through the Poor Laws, though at this stage Fox's hopes centred on an appeal to the 'humanity' of landowners and farmers when fixing wages. Burke's rivalry with Fox could account for his decision to attack the

³ Burke, *Corr.*, VIII, p. 337.

⁴ *Parliamentary History*, XXXII, p. 705.

⁵ Burke, *Corr.*, VIII, p. 337.

⁶ See W. B. Todd, *A Bibliography of Edmund Burke*, London, 1964, pp. 226-7.

⁷ *Parliamentary History*, XXXII, pp. 239-42.

'political canting language' of the 'labouring poor' in his memorandum. Up to this point, however, Burke was chiefly providing ammunition for a skirmish that proved unnecessary when neither the Select Committee nor the opposition came up with suggestions for a major shift of policy. Non-intervention was the agreed response to scarcity of Pitt, Burke, and Fox at this stage, though beneath this consensus lay hints of future differences.

The second phase of the debate began on 9 December when Samuel Whitbread introduced a bill designed to empower magistrates to set minimum wages. This was a development of the hints dropped by Fox earlier, and on this occasion Fox gave the scheme some support. In order to head off the opposition, Pitt announced his intention to reform the Poor Laws, a decision which drew from Burke the following angry comment: 'In the name of God what is the meaning of this project of Mr Pitt concerning the further relief of the Poor. What relief do they want except that which it will be difficult indeed to give to make them more frugal or more industrious. I see he's running for popular plates with Mr. Fox.'⁸

It may have been this new turn of events that led Burke to think of refurbishing his memorandum with new material for publication. An advertisement appeared in December announcing the imminent appearance of 'A Letter from the Right Honourable Edmund Burke to Arthur Young, Secretary to the Board of Agriculture, on some projects talked of in Parliament, for an increase of Wages to Day-Labourers in Husbandry and other topics of rural oeconomy'. The additional material dealt with the nature of the wage bargain and attacked the minimum wage proposal as a 'discretionary tax upon labour' and as an invasion of the property rights of farmer-employers. The absence of any reference to the Poor Laws in the tract could mean that the new material was written in December, before the debate was widened by Pitt's reform proposals. If Burke objected to these proposals, as he seems to have done, there is no sign of what his precise objections were in *Thoughts and Details*.⁹

Given what we know about the circumstances surrounding its composition, there might appear to be an element of overkill in any

⁸ Burke, *Corr.*, VIII, p. 454.

⁹ There seems to be no basis for C. B. Macpherson's belief (*Burke*, Oxford, p. 52) that it was the 'spectre of Speenhamland' that provoked Burke to write *Thoughts and Details*, though he has been followed in this by others (see Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty*, p. 69). For the evidence as to why Speenhamland became an emblem for the problems of the Poor Laws only from 1815 onwards, see Poynter, *Society and Pauperism*, pp. 76-9.

comparison of Burke's pamphlet with what Smith has to say on the same subjects in the *Wealth of Nations*, notably in his chapters on wages, the relationship between wages and profits, and his analysis of the internal and external trade in corn. Influenced though it was by Burke's anxieties about events in France, and the problem of maintaining public order at home, however, *Thoughts and Details* contains sufficient evidence of its author's long-standing concerns to make it a fair example of his opinions and style of presenting them. He had made similar defences of the principle of non-intervention in the market for provisions in 1772 and 1787, before 'French madness' set in; and there are other opinions in *Thoughts and Details* that can be traced, as we shall see, to even earlier writings, notably to his *Vindication of Natural Society* published in 1756. The pamphlet can also be taken as support for Burke's claim that his expertise in political economy was independently acquired. By comparison with other leading political figures such as Pitt and Shelburne, and in view of the earlier friendship between Burke and Smith, it certainly seems significant that Burke did not cite the *Wealth of Nations* on any occasion.¹⁰ Discipleship therefore seems almost as unlikely as the opposite idea, namely that Burke was actually attacking Smith's use of the term 'labouring poor' in a work published twenty years earlier under quite different circumstances.¹¹

With regard to the Poor Laws, the subject around which much of the debate on poverty and pauperism centred after 1798, when Malthus's *Essay* first began to alter the public agenda, any comparison between Smith and Burke has to be purely speculative. Burke's outburst against Pitt on this subject is incoherent; and Smith confined his remarks on the Poor Laws to those regulations which had the effect of restricting the freedom of labour to move in response to higher wages and market opportunities. This has left commentators free to infer from Smith's silence with regard to the basic legal right to assistance under the Poor Laws that he was either a benign defender of them or simply unconcerned.¹² The safest course seems to be one of regretting that this was one of many, indeed potentially innumerable,

¹⁰ For Burke's claims to be self-educated in political economy, see *Letter to a Noble Lord* in *Works*, VI, p. 51. For Shelburne's open avowal of Smith's influence see p. 158 above. The equivalent evidence on Pitt is rehearsed in J. Ehrman's *The British Government and Commercial Negotiations with Europe, 1783-1793*, Cambridge, 1962, pp. 178-81; and the two volumes of his biography of *The Younger Pitt*, London, 1969 and 1983, I, pp. 277, 325, 512; II, pp. 445-7.

¹¹ Cf. Rothschild, 'Adam Smith and Conservative Economics', p. 87.

¹² Himmelfarb adopts the former position in *The Idea of Poverty*, p. 61. For a more ambitious attempt to show that Smith's silence does not imply indifference to the basic issues posed by the Poor Laws, see Dean, *The Constitution of Poverty*, pp. 122-44.

occasions on which Smith was remiss in failing to provide an answer to problems that were to become of great concern to his successors. We have to be content with noting what Smith had to say about related matters, especially wage-fixing and the market for provisions, where he also dealt extensively with the causes and remedies for dearth or acute scarcity.

On wages, the topic brought into question by Whitbread's minimum wage proposals, Burke's pamphlet begins with a denial of the suggestion that there could ever be any conflict of interest between the wage-contracting parties, provided that the bargain was arrived at without 'force or fraud, collusion or combination'. Under these circumstances it was 'absolutely impossible that their free contracts can be onerous to either party'.¹³ This tautological assertion begs the very question from which Smith's inquiry into wage determination begins. Smith held that the interest of the parties 'are by no means the same. The workmen desire to get as much, the masters to give as little as possible. The former are disposed to combine in order to raise, the latter in order to lower the wages of labour.'¹⁴ Only in the long run was it true to say that 'the workman may be as necessary to his master as his master is to him'. The long run was, however, irrelevant to wage negotiations in which immediate necessity undermined the position of the weaker party. In other words, unlike Burke, Smith did not assume the absence of collusion or combination, and he stressed the advantages in staying power and capacity to combine which masters always possessed, especially when there were 'no acts of parliament against combining to lower the price of work; but many against combining to raise it'.¹⁵ For some purposes, as we have seen, Smith contrasted the price-fixing capacities of urban merchants and manufacturers with the scattered competitive conditions ruling in agriculture. With regard to wage fixing, however, Smith treated all masters, in agriculture as well as in manufacturing, as being 'every where in a sort of tacit, but constant and uniform combination, not to raise the wages of labour above their actual rate'.¹⁶ Burke's talk of 'reciprocal necessities' might have struck Smith as the kind of rhetoric usually employed by masters.

Minimum-wage legislation did not present itself as a subject to Smith, and as the above quotations show, his emphasis fell on the bias

¹³ *Thoughts and Details* as reprinted in *WS*, ix, pp. 124-5.

¹⁴ *WN*, I.viii.11.

¹⁵ *WN*, I.viii.12.

¹⁶ *WN*, I.viii.13.

of legislation in favour of masters. When he returned to deal with the subject later in Book I of the *Wealth of Nations*, his conclusion was that: 'Whenever the law has attempted to regulate the wages of workmen, it has always been rather to lower them than to raise them.'¹⁷ Maximum wage legislation was, therefore, Smith's main concern, and it is difficult to imagine how Burke's opposition to *any* form of regulation could be reconciled with Smith's judgement that: 'When the regulation is in favour of the workmen, it is always just and equitable; but it is sometimes otherwise when in favour of the masters.'¹⁸ Smith's interest lay in counterbalancing the powers possessed by masters. The best solution might be one in which all forms of combination were outlawed; but on this, as on most legislative matters, Smith was not content to confine himself to ideal conditions. In an imperfect world, counterbalancing an existing imbalance constituted the best course of action from the point of view of both expediency and justice. We are faced here with a prime case where the traditional roles of the speculative philosopher and the ex-legislator and panegyrist for 'art' in managing the affairs of the nation were reversed; where the retired politician-cum-gentleman farmer was more anxious to reason from ideal competitive conditions than his philosophical counterpart.

It was an important part of Burke's case against minimum-wage fixing by magistrates to show that while wages did not depend on the price of provisions, they had in fact risen in line with provisions in recent decades. Although we can only speculate about what Smith's position might have been on these matters in 1796, Burke could have made general use of Smith's authority in arguing these points – if he had chosen to do so. According to Smith's system, wages depended on the demand and supply of labour rather than the price of food. In a nation enjoying capital accumulation and 'continual increase' of wealth, the expansion in the demand for labour would steadily be raising wages. In spite of combinations of employers and wage-fixing legislation operating against the interest of those who lived by sale of their labour, Smith interpreted the available empirical evidence as showing that wages were above the minimum level consistent with 'common humanity' in Britain. Indeed, he inferred that the real incomes of wage-earners had risen consistently during the eighteenth century as a result of falling food prices and the improved quality and variety of wage goods available.

¹⁷ *WN*, I.x.c.34.

¹⁸ *WN*, I.x.c.61.

Pitt too, in combating wage-fixing proposals, had to attack Whitbread's evidence, derived from Richard Price's pessimistic calculations, which suggested that since wages had lagged behind the price of food there had been no improvement in the condition of the labouring poor, and consequently little or no increase in population.¹⁹ This was an argument that Malthus was later to use against Smith, and when Smith himself had been faced with similar objections by Governor Pownall in 1776, he had chosen not to make any changes on this point in subsequent editions – though he did so on other matters raised by Pownall.²⁰ Pitt did in fact call on the authority of the 'most celebrated writers upon political economy' in his reply to Whitbread and Price, and on these points Pitt and Burke were both reflecting what can legitimately be called a Smithian position. Moreover, in making 'free circulation of labour' one of the main proposals for reforming the laws of settlement, Pitt was mirroring Smith's strongly expressed condemnation of these laws.

III

If we turn to Smith's case for removing all restrictions on the domestic corn trade, further parallels between his conclusions and those of Burke and Pitt emerge. Although Smith never leaves the reader in any doubt that he favours complete freedom of internal and external trade as the ultimate goal, his analysis consistently proceeds from the existing state of legislation and public opinion. He divided the corn trade into its four components – inland, import, export, and re-export trades – even though he recognised that they were often combined, because he wished to separate those cases where the interest of corn dealers did not always coincide with that of the public at large. Since the internal trade was quantitatively far more important than the external trades put together, however, he gave it priority in all respects. By this means, perhaps, he hoped to shift public attention away from its obsession with import and export regulations as the chief devices for encouraging domestic tillage.²¹ It was also with respect to the inland trade that Smith propounded what proved to be one of his most controversial

¹⁹ *Parliamentary History*, 12 February 1796, p. 706.

²⁰ See *WN*, I.viii.22n.

²¹ See *WN*, IV,v.b.28, where, despite his lack of faith in political arithmetic, Smith cites estimates that showed the inland trade was larger than the import trade by a factor of 570:1, with the equivalent figure for the export trade being 30:1.

propositions, namely that the interest of corn dealers, even in years of great scarcity, was always in harmony with that of the public. This conclusion was based on an assessment of the likely persistence of competition between farmers and dealers, the price-stabilising effects of speculation, and the rationing of supplies induced by price increases. Smith therefore imputed to government restrictions all that was popularly believed to be the result of unfair monopolistic practices by farmers and middle-men. Dearth was the result of *genuine* scarcity arising from crop failure and war; and 'a famine has never arisen from any other cause but the violence of government in attempting, by improper means, to remedy the inconveniencies of dearth'.²² The 'popular odium' in which dealers were held had self-fulfilling properties that were encouraged by government-inspired measures. So confident was Smith that removal of restrictions on engrossing and forestalling would be manifestly beneficial to the public that he ventured a rare prediction – one that proved wrong, as it happened – that freedom from restriction would put an end to popular fears and suspicions 'by taking away the great cause which encouraged and supported them'.²³

As with all systems or models, it would be possible to arrive at different conclusions by altering some of the basic assumptions – for example, with regard to competition among dealers and farmers, and the information available to participants on which expectations and actions could be based. But what seems worth stressing is that while Smith may have been making inaccurate assumptions on such matters, he was not making arbitrary ones for the sake of analytical convenience.²⁴ Theory played its part, as in all attempts to discern cause and effect, but so did observation and historical experience. Unlike his modern counterparts, Smith was not constructing ideal competitive models. Nor was he leaving legislators without guidance as to how they should deal with the world as it actually was, and as it appeared to those most closely affected.

Revealing these features of Smith's approach requires consideration of his treatment of the external as well as internal market for corn; they

²² *WN*, iv.v.b.5.

²³ *WN*, iv.v.b.26.

²⁴ On this subject, E. P. Thompson maintained that Smith's model was a purely long-term competitive one. In consequence, it was a 'superb, self-validating essay in logic', even 'counter-empirical'. This appears to conflict with other statements on its non-proven status, on the need for more information, and especially with the view that it 'conformed more closely to eighteenth-century realities' than the paternalist alternative; see 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd' in *Customs in Common*, pp. 203–7, 277–8.

could not be treated independently. On the subject of export bounties and import duties, Smith advanced another set of propositions that was distinctive. Any encouragement to domestic agricultural production from such measures depended on an improvement in the rate of return on this form of agricultural investment, and hence on an increase in the price of grain products relative to others. Against such a hope, Smith argued that: 'The nature of things has stamped upon corn a real value which cannot be altered by merely altering its money price.'²⁵ It followed that 'the money price of corn regulates that of all other home-made commodities', including the money price of labour. Thus a bounty on corn exports could be shown to be self-defeating in its object to raise profits in corn production because the rise in corn prices would be communicated via increases in money wages to the general price level, thereby leaving farmers and landowners in the same relative position to other trades. But while the bounty could not confer real benefit on corn producers, it represented a real burden on taxpayers and consumers, the latter by virtue of the higher price of subsistence goods resulting from the effect of induced exports on home market supplies. In turn, this effect on standards of living would either reduce the rate of population increase or raise money wages; and in both cases the result would be 'to stunt and restrain the gradual extension of the home-market' upon which the demand for domestically produced corn ultimately depended.²⁶

Import duties were subject to the same considerations; they could not alter the real return to agriculture, but free importation would stimulate foreign trade and 'the general industry of the country' through its effect in lowering the money price of other commodities. The dealers engaged in the external trade were the only beneficiaries of the system of bounties and duties. Existing import barriers, strictly enforced, were capable of causing distress during periods of grain scarcity, especially when operating in concert with bounties designed to encourage exports – a form of trade that could be directly opposed to the public interest whenever dearth at home coincided with famine conditions in neighbouring countries. The illogicalities of existing protective legislation were sufficiently revealed, in Smith's opinion, by the frequent need to suspend both duties and bounties during periods of scarcity.²⁷

²⁵ *WN*, iv.v.a.23.

²⁶ *WN*, iv.c.a.8.

²⁷ *WN*, iv.v.b.38.

Having assessed the situation from a purely national point of view, Smith went on to consider it from a cosmopolitan perspective: what would happen if all nations pursued free trade policies? Again, there could be no doubt as to the best solution: complete freedom of trade would be 'the best palliative of a dearth' and 'the most effectual preventative of a famine'. The larger the free trade area, and the cheaper the costs of transport, the greater would be the benefits to all concerned. But this was not the way in which international trade was at present conducted, and in a second-best world it might not be rational or prudent, especially for small states, to follow a free trade policy – for the reasons noted in an earlier essay.²⁸ While small states could not afford to take the risks involved, the same could not be said of large countries like France and England, where corn exports were a small proportion of total agricultural output. And at this point Smith fortified his analysis of expediency by an appeal to considerations of justice: 'To hinder, besides, the farmer from sending his goods at all times to the best market, is evidently to sacrifice the ordinary laws of justice to an idea of public utility, to a sort of reasons of state.'²⁹ On this occasion, it should be noted, Smith was not claiming overriding status for natural justice, but he went on to say that reasons of state could 'be pardoned only in cases of the most urgent necessity'. The conclusion was based, therefore, on a balance of priorities for which a high price at which exportation of corn was prohibited provided a solution, where Smith's view, of course, was that it 'ought always to be a very high price'.

Finally, there were those issues raised by public opinion on which Smith recognised that anything affecting the trade in subsistence goods aroused strong feelings akin to those relating to religion: 'The people feel themselves so much interested in what relates either to their subsistence in this life, or to their happiness in a life to come, that government must yield to their prejudices, and, in order to preserve the public tranquility, establish that system they approve of.'³⁰ Clearly, this was not an immovable barrier because Smith proceeded to give reasons why the opinion that attributed British prosperity to the bounty was based on illegitimate *post hoc* inferences. British prosperity was more properly attributable to the general security which individuals had enjoyed under the rule of law since the Revolution of 1688. Similar encouragements to the corn trade had been enacted in other countries,

²⁸ See pp. 161–2 above.

²⁹ *WN*, iv.v.b.39.

³⁰ *WN*, iv.v.b.40.

but they were less prosperous than Britain because 'this bad policy is not in these countries counter-balanced by the general liberty and security of the people'.³¹ In reviewing the latest British legislation on the subject, the Act of 1772, Smith welcomed the lowering of the prices at which duties and bounties became payable, and the warehousing provisions. But he criticised the clauses which extended the bounty to other grain products, and the prohibitions on exportation at a price which he considered too low. He also thought it had been a mistake to forbid exportation at the same price level at which the bounty was payable: 'The bounty ought certainly either to have been withdrawn at a much lower price, or exportation ought to have been allowed at a much higher.'³²

IV

At this point Burke can be conveniently brought back into the picture. Not only had he played a major part in drafting the 1772 Act, but there is some evidence that he remonstrated with Smith over his criticisms, leading Smith to add a couple of mollifying sentences that are a reminder of a central theme in an earlier essay: 'With all its imperfections, however, we may perhaps say of [the Act] what was said of the laws of Solon, that, though not the best in itself, it is the best which the interests, prejudices, and temper of the times would admit of. It may in due time prepare the way for a better.'³³ From Burke's statements of pride in his part in securing the Act, and his defence of its provisions on subsequent occasions, this could be a case where he might have found Smith's concession patronising. In 1772 he opposed any suggestion that the price at which the bounty became payable should be reduced, citing its benefits in securing an export market in corn and encouraging corn production – consequences which Smith was to dispute four years later.³⁴ It is also worth remembering at this point that Burke was not prepared to countenance any relaxation of the regulations on American trade during the dispute with the colonies – a policy central to Smith's proposals.³⁵ In 1796, when advocating the policy of leaving wages and food prices to the market, Burke did not recommend any

³¹ *WN*, iv.v.b.45.

³² *WN*, iv.v.b.52.

³³ *WN*, iv.v.b.53.

³⁴ *Parliamentary History*, 4 May 1772, pp. 480–2.

³⁵ See pp. 138, 139–40 above.

relaxation of the legislation affecting external trade. Thus although Burke sounds like Smith when excusing middlemen from charges of exacerbating scarcity, he is merely defending the status quo, which entailed retaining a considerable measure of protection to landowners and farmers. Although farming was, in Burke's opinion, a peculiarly vulnerable activity, it was like any other in being subject to 'the common principles of commerce'. But these common principles stopped short at Britain's ports. Of Smith's distinctive argument that 'agriculture is subject to other laws, and to be governed by other principles', supporting the conclusion that attempts to raise corn prices and profits through regulations on the external trade would be self-defeating, there is no trace in Burke's pamphlet. It was hardly the kind of argument likely to appeal to any spokesman for the agricultural interest – one of the guises in which Burke appeared on this occasion.

It will also be clear that Smith made greater allowance for the strength of popular feeling on the subject of subsistence than Burke was willing to do in the 1790s, or, indeed, when faced with earlier pleas for the revival of laws against forestalling. Although Burke made an elaborate defence of 'prejudice' in his *Reflections*, when it came to the question of scarcity at home there is little sign of his wishing to see the government yield to popular feeling in the interests of tranquillity. Quite the opposite, in fact, for Burke's increasing concern with the problem of public order meant that he regarded any weakness on the part of government as tantamount to encouragement of popular disorder. As on other matters, there were great dangers from 'the fury of speculating under circumstances of irritation'. Any attempt to create public granaries would not only be cheating farmers and landowners of a fair return on their capital, but the granaries would become the targets of 'popular phrensy' on the part of the town populations in which they were situated. And here 'French madness' is relevant because Burke closed *Thoughts and Details* with another outburst against the French 'parricides', reminding his readers that one of the faults of the French monarchy was 'a restless desire of governing too much' – an attitude that was enfeebling to authority because it meant that government was made the guilty party in situations for which it should never have assumed responsibility.³⁶

On one aspect of Burke's later reputation – namely as the embodiment of Whig gradualism, favouring renovation of political institutions

³⁶ See *Thoughts and Details* in *WS*, ix, pp. 135, 144–5.

over innovation – Smith’s attitude towards the implementation of free trade provides, once more, a better illustration of this disposition than can be found in Burke himself. Smith’s advice contains a good deal of practical ingenuity of a kind that we have already noticed when dealing with the price at which import duties or export bounties became payable. On the larger question of how free trade should be implemented, as in dealing with the post-revolutionary America, Smith offered equally useful advice. He argued that a countervailing duty on imported goods was justifiable when domestically produced goods were subject to taxation; but the duty should not be so great as to confer protection on home goods. Nor should it be extended to other goods as part of a case for offsetting the more general disadvantages from which a country’s industry was believed to suffer. Smith also accepted that retaliatory restrictions might be justified, but only when there was a chance of their producing the desired effect in reducing foreign trade barriers in a short period. He drew attention to the distributional consequences of such devices by pointing out that they required the whole community to pay for a system that benefited some producers, though not those adversely affected by foreign tariffs. Smith advised that the withdrawal of protection from trades which employed ‘a great multitude of hands’ should be accomplished ‘only by slow gradations, and with a good deal of reserve and circumspection’.³⁷

As a guide to the process, however, Smith mentioned those trades that were unlikely to suffer (those successfully exporting goods without subsidy), and pointed out that re-employment of large numbers of disbanded soldiers had usually proved to be more rapid than expected. It was certainly easier, he thought, ‘to change the direction of industry from one sort of labour to another, than to turn idleness and dissipation to any’.³⁸ In manufacturing there were frequently collateral trades which could be expanded, and as long as the capital of a nation was not impaired, free movement of labour would enable total employment to be maintained at much the same level after protection was removed. Achieving such mobility, however, entailed abolition of exclusive corporate privileges and the statute of apprentices – another major plank in Smith’s programme for legislative reform which if *not* implemented constituted a second-best constraint on movement to the best solution. Smith recognised that where large capitals were involved, an ‘equitable regard’ for the interests of those sustaining losses ‘requires

³⁷ *WN*, iv.ii.40.

³⁸ *WN*, iv.ii.42.

that change should never be introduced suddenly, but slowly, gradually, and after a very long warning'.³⁹

The final part of Burke's pamphlet is remarkable for a statement on 'one of the finest problems in legislation', namely: 'What the state ought to take upon itself to direct by the public wisdom, and what it ought to leave, with as little interference as possible, to individual discretion'.⁴⁰ Dugald Stewart was later to cite this passage as a statement of one of the main themes of the *Wealth of Nations*.⁴¹ While true in general, Stewart's memory of Burke's illustrations of what belonged to the public realm was at fault if he felt that they too captured Smith's meaning. Among the functions that Burke regarded as inherently public are two – 'the exterior establishment of its religion' and regulation of those 'corporations that owe their existence to its fiat'. On the first of these, as we have seen, Smith entertained views that would not have been congenial to Burke; and on the second there is the entire body of Smith's analysis of trading corporations, such as the East India Company, to show that he regarded such bodies as incompatible with his conception of economic efficiency and the likely capacity of governments to exercise control in the public interest.

V

Thoughts and Details contains other material that brings us back to the 'oeconomy of greatness'. It also enables us to return to one of the peculiarities of Burke's defence of church property in the *Reflections* that was mentioned earlier. Thus in *Thoughts and Details* Burke employs some heavy-handed irony on the relationship between the rich and poor in society: cutting the throats of the rich in order to redistribute their property would not benefit those whose sheer number alone casts them in the role of supporters of the rich, who were described, again ironically, as 'dependent pensioners'.⁴² This was part of the attack on fashionable cant about the 'labouring poor' which Burke continued, as the opening epigraph shows, in his other post-revolutionary writings. In *Thoughts and Details* he posed another ironical question: should the labourer who is unable to support his family from his work at existing food prices be 'abandoned to the flinty heart and griping hand of base

³⁹ *WN*, iv.ii.44.

⁴⁰ See *Thoughts and Details* in *WS*, ix, p. 143.

⁴¹ See 'Account of the Life of Adam Smith' in *EPS*, p. 345n.

⁴² See *Thoughts and Details* in *WS*, ix, p. 121.

self-interest, supported by the sword of law'? Burke's answer, invoking Pufendorf's authority, was that those who 'can claim nothing according to the rules of commerce and the principles of justice', where 'perfect' obligations were involved, would have to content themselves with the 'imperfect obligation' of charity.⁴³

The distinction corresponds with another made towards the end of *Thoughts and Details*, already noted, namely between what is 'truly and properly' public – justice in this case – and what belongs to the realm of 'manners', to which politicians 'may give a leaning, but they cannot give a law'. Smith had also made use of this natural law distinction between perfect and imperfect obligations when dealing with the duties of the legislator, notably when advancing his own theory of commutative as opposed to distributive justice.⁴⁴ For Burke, however, the entire discussion of relations between rich and poor takes place inside a theological framework within which there is a divinely ordained 'chain of subordination' reaching down from the landowner to the farmer to his labourers and on to the beasts of the field.⁴⁵ Hence, too, Burke's equation of the laws of commerce with the laws of God, and his treatment of scarcity as an instance of 'divine displeasure'.⁴⁶ In other words, Burke's opinions here and in other post-revolutionary writings have some of the characteristics of a sermon preaching Christian resignation in the face of this world's accidents and injustices. Although, on this occasion at least, Burke's rage and irony deflect the secular reader's attention in the direction of treating such opinions as an offer of opium to the masses, it is necessary, once more, to give credit to the authentic qualities of his religious beliefs. If the consolations of religion in the face of poverty, disease, and death were genuine, as Burke clearly believed, they were not confined to one section of the population. Moreover, it would also have been seriously remiss of him *not* to mention these consolations if he regarded the economic affairs of this world as part of a divine dispensation that included rewards beyond the grave.⁴⁷

Once this point is accepted, there is little reason to doubt the authenticity of other expressions of Burke's sympathy for the plight of

⁴³ See *ibid.*, p. 129.

⁴⁴ See pp. 100–1 above.

⁴⁵ See *Thoughts and Details* in *WS*, ix, p. 125.

⁴⁶ See *ibid.*, p. 137.

⁴⁷ See R. Hole, *Pulpits, Politics and Public Order in England, 1760–1832*, Cambridge, 1989, pp. 140–1 for a salutary reminder of an obvious fact that is now more easily overlooked.

the poor, labouring or otherwise. The best-known example of such expressions can be found in his *Vindication of Natural Society*.

The most obvious Division of Society is into Rich and Poor; and it is no less obvious, that the Number of the former bear a great Disproportion to those of the latter. The whole Business of the Poor is to administer to the Idleness, Folly, and Luxury of the Rich; and that of the Rich, in return, is to find the best Methods of confirming the Slavery and increasing the Burthens of the Poor. In a State of Nature, it is an invariable Law, that a Man's Acquisitions are in proportion to his Labours. In a State of Artificial Society, it is a Law as constant and as invariable, that those who labour most, enjoy the fewest Things; and that those who labour not at all, have the greatest Number of Enjoyments . . . I suppose that there are in *Great Britain* upwards of an hundred thousand People employed in Lead, Tin, Iron, Copper, and Coal Mines; these unhappy Wretches scarce ever see the Light of the Sun; they are buried in the Bowels of the Earth; there they work at a severe and dismal Task, without the least Prospect of being delivered from it; they subsist upon the coarsest and worst sort of Fare; they have their Health miserably impaired, and their lives cut short, by being perpetually confined in the close Vapour of these malignant Minerals. An hundred thousand more at least are tortured with Remission by the suffocating Smoak, intense Fires, and constant Drudgery necessary in refining and managing the Products . . . etc.⁴⁸

The satirical purpose of the *Vindication* – a *reductio ad absurdum* practised on Bolingbroke's aprioristic deism by applying it to the subject of Rousseau's recently published discourse on inequality – tends to deflect attention away from the underlying sentiment. Yet it may be worth suspending judgement for a moment by first recalling that Smith had made use of a similar rhetoric on rich and poor when dealing with the providential features of the invisible hand in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and when laying the groundwork for his non-providential discussion of the benefits of the division of labour in early drafts of the *Wealth of Nations*.⁴⁹ What is entirely absent from Smith's secular treatment of the 'oeconomy of greatness', however, is the idea of a divine chain of command which equates actual conditions with divinely guided ones. When Smith deals with the problem of inequality in practical and historical terms, he is anxious to underline *actual* benefits and *real* injustices that have this-worldly solutions. In other words, Smith was offering something more to the poor than the consolations of religion.

⁴⁸ Burke: *Pre-Revolutionary Writings*, edited by I. Harris, pp. 50–1.

⁴⁹ Compare Burke's statement from the *Vindication* with the quotations from Smith on pp. 62–3 above.

From Burke's perspective, as revealed in *Thoughts and Details*, of course, Smith was either offering more than should be promised (or could be delivered), or less than any believer should accept. And at this point it is worth considering Burke's analysis of the confiscation of church property in France, which contains another powerful statement on the positive *and* negative features of the 'great wheel of circulation'. In one respect, of course, Burke was merely calling upon a well-established argument showing how luxury expenditure served as the means by which the social surplus was circulated, diffused, and transferred as employment to the poor. Yet it provides the basis for a rhetorical exercise that is as extraordinary in its own way as his set-piece on chivalry and the indignities to which Marie Antoinette was subjected. Lengthy citation is needed to appreciate its peculiarities.

In every prosperous community something more is produced than goes to the immediate support of the producer. This surplus forms the income of the landed capitalist. It will be spent by a proprietor who does not labour. But this idleness is itself the spring of labour; this repose the spur to industry. The only concern of the state is, that the capital taken in rent from the land, should be returned again to the industry from whence it came; and that its expenditure should be with the least possible detriment to the morals of those who expend it, and to those of the people to whom it is returned.

In all the views of the receipt, expenditure, and personal employment, a sober legislator would carefully compare the possessor whom he was recommended to expel, with the stranger who was proposed to fill his place. Before 'the inconveniences are incurred which *must* attend all violent revolutions in property through extensive confiscation, we ought to have some rational assurance that the purchasers of the confiscated property will be in a considerable degree more labourious, more virtuous, more sober, less disposed to extort an unreasonable proportion of the gains of the labourer, or to consume on themselves a larger share than is fit for the measure of an individual, or that they should be qualified to dispense the surplus in a more steady and equal mode, so as to answer the purposes of a politic expenditure, than the old possessors, call those possessors, bishops, or canons, or commendatory abbots, or monks, or what you please. The monks are lazy. Be it so. Suppose them no otherwise employed than by singing in the choir. They are as usefully employed as those who neither sing nor say. As usefully even as those who sing upon the stage. They are as usefully employed as if they worked from dawn to dark in the innumerable servile, degrading, unseemly, unmanly, and often unwholesome and pestiferous occupations, to which by the social oeconomy so many wretches are inevitably doomed. If it were not generally pernicious to disturb the natural course of things and to impede in any degree the great wheel of circulation which is turned by the strangely-directed labour of these unhappy people, I should be infinitely more inclined

forcibly to rescue them from their miserable industry than violently to disturb the tranquil repose of monastic quietude. Humanity, and perhaps policy, might better justify me in the one than in the other. It is a subject on which I have often reflected, and never reflected without feeling from it. I am sure that no consideration, except the necessity of submitting to the yoke of luxury and the despotism of fancy, who in their own imperious way will distribute the surplus product of the soil, can justify the toleration of such trades and employments in a well-regulated state. But for this purpose of distribution, it seems to me, that the idle expences of monks are quite as well directed as the idle expences of us lay-loiterers.⁵⁰

This double-edged defence of the yoke of luxury and a policy of leaving things to their natural course has an obvious polemical purpose in fortifying Burke's attack on the new owners of church property in France. It also makes use of another standard feature of the defence of luxury by comparing 'durable magnificence' – libraries, paintings, statues, and 'majestic edifices of religion' – with 'the painted booths and sordid sties of vice and luxury'. Yet, as Burke admits, both forms of expenditure must be tolerated 'not from love of them, but for fear of worse. We tolerate them, because property and liberty, to a degree, require that toleration.' What has been strategically dropped from Burke's analysis here is Smith's distinction between productive and unproductive labour, the useful labour and frugality prompted by our desire for self-improvement that underlies capital accumulation and economic growth. Neither ecclesiastical establishments nor opera singers ('those who sing upon the stage' are in exactly the same position as Burke's monks who sing in choirs) were productive in this sense. Circulation, not growth, is the only point being brought into play by Burke in this instance. Yet this oversight can legitimately be called strategic or temporary because Burke's *Letters on a Regicide Peace* are a detailed record of Britain's economic (and hence taxable) capacity to wage successful war against France that takes past growth for granted and seeks to reassure the faint-hearted that the increase in the national debt to support expenditure on war will not seriously impair future growth. The 'love of lucre' on the part of the monied interest, those whose willingness to invest in public credit is essential in war, may have vicious consequences, but it remains 'the grand cause of the prosperity to all states':

In this natural, this reasonable, this powerful, this prolific principle, it is for the satirist to expose the ridiculous: it is for the moralist to censure the vicious;

⁵⁰ *Reflections* in *WS*, VIII, pp. 209–10.

it is for the sympathetic heart to reprobate the hard and cruel; it is for the judge to animadvert on the fraud, the extortion, and the oppression; but it is for the statesman to employ it as he finds it, with all its concomitant excellencies, with all its imperfections on its head.⁵¹

The monied interest that was the source of so much danger amid France's unstable republican institutions could be induced to serve the public interest in Britain. Moreover, the tax burden was more readily borne by a nation whose habits had long been conducive to growth:

With us, labour and frugality, the parents of riches, are spared, and wisely too. The moment men cease to augment the common stock, the moment they no longer enrich it by their industry or their self-denial, their luxury and even their ease are obliged to pay contribution to the public; not because they are vicious principles, but because they are unproductive.⁵²

The other peculiarity of the argument on church property in the *Reflections* lies in its stress on the 'unwholesome and pestiferous occupations, to which by the social oeconomy so many wretches are inevitably doomed' – a sentiment that echoes the *Vindication* and is not brought under suspicion by being part of a satirical pastiche. By assuming that Burke was genuinely concerned about the double-edged nature of the yoke of luxury, we obtain a rather different portrait from the ones frequently derived from *Thoughts and Details*: hard-headed economic liberal, 'out and out bourgeois', frank apologist for the necessarily exploitive nature of the existing social order, and so on. As we have seen, most of the imputed parallels with Smith which have been used to frame this portrait do not stand up to close examination, especially when the overtly theological elements in Burke's thinking are taken seriously. Knowledgeable commentators on Burke's deployment of religion as part of his defence of the established order have discerned an 'erastian after-taste'.⁵³ This may well be true, but whereas Smith's erastianism in such matters was positively Machiavellian, Burke's leaves room for legitimate doubt.

What we obtain instead, however, is confirmation of the versatility of arguments about luxury and inequality based on the great wheel of circulation, and hence an indication of some of the possibilities open to

⁵¹ *Letters on a Regicide Peace* in *WS*, ix, p. 347.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 348–9.

⁵³ I owe the term 'erastian after-taste' to J. R. Dinwiddy's 'Interpretations of anti-Jacobinism' in M. Philp (ed.), *The French Revolution and British Popular Politics*, Cambridge, 1991, p. 45. Less erastian (more genuinely devout?) defences can be cited, but this does not invalidate the view that Burke was never *entirely* erastian in his beliefs.

the successors of both Burke and Smith. Thus it was precisely the injection of a systematic theological dimension into the discussion of mass poverty by Malthus that was not only to concentrate the minds and fire of many of his critics, but to separate him from the more secular devotees of political economy who followed in Smith's footsteps during the first three decades of the nineteenth century. Equally significantly, William Godwin, Malthus's initial target, regarded Burke's *Vindication* as 'a treatise in which the evils of the existing political institutions are displayed with incomparable force of reasoning and lustre of eloquence', despite the author's intention 'to show that these evils were to be considered as trivial'.⁵⁴ Godwin's own analysis of the slavery to which luxury expenditure condemned the poor, as we shall see, certainly bears a close resemblance to Burke's, whatever may have been Burke's intentions.

To Paine and others, Burke's rigid distinction between perfect and imperfect rights, between justice and charity, called for outright rejection. Although Paine, in his earlier writings, had given a blessing to inequalities arising from 'natural' commercial pursuits – those taking place without monopolies and exclusive privileges – when he came to write the second part of the *Rights of Man* and *Agrarian Justice* there was a shift of emphasis in favour of redistributive politics. This shift probably owes something to the provocation offered by Burke's defence of property and a great deal to Paine's participation, along with Condorcet and other Girondins, in post-revolutionary French discussions of the ways in which inequality undermined those manners considered necessary to establish republics in large states.⁵⁵ A problem that posed few difficulties for republican institutions in America (though not in the eyes of Price, as we have seen) had far greater significance when dealing with the preconditions for success in corrupted European states such as France and Britain. The new emphasis also differentiated Paine from Smith, for whom the distinction between perfect and imperfect rights, commutative and distributive justice, was one that required the 'greatest delicacy' to breach. It was this that

⁵⁴ W. Godwin, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* in *PPW*, III, p. 8.

⁵⁵ In this respect, as recent commentators have stressed, the Burke–Paine controversy should not be seen exclusively as a contest between 'conservatism' and revolution, but as between 'conservatism' and 'redistributive radicalism'. Again, the phrase is J. R. Dinwiddy's; see 'Interpretations of anti-Jacobinism', p. 40. A similar reinterpretation stressing equality can be found in G. Claeys, 'The French Revolution Debate and British Political Thought', *History of Political Thought*, 11 (1990), 59–80; and M. Philp, 'The Fragmented Ideology of Reform' in Philp (ed.), *The French Revolution and British Popular Politics*, p. 53.

made Paine and Condorcet egalitarians of the social insurance variety, and hence, along with Godwin, one of Malthus's targets when attacking 'systems of equality'.

Finally, for those erstwhile supporters of the revolution in France among the romantic poets, those who later assumed Burke's newly woven 'conservative' mantle during the first decades of the nineteenth century, the unwholesome and pestiferous occupations of a society that was increasingly reliant on urban manufacturing activities required a revival of other aspects of Burke's position that would not be apparent to the reader of *Thoughts and Details* alone: a revitalised ideal for the landed interest and an equally revitalised role for the established church. These concerns with what was happening in Britain during the Napoleonic wars, of course, went beyond Burke's romantic admirers. Indeed, they are perhaps more readily associated with Paine's heirs and successors, the large and amorphous body of radical and, later, socialist opinion that was reacting to economic changes occurring in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Affinities between romantic ultra-Tories and the new economic Jacobins have often been noticed, along with a further assumption that the friendly exchanges between these extremes were largely taking place across a bleak space occupied by an indiscriminate group of middle-class Whigs and radicals, represented chiefly by the Benthamites and Smith's disciples within the political economy community.⁵⁶ This certainly captures some strategic aspects of the alignments and antagonisms, though the identity of ideas does not always conform with what can be attributed to them on the basis of class location and supposed ideological import. The Benthamites were no less jacobinical in the eyes of many Whigs, let alone of those who came to occupy an ultra-Tory position on ecclesiastical and constitutional reform in the 1820s. Indeed, the fears created by the French revolution of a popular revolt led by middle-class theorists could be awakened as much by a Benthamite such as James Mill as they were by Paine, Godwin, Thomas Spence, or Robert Owen.⁵⁷ Moreover, what the labouring poor were entitled to expect as of right, and what legitimate visions the future held in prospect, did not always conform with class allegiances, actual, imputed, or chosen. An entry into this

⁵⁶ See E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, London, 1963, reprinted 1968, p. 379.

⁵⁷ The charge of jacobinism was levelled at James Mill by T. B. Macaulay; see *Edinburgh Review*, 46 (1827), 261.

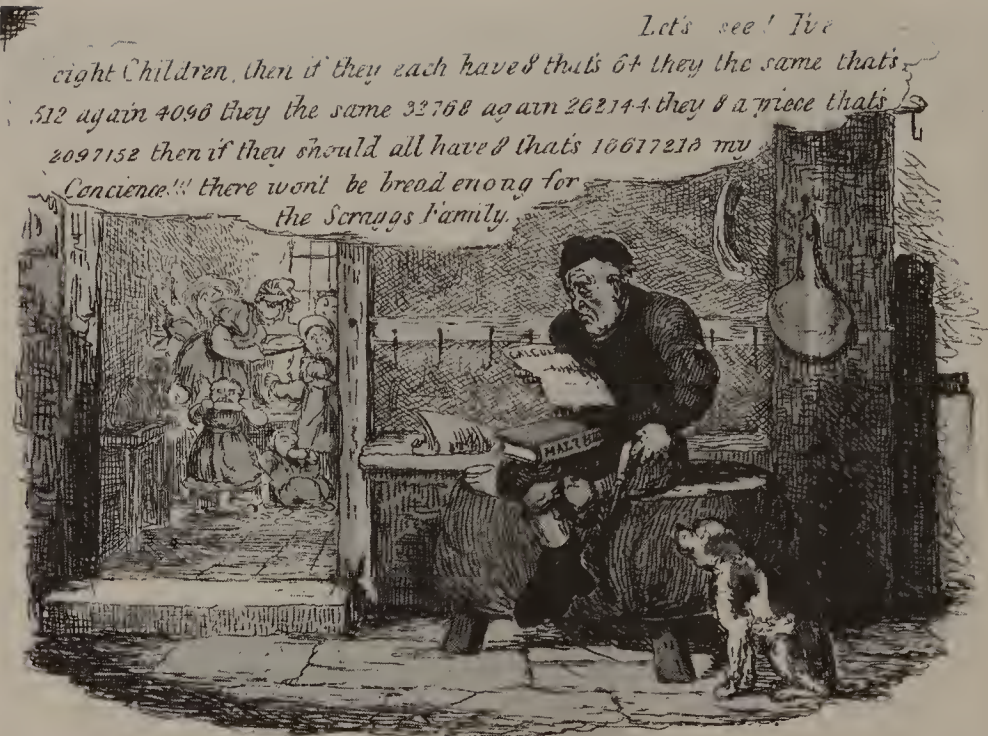
complex realm can best be effected by considering the political and moral bearings of Malthus's *Essay on Population*, the first edition of which undoubtedly did much to concentrate attention on the limits to future hopes through institutional change.

PART III

Robert Malthus as political moralist

A man who is born into a world already possessed, if he cannot get subsistence from his parents on whom he has a just demand, and if society do not want his labour, has no claim of *right* to the smallest portion of food, and, in fact, has no business to be where he is. At nature's mighty feast there is no vacant cover for him. She tells him to be gone, and will quickly execute her own orders, if he do not work on the compassion of some of her guests. If these guests get up and make room for him, other intruders immediately appear demanding the same favour. The report of a provision for all that come fills the hall with numerous claimants. The order and harmony of the feast is disturbed, the plenty that before reigned is changed into scarcity; and the happiness of the guests is destroyed by the spectacle of misery and dependence in every part of the hall, and by the clamorous importunity of those who are justly enraged at not finding the provisions which they had been taught to expect. The guests learn too late their error, in counteracting those strict orders to all intruders, issued by the great mistress of the feast, who, wishing that all her guests should have plenty, and knowing that she could not provide for unlimited numbers, humanely refused to admit fresh comers when her table was already full.

T. R. Malthus, *Essay on the Principle of Population*, 1803



A MALTHUSIAN

Plate 3. This is a vignette from *The March of Intellect* (R. Seymour, 1829), labelled *A Malthusian*. It depicts a butcher saying, 'Let's see! I've eight Children, then if they each have 8 that's 64 they the same again that's 512 again 4096 they the same 32768 again 262144 they 8 apiece that's 2097512 then if they should all have 8 that's 16617216 my Conscience!!! there won't be bread enough for the Scraggs Family.'

Imminence and immediacy: initial bearings

I

The epigraph to the essays in this part of the book has lingered longer in the memory of Malthus's critics than any other. Although the paragraph appeared for only three of the twenty-eight years during which the *Essay on Population* was the chief medium through which Malthus expressed his changing views on the political and moral dilemmas posed by the population principle, as an epitome of all that seems most uncaring about the theory of riches and poverty attached to his name, it has proved too convenient to be allowed to slip from public memory. For surely here was Malthus encouraging the rich, those with a secure seat at nature's feast, not to endanger the entire event by some unreflecting act of sympathy for those whose labour could not earn them a place of their own. The attack on the right to relief also seems an exact echo of Burke's angry denunciation of the idea that the labouring poor deserved, or should be led by their governors to expect, anything more than Christian charity. Although Malthus, rather pointedly, never referred to Burke's *Thoughts and Details*, there are clear parallels between the two men's preoccupations with pauperism under conditions of post-revolutionary political unrest and the distress associated with recurrent food shortage. Add to this the fact that the main targets of Malthus's first *Essay*, Godwin and Condorcet, were closely connected with many of Burke's radical opponents, especially Paine, with Condorcet featuring in Burke's litany of treacherous *philosophes* as a 'fanatic atheist, and furious democratick Republican', and the parallels between Malthus and Burke seem tightly drawn.¹

¹ *Thoughts on French Affairs*, in *WS*, VIII, p. 369; see also reference to the 'impious sophistry' of Condorcet in *Letter to a Noble Lord*, *WS*, IX, p. 186.

By undermining ideas of human perfectibility that were closely associated with Rousseau and the French revolution, Malthus appeared to be engaged not merely on an anti-jacobin crusade, but even possibly on one that carried wider implications of a kind later attributed to Burke as part of a 'conservative' revolt against the eighteenth century. Malthus's clerical allegiances and use of theological arguments equating the natural laws governing the physical and moral universe with those created by a benevolent deity have helped to confirm the anti-enlightenment character of his ideas – to all those, at least, who believe that irreligion and anti-clericalism are infallible marks of enlightenment. Yet against this one could argue that it was precisely because this was true of French versions of enlightenment that Malthus, and all those believers who agreed with him, was not prepared to concede that Christianity was incompatible with the promises held out by science in all its forms, natural and moral. Hence their efforts to prove not merely that enlightenment was compatible with Christianity, but that Christianity, properly interpreted, was the highest form of enlightenment. As was noted in the Prologue to this book, however, the pessimistic, reactionary, and 'demoralising' tendencies of Malthus's contribution to social thought have become a standard feature of the ideological archaeologies of the period. Indeed, as a term of opprobrium, 'Malthusian', already in currency during Malthus's life, can be applied to the entire period neatly demarcated by the publication of the first *Essay* in 1798 and the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, with Malthus often being credited or charged with responsibility for this Act in the final year of his life. Nature's orders were to be reinforced by abolishing the right of able-bodied labourers to outdoor relief; by ensuring that indoor relief was to be available only on a 'less eligible' basis that did not make its recipients as well off as those who depended on the going market wage for free labour; and by underlining the lesson that parents, in making the decision to marry and hence procreate, were primarily responsible for the fate of their offspring and their own chances of a seat at nature's feast.

The essays that follow are concerned with some central features of the Malthusian controversy during this period. The elements of truth and untruth in the above story have become so confused over the years that it seems essential to return to simpler beginnings. This can be done by first considering the spirit in which the initial controversy between Godwin and Malthus was conducted during the period that culminated in 1803, when Malthus produced the second edition of his *Essay* – a

learned quarto bearing his name for the first time. By interpreting the controversy as it evolved and through the eyes of its main participants, rather than in the light of how it later came to be seen, it is possible to appreciate what Godwin and Malthus had in common as well as what divided them. The first five years of the controversy, indeed, represent one of those rare events in intellectual history (or in life generally, for that matter) in which the protagonists not only shared a large number of assumptions but were determined as a matter of conviction and good philosophical manners to treat each other with courtesy and candour. Malthus – a previously unknown author who was criticising Godwin at the peak of his reputation – allowed himself some gentle satire in dealing with Godwin's more extravagant speculations about man's likely future conquest over death and his sexual appetites. But there is, as we shall see, a marked contrast between such satire and the kind of anti-jacobinical abuse that Godwin began to receive from other quarters at the same time.

There is a more striking contrast between the first phase of the Malthus–Godwin dispute and the intemperance that characterised the attacks on Malthus mounted by Southey and Coleridge, with Wordsworth adding his condemnation during the latter part of his life. In making this assault on Malthus the early romantics were ably abetted by Hazlitt, an ally who turned enemy when they forsook the radicalism they had shared in youth. Since each of these figures went through a Godwinian phase that left some indelible marks on their writings, consideration of the Malthus–Godwin dispute is a necessary prelude to any treatment of that subject. Thus if Malthus originally chose to make himself known to the public by adopting a position that entailed a polemical inversion of Godwin's speculations, so Hazlitt and the romantics did something similar with regard to Malthus. He became, or rather what they attributed to him became, a negative defining element in the construction of their identities as public commentators. Since they also sought to distance themselves from Godwin, however, their inversion did not result in a simple restoration of what Malthus had overturned. For the mature Coleridge in particular, Godwin and Malthus were both tainted by their adherence to utilitarian styles of argument that needed to be counteracted by the revival of purified, more Platonic versions of philosophy and religion. Although no attempt will be made in what follows to characterise Coleridge's alternative philosophy, taken as a whole, the grounds on which he chose, at an early stage of the

romantic attack, to reject Malthus's position will be considered in some detail.

On a less rarefied philosophical plane, that occupied by constitutional politics under circumstances of war with Napoleonic France, and by post-war diagnoses of the condition of the nation, the Lake poets pursued a line that can be loosely described as Burkean. Protecting what seemed most under threat in Britain during the first third of the nineteenth century involved the revival, perhaps even creation, of an inheritance that could be associated with Burke's stance in the face of the French revolution and domestic attacks on church and state at home. The threat came first from Napoleon and those in Britain who were either opposed to, or did not seem willing to prosecute with vigour, the war against France. Similar threats to national stability, even national identity and survival, were later to be posed by the rise of the 'manufacturing system' seen as an unprecedented development. This perception was underlined by post-war economic distress, the rising number of able-bodied paupers seeking public relief, and popular unrest – with the last being represented by Luddism and Peterloo. One part of Burke's inheritance that the romantics did *not* choose to acknowledge or perpetuate, however, was his non-interventionist attitude to remedies for the 'labouring poor' – a term Burke disliked for its sentimentalism, but which Coleridge, for the opposite reason, found 'an ominous but too appropriate change in our phraseology'.²

The circumstances of the British economy during the Napoleonic wars posed problems that have no counterpart in Burke's writings. The stimulus given to British commerce and manufacturing raised worrying questions concerning the optimal balance between agrarian necessities and ways of life, and the living and working conditions to be found in the new manufacturing towns and districts. Burke had regretted the necessity of submitting to the yoke of luxury, but he could not have foreseen the rapidity with which the numbers subjected to that yoke would grow. Nor, on the credit side of the account, could he have realised the extent to which manufacturing would increasingly entail goods that represented 'conveniencies' for the mass of society rather than items of luxury consumption for the rich. Coming to terms with the consequences of these observations was a prominent feature of Malthus's writings as well as those of Southey and Coleridge; and since

² See *Lay Sermon* in *CW*, vi, p. 207; cf. Burke's remark on p. 198 above.

they were often writing in parallel with one another, an opportunity exists for comparison of their respective reactions and diagnoses.

After Napoleon had been defeated, the danger perceived by the romantics assumed the menacing form of an imminent revolt of the masses equivalent in scope to the French revolution. While they canvassed various remedies for moral regeneration and improvement in the economic condition of the poor, changes in the established ecclesiastical and constitutional order in Britain appeared to them as signs of capitulation in the face of demagogic pressures that could prove just as destructive of their idea of British nationality as anything associated with Napoleonic France. On such matters, there did appear to be a parallel between their own fears and those of Burke when faced with clamour for constitutional reform under conditions of political instability. As Wordsworth succinctly put it when asked for his opinion on the Reform Bill: 'I am averse (with that wisest of the Moderns Mr Burke) to all *hot* Reformatations.'³ Many observers, including, as we shall see, a moderate Whig such as Malthus, would have concurred in this general sentiment, while drawing a different conclusion about the nature of the cool reformations required. The Burkean inheritance in the early stages of its creation and diffusion was necessarily a divided one, open to claims by Whigs and Tories alike. Although Hazlitt and Marx, as was noted in the Prologue to this book, associated Malthus with 'legitimacy' and 'oligarchy', it was in fact Malthus's romantic critics who were most anxious to lay claim to Burke's legacy, and who have consequently been treated as the true heirs to his 'conservatism'.⁴

How far the romantics should be regarded in this light, rather than simply as occasional admirers seeking tactical support in Burke's post-revolutionary writings, is not an easy matter to resolve, and will not be resolved in what follows. What is clear, however, is that while 'conservative' and hence, *a fortiori*, 'conservatism', had at best shadowy existence in the 1790s, by the 1830s it had become a term that Coleridge, Southey, and Wordsworth were proud to accept as a description of their own politics.⁵ As a pejorative antonym they

³ Letter to Benjamin Haydon, 8 July 1831 in *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, edited by E. de Selincourt, revised by M. Moorman, Oxford, 1969, v (ii), pp. 407-8 (hereafter *Letters*).

⁴ For the classic statement of this view of Burke and his romantic followers see A. Cobban, *Edmund Burke and the Revolt against the Eighteenth Century*.

⁵ On the origins of 'conservative' as a term of political art see E. Halévy, *Triumph of Reform, 1830-41*, London, 1950, pp. 66-7n., who dates it to the period 1819-27; and James J. Sack, *From Jacobite to Conservative*, see introduction on 'Jacobite', 'Tory' and 'conservative' as political

increasingly had recourse to 'liberal', a term that was ceasing to have purely adjectival meaning. The significance of the liberal/conservative dualism goes well beyond the party labels to which they were soon to give birth; and since it continues to describe one of the polarities by which we still live, it may be useful to observe its emergence in the context of the controversy provoked by Malthus.

II

With regard to Malthus's other initial target, Condorcet, whose *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* appeared in 1794, just after its author had become a victim of the revolution in which he had taken a leading part, the one-sided nature of the confrontation means that Malthus's criticisms are in need of supplementation. In the absence of direct evidence of how Condorcet might have responded, the views of Condorcet's fellow-Girondin, Paine, can be brought into play on some matters in dispute. Despite general agreement between Godwin and Condorcet on the doctrine of perfectibility, and some similarities between their views on the ease with which any future problem connected with population pressure could be solved, Malthus did not make the mistake of treating the speculative visions of his two ✓opponents as interchangeable. Condorcet shared with Malthus some- ✓thing that was absent from Malthus's relationship with Godwin: an ✓acceptance of the main lines of Smith's teachings on the benefits of a ✓society based on commerce and the system of natural liberty.

Condorcet, after all, was the *protégé* and panegyrist of Turgot, the *philosophe*-legislator who had mounted the most ambitious attempt to introduce domestic free trade in subsistence goods in France before the revolution. Condorcet confirmed this role in his attempts to popularise the *Wealth of Nations* during the revolution. Although Paine escaped Condorcet's extreme fate, merely being imprisoned by his Jacobin opponents in France, his collaboration with Condorcet was based, among other things, on common Smithian assumptions concerning commerce as a progressive agency that Malthus could have shared. On another subject that united Paine and Condorcet, however, a common interest in redistributive politics through social insurance schemes, ✓there was a deep divide. Indeed, Malthus's attack on the different ✓'systems of equality' produced by Godwin and Condorcet required him

labels, the last of these being dated from around 1830. As was the case with *libéral*, the term *conservateur* was in earlier usage on the Continent.

to define and defend some indefeasible features of modern commercial societies that could be applied as criticism to all egalitarian and communitarian schemes which promised an escape from market imperatives. In the course of articulating this defence, Malthus posed some fundamental issues about private property, inequality, and the self-interest motive that have never entirely disappeared, and have earned him the lasting enmity of all those whose hopes for social improvement rested on finding radical, or what were later to be seen as socialistic, alternatives to just such institutions and motives. While these alternatives are not considered in what follows, it may help to understand radicalism better if the arguments of one of its gentlest yet most inveterate opponents are fully explored.

Theological arguments played a major part in Malthus's case against systems of equality, and the fact that Condorcet (along with Godwin and Paine) could be regarded as a fanatic atheist might be thought sufficient to characterise their disagreement. Speaking from his clerical standpoint, Malthus certainly regretted that his opponents had rejected both the light of revelation and natural religion, leaving him to wonder whether the absence of a belief in the immortality of the soul had led them to substitute the idea of an earthly paradise in which the minds and bodies of a few would become immortal.⁶ What is equally significant, however, is that Malthus and Condorcet were both educated as natural philosophers and mathematicians, sharing a commitment to a form of moral Newtonianism that would enable the science of politics to become a rational social art. This clearly describes Condorcet's ambitions, and since Malthus consistently depicted himself as a seeker after scientific truth in the accepted Newtonian manner, pursuing some established themes in natural and moral philosophy by subjecting all theories to the test of observation and experiment, it can be applied to his as well.

Malthus saw no conflict between his Newtonianism and his Anglicanism: his entire education as a Cambridge natural philosopher intending to take orders within the established church was designed to seal and celebrate their consonance. On some theological issues raised by his initial statement of theodicy – his reconciliation of the existence of partial evils with divine providence – Malthus was found guilty of errors of reasoning and tact by Anglican friends, leading him to embrace the more orthodox doctrine of regarding this world as a state

⁶ See *FE*, pp. 241–2.

of trial or probation in the second edition of the *Essay*.⁷ As we shall see, still further modifications were felt necessary by Malthus's clerical followers before the implications of the population principle for natural theology could be made fully acceptable to the Christian conscience and intelligence. None of this prevented Malthus from being charged with blasphemy by other Christians of a more fundamentalist persuasion – charges he consistently denied by means of detailed arguments designed to show that the conclusions he had reached as a Newtonian moral scientist were entirely compatible with the doctrine of revelation and the scriptures.

Malthus's most serious criticism of Godwin and Condorcet, in fact, was not irreligion but one of fostering unrealisable hopes and endangering the very notion of science as a progressive enterprise by ignoring Newtonian precepts. In arriving at conclusions based on extrapolation they had reasoned from causes to possible effects rather than from observed effects to possible causes. For example, in using 'indefinite' to describe likely progress towards organic perfectibility judged by the extension of average life expectations, Condorcet had committed the fallacy of inferring 'an unlimited progress merely because some partial improvement has taken place', the limits of which were currently unknown. If facts were once more to be bent to fit systems, rather than vice versa, 'The grand and consistent theory of Newton, will be placed on the same footing as the wild and excentric hypotheses of Descartes.'⁸ The charge of reviving Cartesian methods was perhaps a more serious one when made against Condorcet than Godwin, and it may have been a shrewd one as well.⁹ Once more then, what was shared enables a sharper light to be shed on remaining differences.

Another advantage of reading the controversy forwards, as it was lived, is that events such as the debate on the French revolution provoked by Burke cease to exert an excessive pull on interpretations of

⁷ Malthus's theodicy in the first *Essay* and the significance of the changes in his later position has given rise to a large and interesting literature; see E. N. Santurri, 'Theodicy and Social Policy in Malthus's Social Thought', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 43 (1982), 315–20; J. M. Pullen, 'Malthus's Theological Ideas and their Influence on his Principle of Population', *History of Political Economy*, 13 (1983), 39–54; and A. M. C. Waterman, 'Malthus as Theologian; The First Essay and the Relation between Political Economy and Christian Theology' in J. Dupacquier *et al.* (eds.), *Malthus: Past and Present*, London, 1983, pp. 195–209. Waterman has subsequently written a more detailed account placing Malthus within the broader context of an evolving Christian political economy in *Revolution, Economics and Religion*.

⁸ *FE*, p. 159.

⁹ See K. M. Baker, *Condorcet; From Natural Philosophy to Social Mathematics*, Chicago, 1975, p. 192 on the Cartesian elements in Condorcet's Newtonianism.

what was at stake. Godwin and Condorcet produced the works Malthus was to answer during a particular stage of the French revolution, when the violent outcome predicted by Burke had begun to manifest itself – though not necessarily for the reasons given by Burke. They met these reverses by attempting to sustain the original hopes embodied in the revolution through calmer philosophical speculation on future prospects that were to be achieved by the peaceful march of mind. It was this feature of Godwin's writings, above all, that attracted the attention of Southey, Wordsworth, and Coleridge during the period in which they were coming to terms with their own disenchantment with the revolution.

Three editions of Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, and its Influence on Modern Morals and Happiness* appeared in 1793, 1795 and 1798. Condorcet's *Outlines of a History of the Progress of the Human Mind*, as it became known when first translated into English, was published in 1794. Neither work was concerned with immediate political events or personalities. The *Enquiry* also differed from other radical literature responding to Burke in taking the shape of an ambitious treatise designed to replace or correct Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws*. It was to be a work, Godwin originally hoped, that 'by its inherent energy and weight should overbear and annihilate all opposition, and place the principles of politics on an immovable basis'.¹⁰ The vigour of this early aim was not matched by the style of the performance: Godwin dealt with all his opponents, including Burke, with sweet reasonableness.¹¹ As he explained in *The Enquirer* in 1797, the early mood induced by 'the principles of Gallic republicanism' was one of 'exaltation and ferment', when 'the friends of innovation were somewhat imperious in their tone'. While regretting the perversion of Burke's talents – as revealed by his defence of the aristocratic order – Godwin was equally ✓ anxious to condemn revolution as a means of achieving change, and to ✓ dissociate himself from the enthusiasms of Paine and other impetuous ✓ 'friends of innovation'.¹²

At the other end of the Malthusian period, the proceedings that led to the Poor Law Amendment Act have created another kind of gap between authorial intention and subsequent reputation. Malthus

¹⁰ See *Autobiographical Fragments* in *CNM*, I, p. 49.

¹¹ 'In all that is most exalted in talents, I regard [Burke] as the inferior of no man that ever adorned the face of earth; and, in the long record of human genius, I can find for him very few equals'; see *Enquiry* in *PPW*, IV, p. 355.

¹² See the Preface to *The Enquirer; Reflections on Education, Manners, and Literature*, in *PPW*, v, p. 78, and the *Enquiry* in *PPW*, III, Book IV, Chapter 2, 'Of Revolutions'.

began his career as a long-term abolitionist rather than as an administrative reformer. The drastic nature of abolition as a remedy may help to explain why he consistently advised that abolition be postponed in the light of periods of short-term distress during and after the Napoleonic wars; and why he was remarkably hesitant – perhaps, as we shall see, more than that – about pursuing the policy of abolition later in life. Nevertheless, despite the fact that someone as committed as Malthus was to observation and experiment could hardly fail to modify his position in the light of three decades of Poor Law experience, he continues to be treated as a fairly simple-minded advocate of the solution that he canvassed in his earliest writings on the subject. The piece-meal revisions and qualifications that he made to his treatment of the Poor Laws in the *Essay* as each new edition appeared were overlooked by all but the most dedicated of followers – and hence, *a fortiori*, by his most dedicated opponents. Moreover, during the last decade of his life his opinions were as likely to be registered in letters to friends as in contributions to public debate.

Even if the provisions of the Amendment Act had been a more faithful embodiment of what Malthus had been advocating for nearly thirty years, the Act, as it emerged from extensive public inquiries in which Malthus himself took no part, was far too complex to be attributed to any one thinker. Nevertheless, as we shall see, some of Malthus's friends as well as his enemies pressed his claims to paternity. The part he may in fact have played over his entire career has perhaps become clearer as a result of studies that take the story back at least two decades before 1834 – to a period when Malthus occupied a less disputed, though still, of course, highly controversial, role as one of the pioneers of abolitionism. Even so, the Malthusian position probably required the intervention of intermediaries and followers to make it more widely acceptable, by which time it had acquired different priorities. Some reference to the work of these intermediaries will be made in what follows, not so much to establish influence, or its opposite, but rather to show how some sympathetic contemporaries came to understand the implications of what Malthus himself was contending during the final phase of his concern with Poor Law reform, when he was responding to changes in public attitudes rather than attempting to create them.

III

A longer perspective is also required at the beginning of the period under consideration here. Thus, however significant the French revolution may have been to their mature years, Malthus and Godwin were, of course, children of a pre-revolutionary eighteenth century, engaged in dialogue with many of the authors and issues that have figured in the first and second parts of this book. This was recognised in one respect at least by all those who claimed – following the convenient and comprehensively damning principle that what was true could not be new, and vice versa – that Malthus was guilty of plagiarising those who had debated the causes of populousness during the eighteenth century. What seems equally significant, however, is that once Malthus had attached his name to the population principle a licence existed to hunt for all those pre-Malthusian writings that contained anticipations of the principle. Malthus in fact was always explicit in recognising his intellectual debts to those who had expressed the basic idea behind the principle, namely that population will always expand in response to improvements in the supply of subsistence goods. Hume, Wallace, Smith, and Price were mentioned as the authors from whom he had initially ‘deduced the principle’, with a longer list of precursors being given as his studies expanded.¹³

Although the charge of plagiarism cannot be justified, the eighteenth-century debate is still essential to an understanding of the ways in which Malthus, in attacking Godwin and Condorcet, managed to shift the focus of subsequent discussion. As we have seen in an earlier essay (number 3), eighteenth-century opinion on populousness, and the best means of achieving this desirable goal, can be roughly divided along lines that parallel those on the civic dangers of luxury, with some following a *Rousseauiste* line in believing that commerce, luxury, and inequality were sources of depopulation, while others, notably Hume and Smith, took the more optimistic view that commercial opulence and populousness were positively related. Smith modified the terms of this debate by maintaining that ✓ implementation of the system of natural liberty, by ensuring the ✓ maximum rate of capital accumulation and its optimal allocation ✓ between competing employments, would remove a major *direct* ✓ concern with achieving populousness from the list of duties assigned ✓

¹³ The French *économistes*, Montesquieu, Benjamin Franklin, James Steuart, Arthur Young, and Joseph Townsend were mentioned in the second edition; see *EPP*, pp. 1–2.

to the legislator.¹⁴ With the exception of Wallace, none of these authors was greatly troubled by the prospect of *over*-population; their main concern was with achieving the highest rate of population growth consistent with existing institutions and resources. This reflects not merely the largely pro-populationist bias of the debate but the brutal fact that what Malthus was to call the 'positive' checks acting on mortality rates required no affirmative, as opposed to palliative, action on the part of legislators. Famine, war, and pestilence were remedies readily supplied by the mistress of nature's feast herself.

Wallace was exceptional precisely because, in addition to his historical and empirical inquiries into populousness, he wrote a quite different work on *Various Prospects of Mankind, Nature and Providence* which predicted a state of over-population as part of a self-conscious exercise designed to show that any perfect system of government based on equality was 'inconsistent with the present frame of nature, and with a limited extent of earth'.¹⁵ In other words, he was employing a utopian speculation to support an anti-utopian stance by pointing out the 'melancholy situation' of mankind, while at the same time showing how it accorded with a providential design to which man was obliged to accommodate his habits and institutions. Perfect government would encourage population to grow at its highest rate, thereby ultimately producing a 'fatal period' in which population would exceed the resources needed for its support.

Although, as Malthus's critics often charged, this sounded like a fairly complete anticipation of the *reductio* he applied to Godwin's utopia to show its impracticality, there was one crucial difference that Malthus was always careful to point out. If the problem envisaged by Wallace was confined to some future 'fatal period', when 'the whole earth had been cultivated like a garden, and was incapable of any further increase of produce', Malthus would have agreed with Godwin in thinking that this was not an adequate reason for postponing pursuit of perfectibility. What differentiated Malthus from Wallace, however, was his belief that 'the difficulty so far from being remote, would be imminent and immediate'.¹⁶ The downward pressure exerted by population increase on the living standards of those who existed on the proceeds of their labour was an ever-present reality rather than a distant possibility. The pressure had always existed and would continue

¹⁴ See pp. 80-1 above.

¹⁵ *Various Prospects*, Edinburgh, 1761, p. 114.

¹⁶ See *FE*, p. 143.

to exist, sometimes with the terrifying results implied in the operation of the positive checks, unless some prudential restraint on marriage and procreation was exercised on a continuing basis. Even the 'preventive' checks operating on birth rates, however, were productive of vice and misery when they involved such remedies as prostitution, abortion, and infanticide. According to Malthus's new interpretation, historical experience showed that 'perpetual oscillation' rather than indefinite progress was the more likely fate of mankind. It was only after having secured this basic position in his first *Essay* that Malthus felt able, partly through the medium of his early exchanges with Godwin, to assume the role of practical moralist by suggesting more active prudential remedies and institutional reforms that were consistent with his view of what would minimise the human cost measured in terms of misery and vice. Oscillation, or cycles of progress and regress, remained part of the human condition, but the aim should be to ensure that they took place against a background of steady advance.

Godwin and Condorcet had confronted the problem posed by Wallace's 'fatal period' by treating it as an eventuality so distant as not to merit serious attention. Condorcet bluntly asserted what Malthus disproved by writing his *Essay*, namely that 'there is doubtless no-one who does not think that such a time is still very far from us'.¹⁷ Godwin pointed out that since three-quarters of the habitable world was uncultivated: 'Myriads of centuries of still increasing population may pass away, and the earth be yet found sufficient for the support of its inhabitants.'¹⁸ By refusing to regard over-population as a problem that required immediate attention, therefore, Godwin and Condorcet remained closer to the pro-populationist assumptions of eighteenth-century thinking. If this had not been the case, of course, there would have been no grounds, apart from misunderstanding, for Malthus's attack. Nor would Malthus have aroused such a storm of protest over the years if he had merely been repeating established maxims. Moreover, by stressing the immediacy of population pressure, Malthus was led to consider more closely than any of his predecessors the interconnections between those positive and preventive checks which had to be constantly at work if the tendency for population to outrun subsistence was to be curbed or accommodated. His diagnosis also required him to answer the persistent and powerful common-sense

¹⁷ See *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, translated by J. Barraclough, London, 1955, p. 188.

¹⁸ *Enquiry* in *PPW*, III, p. 459.

objection behind Godwin's observation about uncultivated land: how could anyone speak of a problem of over-population while there were unused resources in the world at large, and where, particularly in civilised societies, there were such obvious signs of prodigality and waste associated with luxury and inequality? After the break with the radicalism of their youth the romantics found ways of accommodating themselves to social and economic inequality, not merely as facts but as necessary facts. Nevertheless, they could never escape from the idea that population pressure would become a problem only when the world resembled Wallace's garden. Retaining this belief was one of the ways in which they sought to protect their ideal of a truly moral society from the unwelcome invasion of physical necessity and economic scarcity. Providing answers to questions which had not been posed in that form by earlier writers on population lay at the heart of Malthus's capacity to provoke. In more generous parlance, it was the source of his originality.

Nor could the answers to these novel questions remain at the level of polemical charge and counter-charge. As Malthus recognised, even in the first *Essay*, understanding how population pressure operated persistently, yet irregularly and cyclically, on the manners and living standards of those at the bottom of the social pyramid – those who were most vulnerable to such pressures, yet had so far been ignored in histories mostly confined to the lives of the upper classes – required 'the constant and minute attention of an observing mind during a long life'.¹⁹ This certainly describes how Malthus spent much of the rest of his own life, collecting and interpreting a range of historical, anthropological, and empirical evidence that was sufficiently encyclopaedic in its comparative sweep to allow the later editions of the *Essay* to be compared with the *Wealth of Nations*, or some equally ambitious intellectual enterprises, such as Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* or Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*, that are less equivocally associated with The Enlightenment in its capital letter form.

By comparison with the authors of these works, however, as already noted when speaking of his Newtonianism, Malthus undertook his task from an explicitly Christian standpoint. In this respect he was committed to 'remoralising' Smith's science, to supplying an essential missing or omitted element that could not fail to be noted with regret by Christian readers of both of Smith's main works, especially after his

¹⁹ *FE*, p. 32.

eulogy for Hume had caused offence. Such readers did not have to be as dogged in their pursuit of Smith as the Bishop of Norwich and the Christian Gospel Society proved to be. Nor did they have to become involved, as did William Magee, Archbishop of Dublin, in speculations as to whether Smith's excision of a passage on the doctrine of atonement from the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* was attributable to 'the infection of David Hume's society'.²⁰ They could be more like the Reverend Richard Raikes, who, in an essay comparing Smith unfavourably with his clerical contemporary, Josiah Tucker, the Dean of Gloucester, registered the following mild rebuke:

Dr Adam Smith, in his excellent Inquiry into the Wealth of Nations has ... proved that Commerce will ever be carried on to the greatest advantage on the enlarged principles of philanthropic liberality. We cannot but regret that so valuable a writer should be unwilling to refer this better part of man to its real origin; although he must have understood that without Religion (and ✓ what Religion is there except the Christian?) neither Benevolence nor even ✓ Justice could prevail among men; and that Commerce, when deprived of her ✓ divine associate must in time become the parent of a general depravity.²¹ ✓

Malthus did not record any such regrets himself. Apart from the fact that the *Wealth of Nations* remained the basis for his teachings as a Professor of Political Economy at the East India College throughout his career, he also seems to have had a favourable opinion of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, without wishing to advance an equivalent theory of his own on the formation of moral codes and rules of natural justice.²² More significantly perhaps, despite the infamy surrounding Hume's *Dialogues on Natural Religion*, Hume's moral and political essays were ✓ clearly one of Malthus's favourite sources of maxims. Nevertheless, his ✓ religious beliefs certainly required him to supply the deficiency noted ✓ by Raikes. Indeed, what has increasingly become apparent is the ✓ centrality of Malthus to the process by which Smith's political ✓ economy, as well as other historical and anthropological insights ✓

²⁰ On the Bishop of Norwich, see p. 39 above. See William Magee, *Discourses and Dissertations on the Scriptural Doctrines of Atonement and Sacrifice*, 3rd edition, 1812, 1, p. 212; and D. D. Raphael, 'Adam Smith and "The Infection of David Hume's Society"'.

²¹ *Considerations on the Alliance between Christianity and Commerce* (1806) as reprinted in *Two Essays*, London, 1825, p. 72.

²² There are no references to *TMS* in Malthus's published writings, but in a letter to Thomas Chalmers, 23 June 1833 he said: 'I quite agree with you in your admiration of Butler, and particularly of his sermons. I have generally considered him as the most true to nature of all our metaphysicians, though I have a great liking for Adam Smith's Theory of Moral Sentiments. They do not I think differ so much as it has been sometimes supposed': CHA.7.2.28 (Chalmers Papers, New College, Edinburgh).

connected with Smith's Scottish contemporaries, became an integral part of Anglican thinking about society during the first third of the nineteenth century. By common consent – which includes the approval of Malthus himself – the work that was most successful in reconciling political economy with natural theology was John Bird Sumner's *Treatise on the Records of Creation*, first published in 1816, a work specifically designed to show the 'consistency of the Principle of Population with the Wisdom and Goodness of the Deity'.²³ After Malthus had adopted a more orthodox theodicy in 1803, the population principle could be interpreted as scientific confirmation of God's purpose in creating an educative world in which the struggle with scarcity taught the duty of prudential restraint over the passions. The inculcation of the virtue of prudence not only became the best means of achieving material welfare in this world but part of a progressively unfolding vision in which man was prepared for his higher purpose.

Malthus had clearly outlined this natural theology in the second and later editions of the *Essay*, but Sumner's *Records of Creation* removed any remaining rough edges in Malthus's statement of the theological implications of the population principle. As Edward Coplestone, another follower of Malthus, was to express it, Sumner had 'dissipated that gloom which in the eyes of many candid persons still seemed to hang over that discovery'.²⁴ By distinguishing between 'nosology', the study of diseases, and the normal physiology of society, Sumner was able to maintain that 'Mr. Malthus's first volume, though none of its main facts can be disproved, is not to be taken as a representation of the actual state of human nature, but of the disorders to which it is liable.'²⁵ It followed too that Malthus could not be guilty of arguing for the *necessity* of vice and misery as checks; he was merely attempting to show what would happen in an hypothetical world in which prudential restraint was entirely absent.²⁶ Malthus was congratulated for his efforts in expunging or modifying statements which could have given the opposite impression. The anti-perfectibilist origins of the *Essay*

²³ For Malthus's endorsement of Sumner see *EPP*, II, p. 250. The most thorough account of the intellectual and other connections between Paley, Malthus and Sumner can now be found in A. M. C. Waterman, *Revolution, Economics and Religion*. See also R. A. Soloway, *Prelates and People*.

²⁴ *A Second Letter to the Right Honourable Robert Peel on the Causes of the Increase in Pauperism, and on the Poor Laws*, Oxford, 1819, p. 23.

²⁵ *A Treatise on the Records of Creation; with Particular Reference to the Jewish History, and the Consistency of the Principle of Population with the Wisdom and Goodness of the Deity*, 2 volumes, London, 1816, II, p. 104n.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, II, pp. 165–6.

were, however, cited in explanation for such statements, with Sumner continuing to regret – not altogether justly – that, having done so much to undermine utopian ideas of equality and universal plenty, Malthus ‘had not also taken the pains to prove that the course human nature was forced to pursue is also the best it could pursue’.²⁷

If Smith had discovered the laws underlying wealth, then, Malthus was understood by his clerical followers to have added the crucial supplementary laws underlying human happiness in a world characterised by scarcity and *necessary* inequality of access to resources. Smith’s use of providentialist arguments – where these are more prominent in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* than in the *Wealth of Nations* – may have helped this process of reconciliation. This is best illustrated perhaps by Malthus’s references to the wisdom of the ‘great author of nature’ in making ‘the passion of self-love beyond comparison stronger than the passion of benevolence’, thereby impelling ‘us to that line of conduct which is essential to the preservation of the human race’.²⁸ But the chief difference between Smith and Malthus on this matter lies in the fact that for the latter the ‘invisible hand’ producing social harmony could only be that of a Christian deity whose purposes were prefigured in the scriptures and confirmed by revelation. One of the main sources of regret expressed by Anglican admirers of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* was the omission of references to divine justice and atonement in later editions of the work. Sumner even suggested, without proof, that Smith himself had later ‘lamented’ the omissions.²⁹ On the basis of what has been said earlier about Smith’s religious beliefs, this must either be attributed to wish fulfilment or to the skill with which Smith succeeded in keeping his cards close to his chest: Smith had treated political economy as a branch of the largely secularised sciences of ethics and natural jurisprudence, with moral and judicial codes of behaviour emerging as the unintended outcome of instinctual processes based on sympathy. Not only did Smith’s moral philosophy owe more to Stoicism than Christianity, but it contained a distinctly Mandevillian infusion expressed in a version of the doctrine of unintended conse-

²⁷ See Sumner’s review of the 1817 edition of the *Essay* for the *Quarterly Review*, 17 (1817), 369–403. See also the following summary comment by A. M. C. Waterman: ‘whereas Malthus himself had looked on the principle of population as producing an uncommonly nasty case of the problem of evil to be reconciled as well as might be with the divine *goodness*, Sumner lifted it out of the icy realm of theodicy altogether, transplanting it to the genial soil of Paley’s teleology, there to flourish as an example of divine *wisdom*’: see *Revolution, Economics and Religion*, p. 165.

²⁸ *EPP*, II, pp. 213–15. For Smith’s equivalent see pp. 106–7 above.

²⁹ See *Records of Creation*, II, p. 242n.

quences that entailed the idea of nature achieving its aims through 'deceit'. As noted earlier, this allowed Smith freedom to contrast beneficent social outcomes with the morally neutral or even dubiously moral behaviour of the individuals contributing to those outcomes.

It was precisely this extra degree of freedom that was not available to Malthus. For if the invisible hand was carrying out the purposes of a Christian deity, it could not be treated simply as a Stoic or Newtonian image connoting an ordered universe whose 'efficient causes' could be discovered by a secular version of science. Observation and experiment played their part, but they had to be confirmed by revelation and the scriptures, leaving no room for 'deceit'. Nor, in Malthus's account of the doctrine of 'discipline or trial', was it possible to avoid the terminology of evil. As Malthus said, the evils associated with the operation of the population principle 'do not lose their name or nature because they are overbalanced by good: and to consider them in a different light on this account, and cease to call them evils, would be as irrational as the objecting to call the irregular indulgences of passion vicious, and to affirm that they lead to misery, because our passions are the main sources of human virtue and happiness'.³⁰ Being a matter of revelation and faith, rather than simply the conclusions of a science that was compatible with, perhaps even encouraged, a degree of scepticism about human nature, Malthus had to weigh the two sides of any moral equation, individual and social, in the same moral scale. And if partial evils of a systematic variety were an inescapable feature of the design of the moral and physical universe, there was no room for agnosticism or scepticism: some larger theological explanation had to be offered for their existence.

The differences in outlook created by such divergent commitments are perhaps best epitomised by the respective attitudes of Smith and Malthus towards Mandeville. Smith held that Mandeville's ideas contained a substantial element of truth, despite being based on a deliberate confusion of vice and virtue. Malthus, on the other hand, indignantly rejected any suggestion that he was reviving Mandeville's paradoxes: 'let me not be supposed to give the slightest sanction to the system of morals inculcated in the *Fable of the Bees*, a system which I consider as absolutely false, and directly contrary to the just definition of virtue'.³¹ There is no doubt about Malthus's sincerity in making this disclaimer, but the fact that it had to be repeated by others writing on

³⁰ *EPP*, II, p. 250.

³¹ See *EPP*, II, p. 214n.

his behalf shows how difficult it was to exorcise the ghost of Mandeville when proclaiming the virtue of self-interest – however inferior such a virtue was to other human motives, notably benevolence.

Malthus's clerical allies had special reasons for sensitivity on these matters. It may also be worth citing the reactions of another early reader, Thomas Crabb Robinson, to show that Malthus was not always thought to have unfairly darkened human prospects, where the testimony is perhaps all the more important in view of Robinson's sympathy and life-long connections with the Lake poets. Writing to his brother immediately after reading the second *Essay*, Robinson clearly recognised what positive doctrines distinguished Malthus from both Smith and Godwin:

[Malthus] discusses some important principles of political economy, and throws out I think some very useful ideas on the improvement of society – and although his theories do not delude us with an expectation that men are to become *immortal angels*, yet he does not discourage the expectation of bettering society to a certain extent . . . Since Adam Smith, so able a writer has not appeared on the subject of political economy, and in one respect he improves upon Smith, by proposing plans not only to increase the wealth of the state but the *happiness* of the community, and particularly the poor.³²

Robinson was praising precisely what some of Malthus's secular colleagues in the political economy community found confusing: his emphasis on the moral as well as economic dimension of happiness, where both elements had to be brought within the same framework.

IV

Nor was it simply on questions of explanation that Malthus differed from Smith and other secular moralists. Remedies too had not only to be effective in this-worldly terms but to conform with the teachings of natural theology. How this figured in Malthus's thinking can be indicated by reference to what has come to be known as the Malthusian trap. For those countries that were subsequently released from this trap, escape was effected by means of a combination of rising productivity in agriculture (at home or abroad), control over nuptiality, and contraception within marriage. Of these means of escape only the first two were accepted by Malthus as offering a practical solution capable of being reconciled with the virtue and happiness of the mass

³² Letter to Henry Robinson, 27 December 1803, Dr Williams's Library, London.

of society seen from a Christian standpoint. Since he was one of the first to articulate the doubts of political economists about achieving permanently rising productivity, the emphasis fell on delayed marriage as a solution that remained within the scope of individual moral decision. He was always interested in achieving improvements in the supply of those necessities of life derived from the labour applied to land, whether by improved techniques or, more tentatively, by special measures of protection and legislative encouragement such as the Corn Laws. Nevertheless, he considered that such improvements would probably not be consistent or strong enough to overcome the tendency to diminishing returns implied in his choice of the arithmetic ratio as the one that best illustrated the likely rate of increase in the supply of subsistence goods – a tendency to which he gave more precise definition as he became master of his subject and developed the theory of rent as an explanation for the peculiarities of this form of income. As far as birth control was concerned, however, Malthus was implacably opposed; it was incompatible with a net reduction in vice and misery, while at the same time providing the incentives that would fulfil the divine plan for the optimal cultivation of the world's resources, and educating those human and social capacities summarised as civilisation.

Such considerations do not figure in the calculations of Malthus's secular opponents and followers. Condorcet, for example, was far more optimistic about the benefits of improved technology in agriculture, and he regarded contraception as an acceptable means of dealing with a problem which his prognosis treated only as a remote possibility. The prime movers in the history of birth control in Britain, however, from Francis Place to John Stuart Mill and onwards, were drawn from the ranks of those who were thoroughly convinced that Malthus's statement of the dangers associated with the population principle was, in the main, the correct one. In disowning birth control within marriage before and after this movement had been launched, therefore, Malthus self-consciously separated himself from some of the most energetic disseminators of his principle of population. In so doing, he took a stand that was part and parcel of his entire approach to the science of morals and politics. It cannot, therefore, be lightly dismissed as an example of clerical propriety or timidity on sexual matters. Malthus was no more under the sway of such inhibitions than many of those who adopted veiled ways of advocating contraception, and he was a good deal less censorious on matters of sexual morality than some of his Christian opponents – for example, those who either opposed his

case for delayed marriage on fundamentalist grounds of St Paul's teaching on the subject of fornication or 'burning', or based their critique on such biblical maxims as: 'Be fruitful and multiply.'³³ The latter doctrine, Malthus held, belonged to a more primitive period in the history of society, 'when war was the great business of mankind, and the drains of population from this cause were, beyond comparison, greater than in modern times'.³⁴ By contrast, and as 'a pleasing confirmation of the truth and divinity of the Christian religion, and of its being adapted to a more improved state of human society', Malthus maintained that the duties connected with marriage and procreation could now be seen in a new light. Applying the 'spirit' rather than the word of St Paul's preaching on marriage to the present state of society, it followed that marriage was the right course of action only when it did not conflict with 'higher duties', where such duties could be arrived at by asking whether an act added or subtracted from the general happiness of society.³⁵

Morals, therefore, connoted something far more inclusive to Malthus than sexual mores alone; and the scheme of Christian morals he adopted, though utilitarian in character, was not reducible to a version of what has been called 'implicit secular utilitarianism' that would make him indistinguishable from those Benthamites who were to provide the early mainstay of neo-Malthusianism.³⁶ On these fundamental questions of morals Malthus was not an original thinker, being greatly indebted to Paley for his basic position. Paley's *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* had begun its long career as a successful Cambridge textbook in 1785, and Malthus can be accurately, if not fully, described as a Paleyite, or theological utilitarian, on morals. As

³³ For a typical example of such fundamentalism see *An Inquiry into the Constitution, Government, and Practices of the Churches of Christ, planted by his apostles, containing strictures on Mr. Malthus on Population*, Edinburgh, 1808. Malthus's doctrines were deemed to be incompatible with New Testament invocations that all those who could marry should do so. Even preaching delay was a sign of Malthus's being 'guilty of resisting His ordinance, and, of course, [being] equally liable to damnation'; pp. 208–11. Clergymen with 'liberal' reputations could join the attack: thus Richard Watson, Bishop of Llandaff, when called upon to condemn Malthus' *Essay* as 'a code of morality in opposition to the morality of the Gospel', agreed, without having read the book, that it contradicted 'the most express command of God, "Increase and Multiply."' See *Anecdotes of the Life of Richard Watson*, 1817, pp. 324–9.

³⁴ *EPP*, II, p. 101.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ 'Implicit secular utilitarianism' is the term used by S. H. Hollander to describe Malthus's position; see his 'Malthus and Utilitarianism with Special Reference to the *Essay on Population*', *Utilitas*, 1 (1989), 170–210. For a study of those respects in which it is correct to characterise Bentham as an *explicit* secular utilitarian see James E. Crimmins, *Secular Utilitarianism; Social Science and the Critique of Religion in the Thought of Jeremy Bentham*, Oxford, 1990.

expressed by Malthus, Paley's argument could be summarised as follows:

Our virtue ... as reasonable beings, evidently consists in educing, from the general materials which the Creator has placed under our guidance, the greatest sum of human happiness; and as all our natural impulses are abstractedly considered good, and only to be distinguished by their consequences, a strict attention to these consequences, and the regulation of our conduct conformably to them, must be considered as our principal duty.³⁷

This did not, as we shall see, commit Malthus to acceptance of Paley's distinctly quietist opinions on the matchless qualities of the British constitution as expounded in his *Principles*, and later, in more popular form, in *Reasons for Contentment Addressed to the Labouring Part of the British Public*. Nor did it require Malthus to endorse Paley's views on population and luxury, where he was able to claim Paley as one of his earliest converts.³⁸ The fact that he also succeeded in making converts among those who did not feel it necessary to achieve the kind of consistency between political economy and natural theology celebrated in Sumner's *Records of Creation* accounts for the ease with which Malthus moved between the secular and theological worlds and his importance to both of them – but this still does not provide a licence for treating these worlds as interchangeable.

Although, as a theological utilitarian, Malthus added little to Paley, there is one respect in which what has been described earlier as his ✓ Newtonianism allowed him to apply utilitarian criteria with discrimina- ✓ tion and balance to his chosen field: the diagnosis and practical ✓ remedies for mass poverty. Perhaps the best single statement of this ✓ aspect of his thinking can be found in his invocation of Newton's ✓ calculus when he said that: 'Many of the questions both in morals and ✓ politics seem to be of the nature of the problems of *de maximis et minimis* ✓ in Fluxions; in which there is always a point where a certain effect is ✓ the greatest, while on either side of this point it gradually vanishes.'³⁹

The use of mechanical analogies based on ballistics, weights, and springs was meant to underline the basic message that achieving an optimal solution at which happiness would be maximised and vice and misery minimised always entailed achieving a balance of countervailing forces, where marginal rather than all-or-nothing adjustments were

³⁷ *EPP*, II, p. 93.

³⁸ See *EPP*, II, p. 193.

³⁹ See *Observations on the Effects of the Corn Laws*, London, 1814 as reprinted in Malthus, *Works*, VII, p. 102.

required. In Godwin and Condorcet, Malthus thought he had found representatives of the most common perfectibilist fallacy: the belief that what was true to some extent was true to an unlimited extent. It was a message that could be applied to other social reforms, and to the conclusions of Ricardo, his friend and more deductive-minded fellow political economist, as well. Temperamentally, it taught Malthus, *qua* scientist, to mistrust 'premature generalisations' and to pay great respect to empirical evidence, while not abandoning theory or general principles. As an adviser on policy matters, what he nominated as the 'doctrine of proportions' made him a moderate in all things, sometimes a rather timid one, subject to doubts as to whether the solutions he proposed provided the optimum balance between opposed and shifting forces making for good or evil, happiness or pain, whether as between individuals or groups.⁴⁰

Like Malthus, Godwin was equally and openly dependent on a similarly broad range of eighteenth-century writings, including Rousseau, D'Holbach, and Helvétius, but more especially those figures within the movement known as rational dissent that were central to the English enlightenment and formed the backbone of the education he received at Hoxton Dissenting Academy: John Locke, Andrew Kippis, David Hartley, Richard Price, and Joseph Priestley.⁴¹ Again like Malthus, his main philosophical work underwent considerable revision in the light of new reading and discussion with friends. When he came to write his *Enquiry* the metaphysical or psychological issues connected with motivation and the formation of mind were at least as important to him as those concerning politics. This also explains why Malthus found it necessary to contest Godwin's ideas on these matters by proposing his own answers to such basic moral and psychological questions as the respective roles of self-interest and benevolence in human nature, and the relationship of conscious reason to the passions and domestic affections.

These elements of continuity that run through the Malthus–Godwin dispute need to be registered, if not compulsively traced to all their

⁴⁰ On this aspect of Malthus's thinking the following article by John Pullen has influenced my own approach: 'Malthus and the Doctrine of Proportions and the Concept of the Optimum', *Australian Economic Papers*, 21 (1982), 270–86. For an equally insightful treatment of Malthus's style and method see E. A. Wrigley, 'Elegance and Experience' in D. Coleman and R. Schofield (eds.), *The State of Population Theory*, pp. 46–64.

⁴¹ Accounts of Godwin's education can be found in P. H. Marshall, *William Godwin*, New Haven, 1984, Chapters 2 and 3; and with more emphasis on rational dissenting sources in M. Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice*, London, 1986, Chapters 1 and 2.

possible origins, as a means of isolating discontinuities – those places where a combination of circumstances, social and intellectual, led the original protagonists to modify established propositions. Detailed studies have been made of the evolution of Godwin's ideas over the three editions of his *Enquiry* and in the novels that belong to the same period, especially *Caleb Williams* and *St Leon*.⁴² This is now made easier in the case of Malthus as a result of the publication of *variorum* editions of his main works. These enable us to reconstruct the evolution of his thinking in the period before the final version of his *Essay* appeared in 1826, encompassing his *Principle of Political Economy* (1820, posthumous second edition, 1836) and other more ephemeral political writings along the way. While they lend some substance to the unkind judgement passed by Robert Torrens to the effect that Malthus was guilty of advancing 'a chaos of original but unconnected elements', they also enable us to rebut the major charge of inconsistency between the *Essay* and the *Principles* that has dogged him since Jean-Baptiste Say first raised it, half in jest, in 1821.⁴³

Malthus entered the realm of political economy via his concern with the relationship between population and subsistence and its implications for the doctrine of perfectibility. It was an indirect point of entry at first, and at the beginning of his career he was tentative in suggesting modifications to the science and art of political economy as it had been left by Smith and the French *économistes*. Two chapters in the first *Essay* criticising Smith's view of economic growth blossomed into a separate comparative and historical treatise on agriculture, manufacturing, and commerce as the foundation for a nation's wealth in the 1817 and 1826 editions. The final result of all Malthus's revisions, hesitations, and qualifications was not always harmonious. Indeed, he acquired a reputation for inconsistency that was captured in another cruel remark by Torrens: 'Mr Malthus scarcely ever embraced a principle which he did not subsequently abandon.'⁴⁴ Harmonious or not, Malthus's position was certainly distinctive and undoubtedly influential, often in

⁴² In addition to the works mentioned in the previous note see M. Butler, 'Godwin, Burke, and *Caleb Williams*', *Essays in Criticism*, 32 (1982), 237–57; the introduction by M. Butler and M. Philp to *CNM*; and W. St Clair, *The Godwins and the Shelleys*, London, 1989, Chapters 6 and 7.

⁴³ See R. Torrens, *Essay on the Production of Wealth*, London, 1821, p. v. For Say's comment ('Either the author of the *Essay on Population* or the author of the *Principles of Political Economy* must be in the wrong') see *Letters to Mr. Malthus on Several Subjects of Political Economy*, London, 1821, p. 30. For a demonstration of the basic consistency between the two works see the comments of J. M. Pullen, the editor of *PPE*, 1, p. xvii. Consistency is explored as well as assumed in much of what follows in the essays in this part of the book.

⁴⁴ *Essay on the External Corn Trade*, 1815, pp. viiii–x.

ways he came to regret. Hence, incidentally, his decision to withdraw the infamous paragraph with which this part of the book begins; and his admission in 1817 that 'having found the bow bent too much one way, I was induced to bend it too much the other, in order to make it straight'.⁴⁵

Although Malthus remained closer in many respects to the spirit and letter of Smith's economic writings than Ricardo was willing to do, he went well beyond supplying a Christian version of Smith's ideas. On a range of urgent matters facing his successors during the Napoleonic war period, the *Wealth of Nations* offered little or no guidance. On all questions connected with population pressure, the law of diminishing returns to investment in domestic agriculture, and the related theory of rent, it was Malthus who created the original agenda for most of those political economists who adopted Smith's work as their starting point. Most notably, the combination of Smith with Malthus furnished Ricardo with the basis on which he was to develop the distinctive amalgam of doctrines that, with help from his disciples, John Ramsay McCulloch, James Mill and his son, John Stuart Mill, was to emerge as Ricardianism in the 1820s. Since it was against this 'new school of political economy' that Malthus had to contend in order to protect his own vision of the shape that post-Smithian political economy needed to assume if it was to grasp the reality of Britain's rapid emergence as a manufacturing nation, an account of some of the main differences between the Malthusian and Ricardian versions of the science is given in later essay (number 13). This bifurcation of the Smithian inheritance turned on a complex assortment of economic doctrine, interpretation of empirical evidence, and constitutional politics. It was also compounded by that other persistent underlying difference stressed above: Malthus's fidelity to a broader eighteenth-century interpretation of political economy which stressed its connections with the science of morals and politics.

Since the moral component was intimately connected with Malthus's natural theology, it became one of the main factors separating him from other devotees of political economy who took a purely secular view of the method and scope of the science and were more anxious to observe the distinction between positive theorems that would make a nation rich and those other kinds of inquiry that bore on whether it was right for individuals or nations to seek riches. Some

⁴⁵ See *EPP*, II, p. 251.

of Malthus's clerical followers arrived at a similar conclusion for
✓ different reasons: they felt such distinctions were necessary in order to
✓ preserve the autonomy and superiority of the Christian position in
✓ any scale of values. Malthus himself, as we shall see, when faced with
Thomas Chalmers's virtual conflation of political economy with
morals, also urged the retention of more distance, more careful
✓ linguistic discrimination at least. But the combination of Newto-
✓ nianism and natural theology that led Malthus to attack Godwin and
✓ Condorcet at the outset of his career was still at work when dealing
✓ with his clerical admirers towards its end. Malthus was to prove as
tenacious in curbing the excessive zeal of his admirers as he was in
answering his critics. Despite frequent charges of variability in his
economic doctrines, and evidence of his willingness to change his
views on political and economic remedies in the light of changing
circumstances, the continuities in Malthus's position are more im-
pressive than the discontinuities.

New and extraordinary lights

I

Since much of the original potency of Malthus's first *Essay* derived from its post-revolutionary date of publication, a beginning can be made by recalling the flavour of Malthus's remarks on events in France. The revolution features prominently as 'that tremendous phenomenon in the political horizon ... which, like a blazing comet seems destined either to inspire with fresh life and vigour, or scorch up and destroy the shrinking inhabitants of the earth'. The 'new and extraordinary lights that have been thrown on political subjects, which dazzle, and astonish the understanding', have convinced 'many able men that we were touching on a period big with the most important changes that would in some measure be decisive of the future fate of mankind'. Later references shift the imagery from astronomy to botany, a realm in which Malthus was equally at home when it came to drawing analogies between the physical and moral universe. The 'forcing manure' of the revolution 'has burst the calyx of humanity, the restraining bond of all society; and however large the separate petals have grown; however strongly, or beautifully a few of them have been marked; the whole is at present a loose, deformed, disjointed mass, without union, symmetry, or harmony of colouring'. Less elaborately, Malthus also described France as presenting the spectacle of 'one of the most enlightened nations of the world debased by such a fermentation of disgusting passions, of fear, cruelty, malice, revenge, ambition, madness, and folly, as would have disgraced the most savage nation in the most barbarous age'.¹

¹ The bouquet of quotations has been culled from *FE*, pp. 1-2, 144-5, 274. Marilyn Butler (in her contribution to K. Hanley and R. Selden, *Revolution and English Romanticism*, Brighton, 1990, pp. 12-14) has advanced an interesting interpretation of these remarks as a 'witty dystopia' derived from imagery based on the 'new science of evolution' in order to drive a

The final opinion and the use of organic imagery seem to confirm the impression that Malthus sympathised with Burke's *Reflections*, even perhaps that he was consciously lending support to the burgeoning anti-jacobin cause during the last years of the eighteenth century. The immediate origins of the first *Essay* were, however, more domestic than the high-flown language suggests. They are to be found in a friendly argument between Malthus *père et fils* over one of Godwin's essays in *The Enquirer* which led the son, in the interests of clarity, to record his views on paper. Daniel Malthus was a fervent disciple of Rousseau and had entertained Rousseau and Hume in 1766 when the Scottish philosopher brought Rousseau to England in search of refuge. Although Daniel's hope that Rousseau would settle near him in Surrey was not fulfilled, he visited Rousseau in his Derbyshire retreat and kept on good terms with his idol during and after the quarrel with Hume that preceded Rousseau's return to the Continent.² One of the pursuits that united Daniel Malthus with his Genevan hero, namely an interest in botany, resurfaced when his son deployed botanical illustrations to answer Rousseau's successors as advocates of organic perfectibility during the post-revolutionary period.

Although Godwin and Condorcet were perfectibilists in the sense of believing that man's capacity for unlimited mental and social advance was his most important characteristic, they were not disciples of Rousseau. They assumed man's natural equality, liberty, and goodness, and reached the same general – call it *Rousseauiste* – conclusion that the clue to man's corruption, and hence to his chances of achieving perfection, lay in reform of the political and economic institutions that at that time conditioned his existence. Condorcet was more faithful to this idea than Godwin, who credited Rousseau with the further insight that 'government, however formed, was little capable of affording solid benefit to mankind', referring his readers to a now-famous statement by Paine in *Common Sense* on the priority of civil society over government that we have already noted when discussing Paine's response to Burke.³ The idea that society could

wedge between perfectibilism and the earlier affiliation of science with optimistic views of the future. That readers may have drawn the conclusion that Malthus had sketched 'a desolate vision of the coming age of the masses' will emerge in what follows. Equally, however, it will be argued that this was not Malthus's own position.

² The story is told at greater length in Keynes's essay on Malthus: see *Essays in Biography* in Keynes, *CW*, x, pp. 74–7.

³ See p. 130 above.

exist without government was, of course, congenial to the anarchistic position Godwin was developing.⁴

Godwin's admiration for Rousseau was heavily qualified, with the educational writings, particularly *Emile*, being regarded as more important than his political doctrines.⁵ He rejected Rousseau's suggestion that any legislator who wished to establish a new political system would need to have recourse to a civil form of religious sanction to overcome the selfish short-sightedness of the 'common herd'.⁶ This rejection paralleled Godwin's attack on Burke's arguments in favour of deference to established forms of government. Both positions were a form of 'political imposture', where this term serves the same purpose as Condorcet's critique of 'Machiavellism' in politics, defined as the belief that government was an exercise in the use of power without moral purpose based on the assumption that the populace at large would always be too ignorant, too selfish and too impervious to reason, to be capable of being ruled in any other way. For both Godwin and Condorcet the need for such legislative ruses would be abolished in a future state based on the application of reason to human affairs, one in which (Godwin's emphasis) transparency, sincerity, and universal benevolence would determine social relationships, or in which (Condorcet's emphasis) new forms of applied social science would be brought to bear on the problems of representative bodies, republican forms of government, and the economic welfare of those living under them.⁷ The difference was captured in a casual remark that Godwin inserted into the *Enquiry* after Condorcet's work appeared: Condorcet, he said, was one of those authors who was 'inclined to rest their hopes rather upon the growing perfection of art than, as is here done, upon the immediate and unavoidable operation of an improved intellect'.⁸

There was another significant respect in which Godwin was critical of a position commonly (though illegitimately) associated with Rousseau, namely 'that the savage state was the genuine and proper

⁴ For Godwin's endorsement see *Enquiry* in *PPW*, III, p. 48.

⁵ 'Rousseau, notwithstanding his genius, was full of weakness and prejudice. His *Emile* deserves perhaps to be regarded as one of the principal reservoirs of philosophical truth as yet existing in the world; though with a perpetual mixture of absurdity and mistake. In his writings expressly political, *Du contrat social* and *Considérations sur la Pologne*, the superiority of his genius seems to desert him.' See *Enquiry* in *PPW*, III, p. 273n.

⁶ See *Enquiry* in *PPW*, III, pp. 273-6, citing Book II, Chapter 7, 'The Legislator' in Rousseau's *Social Contract*.

⁷ For Condorcet's criticisms of Machiavellism see *Sketch*, pp. 165, 176; and Baker, *Condorcet*, pp. 347-8.

⁸ *Enquiry* in *PPW*, IV, p. 344.

condition of man'.⁹ Rousseau's eulogy of the state that existed before the establishment of government and laws should have been reserved, Godwin argued, for 'the period that may possibly follow upon their abolition'. Godwin's dissent from Rousseau on this point was also expressed in qualified acceptance of those propositions that had made Mandeville scandalous. Godwin chose (this time with more legitimacy) to ignore the satirical and licentious side of the *Fable of the Bees* by commending it as 'highly worthy of the attention of every man who would learn profoundly to philosophise upon human affairs. No author has displayed, in stronger terms, the deformity of existing abuses, or proved more satisfactorily how inseparably these abuses are connected together.'¹⁰ The state of luxury and inequality execrated by Rousseau and anatomised by Mandeville was a necessary but temporary phase through which societies had to pass on their way to a more rational, truly civilised, and more egalitarian condition.

It was as advocates of systems of equality that Malthus first dealt with Godwin and Condorcet. They retained this role in all editions of the *Essay*, with other spokesmen for egalitarian and communitarian solutions being added later: Robert Owen, Paine, the followers of Thomas Spence, and far less radical schemes for benefit societies, such as those put forward by Joseph Townsend, which appeared to involve compulsory membership. The six chapters originally devoted to Godwin were reduced to two and then one, reflecting with a long delay the decline in Godwin's reputation, though not Malthus's interest in the subject. As he explained when adding Owen's *New View of Society* to his list of egalitarian systems in 1817, such ideas had perennial attractions arising from the conjunction in all civilised societies of trivial luxury at one end of the social scale and poverty at the other, of 'invention after invention in machinery' promising abundance and leisure for all, the results of which were not visible in a reduction of 'the labours of the great mass of society'.¹¹

Godwin's portrayal of himself as an arbiter between Burke and Paine was matched by Malthus's offer to mediate the 'unamicable contest' between the 'advocate for the present order' who 'condemns all political speculations in the gross', who treated philosophers as 'wild

⁹ *Enquiry* in *PPW*, III, p. 276n.

¹⁰ *Enquiry* in *PPW*, IV, p. 328. Such insight or tolerance of what might appear to be a diametrically opposed position parallels Godwin's willingness to regard similar statements in Burke's *Vindication of Natural Society* as being truthful rather than ironic; see p. 218 above.

¹¹ See Chapter 3 (b) as reprinted in *EPP*, II, pp. 333-9.

and mad-headed enthusiasts', cloaking personal ambition behind pretended public benevolence; and those who 'indulge in the most bitter invectives against every present establishment, without applying [their] talents to consider the best and safest means of removing abuses, and without seeming to be aware of the tremendous obstacles that threaten, even in theory, to oppose the progress of man towards perfection'.¹² In other words, Malthus certainly did not see himself as a spokesman for the 'present order' or as antagonistic to all forms of political theorising: he was seeking a middle way *between* Burke and Godwin.

II

The position in party politics that Malthus started from was far closer to Godwin's than Burke's in the 1790s. Godwin had supported Sheridan and Fox in the hope of establishing an alliance between the Whigs and radical supporters of domestic political reform; he had condemned the measures taken to suppress radical publications; and he had also opposed the war with France.¹³ Malthus's party allegiances at this time can be established from the fragments of an anonymous pamphlet on *The Crisis; A View of the Present State of Great Britain, by a Friend to the Constitution* which he hoped to publish in 1796. What these tell us is that Malthus, probably in common with his father, was some kind of Foxite Whig, critical of the way in which the Duke of Portland, together with Burke, had gone over to Pitt as soon as war with France had begun. Malthus's hopes of reviving 'true Whig principles' centred on 'the returning sense and reason of the country gentleman and middle classes of society' to bring the legislature back to 'the safe and enlightened policy of removing the weight of objections to our constitution by diminishing the truth of them'.¹⁴

Like that other Foxite Whig, John Millar, then, though in more 'Country' Whig fashion, Malthus was an opponent of the war and the repressive measures adopted by Pitt in the course of it. In common ✓ with Millar too, he was anxious that curbs on executive tyranny and ✓ gradual reform of British political institutions should not be indefinitely ✓ postponed by the response to events in France. Unlike Millar, however, ✓

¹² See *FE*, pp. 3–6.

¹³ For Godwin's political writings during the 1790s see 'Political Letters', 'Essay Against the War with France' and *Considerations on Lord Grenville's and Mr Pitt's Bills* as reprinted in *PPW*, II.

¹⁴ The fragments are cited in two memoirs written by friends of Malthus, William Otter and William Empson. The most convenient source is P. James, *Population Malthus*, London, 1979, pp. 50–4.

✓ Malthus's faith in the beneficial diffusion of the principle of utility
 ✓ among the populace at large was more qualified, largely as a result of one of the implications of his diagnosis of the source of domestic unrest. As he was to express this in the second *Essay*: 'A mob, which is generally the growth of a redundant population, goaded by resentment for real sufferings, but totally ignorant of the quarter from which they originate, is of all monsters the most fatal to freedom.'¹⁵ Coping with the implications of this diagnosis, as we shall see, lay behind a number of Malthus's recommendations with regard to education and the extension of civil and political liberties to the populace at large.

One of the possible 'objections to our constitution' consistently singled out by Malthus lay in the Test and Corporation Acts which restricted participation by dissenters in many aspects of public life. To his acceptance of the need to abolish these acts was later added the case for extending similar liberties to Roman Catholics.¹⁶ In 1796 he took a noticeably latitudinarian view of the rights of dissenters, especially perhaps for someone who had just begun his career as a serving curate in the established church.¹⁷ It may have been for this reason that his father advised that publication of *The Crisis* 'will never do you discredit, tho' I can not answer that it will get you a Deanery'.¹⁸

✓ The most likely reason for Malthus's tolerance in such matters lies in
 ✓ the slightly unorthodox education he had received at the hands of
 ✓ prominent dissenters. Before going up to Jesus College, Cambridge in 1784, Malthus had been educated at the Dissenting Academy at Warrington, where he was the personal tutee of Gilbert Wakefield, another of Burke's critics and a leading figure in the Unitarian movement who was later to die after imprisonment for sedition as a result of his activities in opposing the war with France. Nor did Malthus escape the influence of dissenting religion and politics at Cambridge: Jesus College had been Wakefield's college and was at the centre of both latitudinarian and republican thinking in Cambridge in the 1780s. Malthus's tutor, the Unitarian and political radical, William

¹⁵ See *EPP*, II, p. 123.

¹⁶ On Malthus's support for Catholic emancipation see pp. 341–2 below.

¹⁷ '... perhaps if the mother church prompted by an universal charity had extended her pale to admit a set of men, separated by such slight shades of difference in their religious tenets, such a conduct, so far from endangering the holy building, I must ever think would have added strength and safety both to the Church and the State. Admitted to equal advantages, and separated by no distinct interest, they could have no motives peculiar to themselves for dislike to the government.' See James, *Population Malthus*, p. 51.

¹⁸ Letter to T. R. Malthus, 14 April 1796 as reprinted in *Selected Papers of T. R. Malthus*, edited by T. Satoh, J. Pullen and T. Hughes Parry, Cambridge, forthcoming.

Frend, opposed both the Test Acts and the war against France, and was later banished from the university for his views. While Malthus did not share Frend's radical political and economic ideas, he remained on good terms with him after the publication of his first *Essay*, and when in London mixed in the same dissenting circles frequented by Frend and Godwin.

The publisher of Malthus's *Essay*, Joseph Johnson, another prominent Unitarian, was a central figure in these circles.¹⁹ Johnson, a friend of Paine, had published the English translation of Condorcet as well as the anti-war pamphlet by Wakefield that had landed both author and publisher in prison. He also published some of the poetry of Coleridge and Wordsworth in the 1790s, a fact that is of interest to the next two essays. It was through Johnson that Malthus met and corresponded with Godwin after the *Essay* first appeared. Moreover, throughout his life Malthus remained on close terms with the another prominent dissenting family with strong publishing connections, the son and daughter of the principal of the Warrington Academy, John Aikin and Anna Letitia Barbauld.²⁰ Despite his ordination as a priest in the established church, therefore, it seems legitimate to conclude that Malthus was intimately acquainted with the political and religious ideas of the dissenting alternative. Indeed, one early reader of the first *Essay* who was later to become a close friend of Malthus, Francis Horner, recorded the following impression in his journal: 'The author treats Godwin and Condorcet with great candour and mildness; his language, indeed, and his turn of thought seem to have been formed very much in their school.'²¹

This would certainly help to account for the respect Malthus paid to Godwin's position, and the friendliness of their exchanges after the first *Essay* appeared and during the period in which Malthus was engaged in transforming it from an anonymous polemical pamphlet into a more scholarly work. In selecting Godwin's *Enquiry* for criticism, Malthus spoke as one who 'ardently wished' to believe in the kind of future it

¹⁹ On Johnson and his circle see G. P. Tyson, *Joseph Johnson: A Liberal Publisher*, Iowa City, 1979.

²⁰ See references to John Aikin, MD, Lucy Aikin (his daughter), and Anna Letitia Barbauld (his sister) in the index to James, *Population Malthus*. The Aikin family ran the *Annual Review*, with Arthur, John, Lucy, and their aunt, Mrs Barbauld, being frequent contributors. John Aikin was also literary editor of the *Monthly Magazine*, another prominent Unitarian publication, and a regular contributor to the *Monthly Review*. For details see J. O. Hayden, *The Romantic Reviewers*, London, 1969, pp. 52-4, 57-8; and J. E. Cookson, *The Friends of Peace; Anti-war Liberalism in England, 1793-1815*, Cambridge, 1982, Chapter 4 on 'The Liberal Press'.

²¹ See *The Horner Papers; Selections from the Letters and Miscellaneous Writings of Francis Horner, MP*, edited by Kenneth Bourne and William Banks Taylor, Edinburgh, 1994, p. 101.

espoused, as someone who was 'warmed and delighted' by the portrait of man's prospects it contained. One of the features of Godwin's anarchistic utopia that Malthus most admired was its reliance on individual 'reason and conviction', though he was later to discover that Godwin placed limits on this that were not his own. 'The unlimited exercise of private judgment', he said in 1798, 'is a doctrine inexpressibly grand and captivating, and has a vast superiority over those systems where every individual is in a manner the slave of the public'.²²

This was an oblique reference to Godwin's rejection of Rousseau's use of the legislatorial device of civil religion, but Malthus's agreement with Godwin on the importance of private judgement runs deeper than this suggests. Both men agreed that human dignity and happiness were strongly connected with the absence of relations of paternalistic dependence, and with self-exertion and the exercise of discretionary foresight in conducting personal affairs. While this did not make Malthus an anarchist, of course, it helps to explain the strength of his conviction that under the existing Poor Law 'the whole class of the common people of England is subjected to a set of grating, inconvenient, and tyrannical laws, totally inconsistent with the genuine spirit of the constitution'.²³ It is also highly relevant to the individualistic moral virtues that underlie what became, in the second and later editions of the *Essay*, Malthus's ideal remedy for the population problem, moral restraint – about which more will have to be said later.

On the other hand, what Malthus most deprecated was Godwin's assumption, in common with Paine and other radicals, that social and political institutions were the chief source of all social evils. As he said in the first *Essay*, overplaying his hand in a way that he qualified in significant fashion in later editions, 'though human institutions appear to be the obvious and obtrusive causes of much mischief to mankind; yet, in reality, they are light and superficial, they are mere feathers that float on the surface'.²⁴ It also followed that instead of the present form of society being a temporary piece of scaffolding that could be dismantled in the ascent to higher things, existing property and marriage laws were an indispensable part of the human condition. Going on to the offensive, Malthus maintained that any attempt to dispense with these institutions would not only prove temporary, but would prevent any society adopting the course recommended by

²² *FE*, p. 174.

²³ *FE*, p. 92.

²⁴ *FE*, p. 177.

Godwin from harnessing those forces connected with self-interest which alone could enable it to solve the basic subsistence problem and sustain the forward march of civilisation:

It is to the established administration of property, and to the apparently narrow principle of self-love, that we are indebted for all the noblest exertions of human genius, all the finer and more delicate emotions of the soul, for everything, indeed, that distinguishes the civilised, from the savage state; and no sufficient change, has as yet taken place in the nature of civilised man, to enable us to say, that he either is, or ever will be, in a state, when he may safely throw down the ladder by which he has risen to this eminence.²⁵

This statement was to be given a slightly more up-beat interpretation in the second *Essay* by recognising that man could 'rise higher by the same means', but it was to this central issue that the Godwin–Malthus dispute returned by every available route. In defending the role of self-love and by distinguishing this from mere selfishness, Malthus was continuing an eighteenth-century line of thought which, since the publication of the *Wealth of Nations*, had become associated with Smith's name. In his first *Essay*, Malthus commended Smith's 'generous system of perfect liberty' as the only feasible way of dividing the labour and incomes of society equitably, without direct government intervention or unacceptable forms of dependence.²⁶ In this respect he was merely reinstating views that had been rejected by Godwin when he treated Smith (along with Hume) as an erroneous advocate of a version of the 'system of optimism', according to which 'disorder, selfishness, monopoly and distress, all of them seeming discords, contribut[e] to the admirable harmony and magnificence of the whole'. Godwin had mentioned Smith more specifically when he responded to the argument that only a society in which economic relations were mediated by market transactions could reap the benefits associated with specialisation and the division of labour. To Godwin, such appeals to reciprocal self-interest could only be at the expense of 'the dictates of benevolence', marking 'the end of that political justice and pure society of which we treat'. Smith, therefore, in Godwin's eyes was simply one of those 'commercial writers' who had argued that the division of labour in society was 'the offspring of avarice', and where 'refinement is the growth of monopoly'.

In Godwin's vocabulary, 'monopoly' was a comprehensive term of opprobrium referring to the Rousseau-inspired idea that inequality of

²⁵ *FE*, pp. 286–7.

²⁶ *FE*, pp. 287–8n.

income and property ownership had created societies in which the mass who lived by their labour were enslaved by luxuries available only to the few. It also covered the institution of marriage and a division of labour in society which created specialised roles that conferred local monopolies of skill and knowledge.²⁷ A more comprehensive inversion of what Hume and Smith stood for can hardly be envisaged: any increase in the productiveness of labour achieved through capital accumulation, the extension of markets, and the division of labour merely impoverished those who were already poor. The security of property, including property in labour, which Smith had treated as a precondition for the progress of opulence, became the root source of the chief distributive injustices of commercial society.

It is clear that Godwin was an exponent of what might be called a post-economic utopia – one that could be attained only by allowing the unjust institutions of existing commercial society to sink beneath the weight of their own imperfections. Property created dependence and servility; it directed human effort away from moral and intellectual improvement towards sordid material pursuits. Nothing less than the abandonment of private property (including property in spouses) and the sharing of labour equally would answer, with change being effected without coercion through general moral and intellectual improvement achieved by means of public debate and the exposure of error. Godwin's ideal was an economy of abundance, judged not in terms of material goods and services – the need for which could be reduced in a world where uniformity of basic wants was recognised – so much as in minimum unnecessary labour and the maximum scope for leisure.²⁸

Despite what might seem to be a stark clash between Malthus and Godwin over these central issues, it is still important to register those features of existing society that Malthus was *not* prepared to defend. In the correspondence with Godwin that followed publication of the first *Essay* he readily conceded the 'extreme desirableness' of abolishing unnecessary labour and achieving an 'equal division of the necessary labour among all the members of the society'.²⁹ Although the rich were

²⁷ *Enquiry* in *PPW*, III, p. 458. Godwin's most extended treatment of the division of labour can be found in his essay 'Of Trades and Professions' in *The Enquirer* as reprinted in *PPW*, v, pp. 171–83. On the subject of merchants and tradesmen Godwin held that the difference between cost and price allowed them 'a large discretionary power', though he also maintained that: 'Nothing is more striking than the eagerness with which tradesmen endeavour to supplant each other.' See *ibid.*, pp. 174–5.

²⁸ On this see F. Rosen, *Progress and Democracy; William Godwin's Contribution to Political Philosophy*, London, 1987, Chapter 6.

²⁹ See letter to Godwin, 20 August 1798 as reprinted in end-notes to *FE*, p. iv.

incapable of preventing the 'almost constant action of misery upon the great part of society', he acknowledged that they were sometimes guilty of 'unfair combination' against the labouring poor.³⁰ He also admitted that 'the present great inequality of property' could not be justified; it was 'an evil, and every institution that promotes it, is essentially bad and impolitic'. Nevertheless, since the advantages of active government intervention to 'repress inequality of fortunes' were dubious – again a point on which he was at one with Godwin (though not with Condorcet and Paine, as we shall see) – any alternative had to be sought within the existing structure of society. It also had to be based on assumptions about motives that could be justified in terms of observation and experience, and by means that did not entail 'romantic' sacrifices – another topic within the science of morals on which Malthus took issue with Godwin. The only inescapable features of the existing social order, according to Malthus, were the division of society into 'a class of proprietors and a class of labourers', and a 'system of barter and exchange' that relied on 'the general moving principle of self-love'.³¹

On this matter Malthus differentiated between Godwin's post-economic vision and Condorcet's advocacy of equalising policies and institutions *within* a society based on commerce and private property. The theme of equality is a prominent one in the final or tenth stage of Condorcet's sketch of future lines of social development, with the ultimate goal being defined as one in which 'the only kind of inequality to persist will be that which is in the interests of all and which favours the progress of civilization, of education, and of industry, without entailing either poverty, humiliation, or dependence'.³² Inequalities in wealth as well as inequalities between those whose income depended on labour and those whose income derived from inheritance or accumulated capital would, he thought, be diminished through social progress, leaving only those inequalities that were 'the result of natural and necessary causes which it would be foolish and dangerous to wish to eradicate'.³³ While much of this would occur simply as a result of removing restrictive practices and fiscal privileges that provided 'artificial ways of perpetuating and uniting fortunes', it could be further aided by old-age, widows', and orphans' pensions, as well as payments to cover

³⁰ *FE*, p. 36.

³¹ *FE*, pp. 207, 287–8, and his letter to Godwin, 20 August 1798 reprinted on pp. iii–viii in end-notes to *FE*.

³² *Sketch*, p. 174.

³³ *Sketch*, p. 179.

'periodic disasters'. The calculus of probabilities based on life statistics would enable an insurance fund to be created for these purposes, with the scheme being based on a mixture of personal contributions supplemented by a tontine arrangement fed from the compulsory contributions of those who died before they could benefit. Condorcet saw such schemes as covering society as a whole, whether organised by private associations or not. Beyond this, he wanted to improve access to credit facilities so that they were 'no longer the exclusive privilege of great wealth'. Once greater equality of wealth was achieved, this would lead to greater equality in education and social status.

Malthus regarded Condorcet's commitment to redistribution through social insurance as involving a blatant inconsistency: 'M. Condorcet allows that a class of people which maintains itself entirely by industry is necessary to every state. Why does he allow this? No other reason can well be assigned than because he conceives that the labour necessary to procure subsistence for an extended population will not be performed without the goad of necessity.'³⁴ How then could Condorcet fail to see that his insurance fund removed an essential element in commercial society, the need for punishments as well as rewards? The idle and improvident would be placed upon the same footing as those who were active, prudent, and industrious. What incentive would there be for the spread of habits of self-reliance? Administration of the scheme would require an 'inquisition' to distinguish between the worthy and unworthy. It would create something akin to the English Poor Law upon a larger scale and be 'completely destructive of the true principles of liberty and equality'.

These are strong claims, and they show why it makes sense to speak of Malthus adding the fear of falling in the social scale to Smith's assumption concerning the restless desire for individual improvement as part of the motivation necessary to sustain commercial society. One reason for this is Malthus's preoccupation with a population problem that Smith had not recognised and Condorcet had dismissed as of no current concern. Another is the system of Paleyite or theological utilitarianism that Malthus accepted as part and parcel of his Newtonianism. According to this theology, a beneficent Deity, anxious to maximise happiness and minimise vice, had attached pleasure to those activities that were conducive to happiness and pain to those that were vicious. This constituted a fixed system of laws of nature designed to place man

³⁴ *FE*, p. 149.

under sufficient tension between needs and resources to ensure that he did not fall backward along the scale of civilisation. Hence the conclusion of Malthus's theodicy that 'evil existed in the world, not to create despair, but activity'.³⁵ The goad of necessity acted as the spur to invention, without which God's original purpose in wishing the world's resources to be cultivated optimally would remain unfulfilled.

Lacking any such theodicy or idea of regression – indeed believing that all was set fair for indefinite progress – Condorcet would have accepted only the positive role of market incentives. He sought to add considerations of distributive justice to a position that had essentially concerned itself with those rules of commutative justice that commanded universal assent. The market may reduce absolute inequalities, but will not do enough to reduce relative inequalities of property and income. It may even leave a large section of the population with a need for the kind of assistance that could not be provided by charity or private insurance. In adopting this position Condorcet was extending the Smithian argument and departing from Turgot, his own master in these matters. Thus Turgot had condemned badly directed charity and defended the 'useful and necessary' aspects of inequality that accompany economic liberty along lines that are almost identical with Malthus's arguments on the same subjects.³⁶ Condorcet's (and, as we shall see, Paine's) new move within an established game had provoked an equally novel response from Malthus that made the defence of inequality within commercial society more central than it had been to Smith, the cautious import of whose arguments was merely to suggest that the progress of opulence could have equalising tendencies. Moreover, unlike some other arguments in the first *Essay*, it was in essence to be the response Malthus gave to a wide variety of egalitarian and communalistic schemes throughout his life, including those that merely entailed some form of compulsory contribution to a common fund.

III

The 'immovable basis' on which Godwin hoped to place 'the principles of politics' was provided by his metaphysics or psychological account of

³⁵ *FE*, p. 395-

³⁶ See *Reflexions sur la formation et la distribution des richesses* in *Oeuvres de Turgot*, edited by G. Schelle, Paris, 1919, II, p. 540; and *Lettre à Mme Graffigny*, *ibid.*, I, p. 241. See also P. Surault, 'Turgot et le populationisme' and J. Morange, 'L'Etat et le droit dans la pensée de Turgot' in C. Bordes and J. Morange (eds.), *Turgot, économiste et administrateur*, Paris, 1981, pp. 68–71, 137–8.

the human mind and its capacities. Any refutation of Godwin's system, therefore, had to supply an alternative account of human motivation and character formation. Godwin had adopted a necessitarian position that made the formation of mind and character by circumstances, and the rational mind's capacity to exert control over mere sensual passions, a central issue. Malthus's respect for experience led him to doubt whether Godwin was correct in assuming that intellectual pursuits would eventually establish hegemony over 'mere animal function', especially among those who had never known such pursuits. Godwin had contended that only savages were 'subject to the weakness of indolence'. In civilised societies 'thought, acuteness of disquisition, and ardour of pursuit . . . set the corporeal faculties at work'.³⁷ Malthus countered this mind-over-matter argument with one based on mind-out-of-matter that suggested to some of his Cambridge friends that he had allowed himself to come too close to embracing materialism for comfort.³⁸ Those, like Francis Horner, who cared little for such theological speculations were even less sympathetic; he found the 'mystical metaphysical theory of the evolution or existence of mind out of matter' contained in the concluding chapters of the *Essay* the worst parts of the book.³⁹ Malthus's theodicy also flirted with 'annihilationism', and was therefore at odds with the orthodox Anglican doctrine of regarding this world as a state of trial or probation. It was withdrawn, with more or less good grace, on the advice of friends within the Church in later editions.⁴⁰

In the first *Essay*, however, the polemical urge to invert Godwin's logic drove the argument. Indolence was treated as a curb on thought that was not confined to the savage state: it was a human disposition that constantly threatened to inhibit intellectual and bodily activity. Without the pressure posed by necessity and new wants, there was always a risk of listlessness overcoming improvement. Godwin had exaggerated the intellectual at the expense of the corporeal elements in human nature. Both types of activity were subject to diminishing returns, the superiority of intellectual pleasures consisting only 'in their

³⁷ *Enquiry* in *PPW*, III, p. 438.

³⁸ See letter to Malthus from Edward Clarke, 20 August 1798 reporting on his defence of *FE* from the following charge: 'A casual Reader, would swear he is a Materialist . . . He speaks of Intellect, as produced by the Operation of Matter upon Mind; not considering, what he knows as well as every body else, that all our Knowledge, all the Ideas we have, or ever shall obtain, is produced by Sensation'; see *Selected Papers*, edited by Satoh *et al.*

³⁹ *Horner Papers*, edited by Bourne and Taylor, p. 102.

⁴⁰ For the most comprehensive treatment of the underlying issue, see Waterman, *Revolution, Economics and Religion*, Chapter 3.

filling up more time, in their having a larger range, and in their being less liable to satiety, than in their being more real and essential'.⁴¹ The pleasures of mind and body could not be separated: preoccupation with the former often provided a motive capable of overcoming physical fatigue, but it could not do so indefinitely. By separating and denigrating the pleasures of the body, Godwin had bent the rod too far: 'To strip sensual pleasures of all their adjuncts, in order to prove their inferiority, is to deprive a magnet of some of its most essential causes of attraction, and then to say that it is weak and inefficient.'⁴²

The belief that corporeal propensities would always be capable of influencing rational and virtuous deliberation led Malthus to reject Godwin's views on crime and punishment. He accepted the injustice of punishments that were not accurately proportioned to the offence, but derived the regrettable need for deterrence and restraining political institutions from the 'compound' nature of human motivation, the consequence of which was that conviction could never be secured by reason divorced from experience. This also provided Malthus with an answer to Godwin's (and later, by implication, to Owen's) necessitarianism, according to which vice and moral weakness could be abolished in a world where no evil impressions could be acquired. The temptations arising from want and other passions would be present regardless of political institutions, producing, according to Godwin's own theory of character formation, a variety of dispositions that made it as unlikely that 'all men will be virtuous, as that sixes will come up a hundred times following upon the dice'.⁴³ Man was capable of improvement, the limits of which could not be known in advance; but this did not warrant the conclusion that man was capable of unlimited improvement – the argument Malthus had employed against the speculations of Condorcet and Godwin on the indefinite prolongation of human life, making use of both physical and botanical analogies for the purpose.

In the debate with Godwin, then, it was Malthus who was the defender of immediate sense and feeling, of compound motivations against purely intellectual ones. Considered abstractly, all the passions, impulses, and wants with which God had endowed man were natural: their satisfaction brought happiness and thereby played an essential part in a beneficent design. The desire to satisfy material wants was the

⁴¹ *FE*, p. 212.

⁴² *FE*, p. 215.

⁴³ *FE*, pp. 267–8.

impulse that underlay the process of civilisation itself, and the passion between the sexes was the foundation on which the pleasures associated with conjugal affection was based. The dangers to happiness lay not in these impulses themselves, but in the 'fatal extravagances' to which they sometimes gave rise. Since it was impossible to weaken the force of basic impulses without injuring happiness, regulation and redirection rather than suppression was the correct response.

William Hazlitt later encapsulated these differences between Malthus and Godwin in his caricatures of both men. Malthus was portrayed as a sensualist with an amorous disposition who was unable to envisage man's capacity to control his sexual appetites. His adversary lay at the other extreme: 'Mr Godwin has rendered an essential service to moral science by attempting (in vain) to pass the Arctic Circle and Frozen Regions, where the understanding is no longer warmed by the affections, nor fanned by the breeze of fancy.' But these *were* caricatures; they were based on what it became convenient to continue to believe about both authors, rather than what the authors themselves had said – as Hazlitt knew as well as the authors he was caricaturing.⁴⁴

✓ By endorsing moral restraint as both the ideal and practical solution to the population problem after 1803, Malthus was assuming that control over sexual desire was not merely to be welcomed but possible, even if he did not expect it to be universally adopted. Godwin too underwent a change of heart after the first edition of the *Enquiry*. The three chief blemishes of the work to which he later confessed were Stoicism ('or an inattention to the principle that pleasure and pain are the only bases upon which morality can rest'), Sandemanianism ('or an inattention to the principle that feeling, and not judgment, is the source of human actions'), and finally, 'the unqualified condemnation of the private affections'.⁴⁵ On all these fronts, therefore, Godwin made changes that brought him closer to Malthus's position, just as Malthus may have been influenced by his correspondence and contacts with Godwin to give greater weight to moral restraint in later editions of the *Essay*. The basic differences were not resolved, but both parties had been led – though not necessarily by each other – to make more qualified statements of their position. If anything, as we shall see, Godwin conceded more to Malthus in his first direct response than he could afford to do without relinquishing essential elements in his position.

⁴⁴ On Malthus and Godwin see *Spirit of the Times* in *CW*, XI, pp. 23, 108–9. For more on Hazlitt's playful use of this knowledge see pp. 294–5, 303 below.

⁴⁵ See 'The Principal Revolutions of Opinion' in *CNM*, I, p. 53.

IV

Malthus's final sally against Godwin in the first *Essay* confronted the arguments on avarice and profusion in *The Enquirer*, the latest statement of Godwin's position on accumulation, luxury, and the possibilities of establishing a society in which inequality and unnecessary labour were abolished. Which of the two characters, the rich man who spends his fortune or the miser who hoards it, contributes more to the ideal state of society? Contrary to what, since the *Wealth of Nations*, had become conventional wisdom on capital accumulation and progress, Godwin maintained, following Rousseau, that the invention of new manufactured luxuries merely added to the burdens of the poor; their labours increased while their command over necessities through their wages remained static. The self-denying miser, therefore, by confining himself to that minimum set of wants held in common by all men, was, unwittingly, the greater public benefactor. In response, Malthus was able to call upon Smith's arguments in favour of parsimony, where this connoted not barren miserliness but adding to the capital that maintained productive labour. The poor man would hardly benefit from actions that simply decreased the demand for his only saleable commodity. Malthus was equally convinced that imposing uniformity of wants on mankind was neither possible nor desirable. The controversy had returned to its central point: the indefeasibility, in Malthus's view, of a society based on private property, with self-love acting as the strongest motive within a system of voluntary exchange.

Contrary to Godwin's belief that universal benevolence would replace self-love, Malthus maintained that this human quality was best seen not as a substitute for, but as the child of self-love, 'whose kind office it should be to soften the partial deformities, to correct the asperities, and to smooth the wrinkles of its parent'.⁴⁶ 'Narrow motives' were needed to inspire action on the part of mankind taken generally. If economic life had not been commercialised over the previous three of four hundred years, Britain would not have achieved its present degree of civil liberty. There would be less labour in relation to the size of the population, but more dependence – a state that Godwin professed to be in the business of abolishing. Smith's account of the connections between commerce and manufacturing on the one side, and civil liberties on the other, was still valid. Even so, Malthus

⁴⁶ FE, p. 294.

remained sufficiently close to Godwin (and, incidentally, to earlier contributors to the debate on populousness) to seek a compromise between Smith and Godwin on agricultural necessities and manufactured luxuries. At the end of his last chapter on Godwin, Malthus prefaced his next on Smith's model of progress through capital accumulation with a statement that conceded a good deal to Godwin's antagonism to the 'oeconomy of greatness', to a system in which the many laboured to provide manufactured luxuries for the property-owning few:

The labour created by luxuries, though useful in distributing the produce of the country, without vitiating the proprietor by power, or debasing the labourer by dependence, has not, indeed, the same beneficial effects on the state of the poor. A great accession of work from manufactures, though it may raise the price of labour even more than an increasing demand for agricultural labour; yet, as in this case, the quantity of food in the country may not be proportionably increasing, the advantage to the poor will be but temporary, as the price of provisions must necessarily rise in proportion to the price of labour.⁴⁷

Although barely more than a digression in the first *Essay*, the two chapters devoted to Smith and the French *économistes* on the sources of wealth were to lay the foundation for the gradual evolution of a Malthusian version of political economy during the next two decades, imparting an enduring if variable agrarian bias to his thinking that differentiated Malthus from Smith and brought him closer, for a time at least, to the French *économistes*. Initially, it was expressed as a doubt whether the labouring poor had benefited greatly from the economic growth that had accompanied the rise of commerce and manufacturing in Britain. Malthus believed that Richard Price's pessimistic estimates of declining population were based on genuine expertise, though he did not endorse them fully or accept their underlying pro-populationist assumptions. Nor did he share Smith's optimistic view of the rise in living standards since 1688. Before the census evidence became available in 1801, Malthus was inclined to think that population in Britain was increasing slowly, reflecting an equally slow rate of improvement in the availability of domestically produced subsistence goods. The rise in money wages associated with capital accumulation had preceded the rise in the price of food, thereby raising costs ahead of revenues and impairing the ability of agriculture to respond to the price rise. Enclosure and other improvements in agricultural technology had

⁴⁷ *FE*, pp. 301-2.

mostly been concentrated on grazing rather than arable wheat production, and fewer people were now employed on the land. In short, population would have increased faster if capital accumulation had not been so heavily concentrated on manufacturing and commerce rather than agriculture – a proposition that was to remain central to the Malthusian diagnosis of Britain's evolving condition.

By means of such arguments Malthus sought to emphasise the possibilities of conflict between economic growth and the 'happiness and comfort of the lower orders of society'. Real wages had not increased, and many wage-earners had suffered in the 'process of exchanging a stable and healthy form of life in agriculture for manufacturing occupations in towns where they were exposed to the risks of vice and disease as well as to greater uncertainties 'arising from the capricious taste of man, the accidents of war, and other causes'.⁴⁸ As Malthus said of manufacturing occupations in the first *Essay*, 'I do not reckon myself a very determined friend to them.'⁴⁹ This unfriendliness is confirmed by his treatment of them (very much in Godwin's manner) as serving only 'to gratify the vanity of a few rich people'; and by his decision to describe them as 'ornamental luxuries', illustrated by 'silks, laces, trinkets, and expensive furniture'.⁵⁰

While Malthus recognised, therefore, that Smith's system of natural liberty was capable of bringing material and other advantages of a political variety in its train, there was no guarantee that capital accumulation would always improve the living standards of the mass of society. Indeed, there was a distinct possibility that when economic growth was at the expense of agriculture and entailed living in cities and working on 'unwholesome manufactures' the material gains might be purchased at too high a price in terms of national security, unhealthiness, instability, vice, and misery. This lay at the heart of the moral dimension Malthus sought to add to political economy. When viewed from a perspective dominated by the system of natural liberty, it contained what was potentially at least an interventionist programme based on the idea that the wise legislator might have to take measures

⁴⁸ *FE*, p. 310.

⁴⁹ *FE*, p. 293.

⁵⁰ *FE*, pp. 332, 335–6. In his letter to Godwin dated 20 August 1798, Malthus conceived of a future 'when the baubles that at present engage the attention of the higher classes may be held in contempt', though he believed that 'moderate' wants would 'always remain objects of rational desire among the majority of mankind'; see *FE*, end-notes, p. v. In a footnote to this letter that was not included in this edition, Malthus expressed the opinion 'that the greatest encouragements should be given to tillage in preference either to grazing or manufacture'; see Abinger Papers, Bodleian Library catalogue, Dep. c.525/1.

to correct an imbalance between agriculture and manufacturing. Francis Horner, again, was perceptive in commenting later that 'those who have looked closely into [Malthus's] philosophy will admit, that there is always a leaning in favour of the efficacy of laws'.⁵¹ It is also significant that in order to express this idea Malthus reverted to the French *économistes* and James Steuart to suggest that 'the labour employed in trade and manufactures is sufficiently productive to individuals; but it is certainly not productive in the same degree to the state'.⁵²

In this respect at least it is tempting to conclude that Malthus was giving a *pre-Smithian* answer to problems that Smith had bypassed or treated as no longer being of importance once the underlying causes of growth had been made plain.⁵³ Another way of making the point, however, would be to say that Malthus was maintaining that the inversion of the natural progress of opulence in Europe condemned by Smith as part of his critique of mercantile policies was being perpetuated as a result of an unbalanced response to the pressures of population growth. It was giving rise to a condition to which Malthus gave the intriguing label of 'premature old age' in order to contrast it with the 'perpetual youth' of the United States.⁵⁴ He did not believe that the United States could preserve this condition indefinitely, any more than one could 'reasonably expect to prevent a wife or mistress from growing old by never exposing her to the sun or air'.⁵⁵ By the same token, however, he clearly felt that old age could be postponed in Europe by restoring agriculture to a position of pre-eminence, though what this meant and how it could be achieved, as we shall see, was something on which he shifted his views in accordance with his interpretation of what was happening to the British economy during and after the Napoleonic wars.

One daring proposal for achieving this in the first *Essay* was to question the law of primogeniture which accorded a 'monopoly price' to land and made its cultivation less advantageous to the individual – a radical solution entailing an 'equalization of property' (as opposed to 'fortunes' or income) that would remove an impediment which Smith

⁵¹ See *Horner Papers*, edited by Bourne and Taylor, p. 815.

⁵² *FE*, pp. 334–5.

⁵³ Indeed, Smith had explicitly rejected the kind of outcome Malthus was envisaging when it was put to him in similar terms by Governor Pownall; see p. 205 above for reference.

⁵⁴ *FE*, p. 344.

⁵⁵ *FE*, p. 343. This proposition, expressed less provocatively, was, as noted on p. 164 above, one that found a ready echo in James Madison's thinking about the American future.

had been too cautious or sceptical to advocate openly.⁵⁶ Malthus's agrarian bias revealed itself in proposals for subsidising the cultivation of 'fresh land' and legislation 'to weaken and destroy all those institutions relating to corporations, apprenticeships etc. which cause the labours of agriculture to be worse paid than the labours of trade and manufactures'.⁵⁷ An increase in the number of proprietors and a decrease in the number of landless labourers would be beneficial to society at large. Malthus was to defend primogeniture in Britain later – a reflection of the importance he attached, as a 'Country' Whig, to an independent landed order as a check on arbitrary power.⁵⁸ That he could even raise the abandonment of primogeniture in 1798, however, should be taken as another mark of the extent to which he was prepared to give a fair hearing to the views of Godwin and other critics of existing inequalities in property where possible.

On another subject of importance to Malthus's anxieties about the course of economic growth in Britain, the Poor Laws, there was less scope for agreement or disagreement with Smith. In common with Pitt and others who had contemplated changes in these laws during the period of scarcity in 1795–6, Malthus fully endorsed Smith's condemnation of the regulations governing settlement – another subject on which he was to change his position later when he acknowledged the advantages of local administration and responsibility. Beyond this, as we have seen, Smith provided little guidance on how the Poor Laws should operate under conditions of acute scarcity. Malthus noted the rapid growth of expenditure on poor relief in the first *Essay* as evidence that his population principle was in full operation in Britain, and that the benefits of growth were not filtering downward. In the short term the redistribution of income from rich to poor through the Poor Laws had merely increased the competition for available supplies. In the longer term the availability of relief as of right had the more disastrous effect of lowering wages and encouraging early marriage by those without the prospect of supporting children by their own efforts and income. Hence the conclusion that the Poor Laws 'in some measure create the poor which they maintain', and its corollary that 'dependent poverty ought to be held disgraceful' because '[a] labourer who marries without being able to support a family, may in some respects be considered as an enemy to

⁵⁶ *FE*, p. 344.

⁵⁷ *FE*, p. 96; see also p. 337.

⁵⁸ See pp. 356–8 below.

all his fellow-labourers'.⁵⁹ Although Malthus was later to infer from the census returns that the Poor Laws had not had the effect of lowering the age of marriage in Britain, here was the beginnings of his campaign in favour of long-term abolition.

While still working on the second *Essay*, Malthus took the opportunity presented by the recurrence of grain scarcity in 1799–1800 to publish *An Investigation of the Causes of the Present High Price of Provisions*. This enabled him to accomplish several things, the most obvious of which was to endorse Smith's defence of middlemen from the usual attacks on them for having engineered high prices by exercising monopoly power. It also enabled him to underline the connection between scarcity and the population principle by pointing out the consequences of using the allowance system to supplement the family income of those receiving assistance under the Poor Laws. In the first *Essay* he had accused the Poor Laws of relieving individuals at the cost of spreading pauperism. The allowance system could now be shown to have the effect, under conditions of acute scarcity, of raising the price of food beyond what the ordinary forces of demand and supply would have generated. Malthus did not complain about the resulting diffusion of the burden of scarcity. Indeed, although he continued to criticise the Poor Law regulations as an encouragement to population, he accepted that 'their operation in the present scarcity has been advantageous to the country'.⁶⁰ Since a high price that led to reduced consumption was itself the only palliative during extreme scarcity, it was pointless to complain or attribute it wrongly to the activities of middlemen. The underlying situation was one in which Britain had become a net importer of foodstuffs, which meant that population pressure laid the bulk of the population open to risk from domestic crop failure or deficiency. In other words, the events of 1799–1800 provided Malthus with an ideal opportunity to advertise his new work and give an additional airing to his concerns about long-term developments in the British economy that had no counterpart in the *Wealth of Nations*.

When the new edition appeared, it contained an extended commentary on the Poor Laws, broaching for the first time the benefits that would accrue from their 'gradual and very gradual' abolition. The rise in poor rates and the proportion of the active labour force claiming relief had led to proposals for setting a limit to the total fund available.

⁵⁹ *FE*, p. 86.

⁶⁰ See *An Investigation of the Causes of the Present High Price of Provisions* as reprinted in *Works*, VII, p. 13.

Malthus could not accept such ideas on grounds of impracticality and injustice to those who would be excluded or under-supported. The 'wide-spreading tyranny, dependence, indolence, and unhappiness' created by the Poor Laws was his main concern. It had produced a situation in which the poor had acquired the habit of 'constantly looking to these sources for all the good or evil they enjoy or suffer', with the further implication that 'their minds must almost necessarily be under a continual state of irritation against the higher classes of society whenever they feel distressed from the pressure of circumstances'.⁶¹ Although such considerations, ultimately those of public order, remained important to Malthus, it is also significant that the conclusion of this argument, mentioning irremediable misfortunes that would have to be borne 'with the fortitude of men and the resignation of Christians', was one of the passages later removed from the 1803 edition. In countering the argument that pauper children should not be punished for the failings of their parents, however, he defended the biblical doctrine concerning the sins of fathers by maintaining that it was merely the other side of the coin on which the blessings and responsibilities of parents to their children were inscribed. The dishonesty and inexpediency of upholding a legal right of relief brought the case back to broader political considerations. It was a tribute to her constitutional arrangements that Britain had been able to shoulder a burden that no other country could have borne without risking 'utter ruin'.

Malthus also returned to the criticisms of Smith's account of economic growth, expanding on his belief in the unwholesome nature of urban manufacturing activities by calling on John Aikin's account of conditions in Manchester to do so.⁶² The peculiar difficulties of agriculture in responding to the higher demand for and price of foodstuffs were also stressed. Britain's situation was described as that of 'a nation which from its extent of territory and population' was destined to support the greater part of its population from domestic agriculture, but had increasingly become reliant on foreign imports to meet the balance of its needs: 'A nation possessed of a large territory is unavoidably subject to this uncertainty in its means of subsistence, when the commercial part of its population is either equal to or has increased beyond, the surplus produce of its cultivators.' Intermittent

⁶¹ *EPP*, II, p. 139.

⁶² See *A Description of the Country from thirty to forty Miles around Manchester*, 1795 as cited in the *EPP*, I, pp. 382-4.

scarcity, being a constant risk, ought now to have a permanent place on the agenda of legislators; and Malthus began his sustained concern with the Corn Laws as a method of dealing with the problem by criticising Smith's case against corn bounties as a means of encouraging and safeguarding domestic production.⁶³

This led to Malthus's most extended foray into the country charted by the French *économistes*. Malthus was registering a protest against becoming blinded by 'the shewiness of commerce and manufacturing' into believing that they were the sole source of wealth, power, and prosperity. They were consequences not causes of wealth. The surplus product of agriculture, as the *économistes* had held, was still the real clue to prosperity, even if they had been wrong to attribute exclusive productivity to agriculture. Malthus was returning to an older concern with potential sources of 'ruin' and 'germs of decay' that Smith's attacks on Jeremiahs who predicted decline had made to seem outdated. A threat to future prosperity was posed by the excessive growth of commerce and manufacturing at the expense of agriculture – a threat that acquired urgency to Malthus as a result, first, of finding that population increase in Britain had been more rapid than he had earlier supposed, and, secondly, because the entire sequence of events was taking place against the background of war and Napoleon's attempted blockade. The 'body politick', Malthus argued in 1803, 'is in an artificial, and in some degree, diseased state, with one of its principal members out of proportion with the rest'.⁶⁴ How this disease could be alleviated was to become one of Malthus's major concerns, and no attentive reader of the chapters on this subject, as they emerged from revisions made during the Napoleonic wars, could have been surprised by the cautious stand he took in favour of corn bounties and retaining a measure of agricultural protection in the public debates that preceded renewal of the Corn Laws in 1815.⁶⁵

In one significant respect, however, Malthus had become friendlier to manufacturing in 1803: although he continued to think that it was an inferior way of life to rural labour and was subject to both the caprices of taste and the emulation of late-comers in the shift towards manufacturing, he no longer saw it simply as providing ornamental luxuries that gratified the vanity of the rich.⁶⁶ In order to mark the change of

⁶³ See *EPP*, II, Chapter D.

⁶⁴ *EPP*, I, p. 408.

⁶⁵ See pp. 332–4 below.

⁶⁶ On the gradual change in Malthus's attitudes towards manufacturing see G. Gilbert,

view, Malthus took issue with Paley's argument that populousness and hence aggregate happiness would best be served by a society in which 'a labourious frugal people minister[ed] to the demands of an opulent, luxurious nation'.⁶⁷ Such a society did not present 'an inviting aspect' to Malthus. Paley's position was too close to being a frank endorsement, reminiscent of Mandeville, of the 'slavery' to which – as Rousseau and Godwin had argued – luxury condemned the mass of society. Since Malthus could not accept Paley's or Godwin's position on luxury, he was obliged to chart his own middle way on this as on other matters. As part of his campaign to undermine the pro-populationist ideas that underlay Paley's position, he argued that: 'It is the spread of luxury among the mass of the people, and not an excess of it in a few, that seems to be the most advantageous, both with regard to national wealth and national happiness.' Malthus had recognised that the aspiration to acquire goods that were not agrarian necessities could reinforce his case for moral and prudential checks. This left him with a complex dual view of luxury. Its diffusion was beneficial in so far as it discouraged early marriage by making higher standards of living a viable alternative to children; but the overall balance between those employed in producing luxuries as opposed to those engaged in providing subsistence goods remained a matter of legislative concern at the national level.⁶⁸ If Malthus was acting as a Jeremiah, he was not doing so by merely repeating the eighteenth-century arguments.

V

We do not know how Godwin responded to his first meeting and correspondence with Malthus in 1798, though from a letter Malthus wrote at the time it would seem that both parties held to their original positions. The exchanges coincided with a particularly distressing period in Godwin's life marked by the death, in the previous year, of his wife, Mary Wollstonecraft, scurrilous attacks from the anti-jacobin press, and public denigration by two former friends, James Mackintosh

'Economic Growth and the Poor in Malthus's *Essay on Population*', *History of Political Economy*, 12 (1980), 83–96.

⁶⁷ Paley's *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* as cited by Malthus, in *EPP*, II, p. 193.

⁶⁸ Malthus was aware of the possibility of confusion here, but claimed that the two ideas involved different considerations: 'I have mentioned the point at which, alone, it is probable that luxury becomes really prejudicial to a country. But this point does not depend upon the spread of luxury ... but upon the proportion which those employed in preparing or procuring luxuries bears to the funds which are to support them.' See *EPP*, II, p. 194n.

and Dr Samuel Parr. Mackintosh had opposed Burke's *Reflections* in his *Vindiciae Gallicae* in 1791, but by 1796 had reneged on these opinions, first making peace with Burke himself and then, in 1799, announcing his change of position in a set of public lectures on the law of nature and nations. Without naming Godwin in these lectures, Mackintosh mounted an attack on his perfectibilist speculations, treating them as part of the dangerous disease associated with the spread of the 'new philosophy' since the French revolution. Parr's *Spital Sermon*, delivered in 1801, followed this up with wholesale condemnation of Godwin's philosophy of universal benevolence: it was antagonistic to those natural instincts which underlay patriotic citizenship, the ties of religion, and the domestic affections. As the correspondence between Parr and Godwin subsequently made clear, however, it was the impious tone of one of the essays in *The Enquirer* and the revelations of sexual libertinism in Godwin's memoir of his wife's life that were the chief source of offence.⁶⁹

Godwin had every right to be affronted by this concerted hostility from former friends, particularly in view of the revisions to the final edition of the *Enquiry* and the publication of his novel *St Leon*, in which he had gone out of his way to stress the importance he now attached to the domestic affections. Malthus, on the other hand, had succeeded in his aim of making an 'unamicable contest' more amicable by consistently putting the best construction on Godwin's arguments and motives. For example, he did not condemn the immorality of Godwin's proposals to abolish marriage, preferring to infer, as Godwin had claimed in the final edition of the *Enquiry*, that fidelity to one partner would rule in Godwin's ideal society.⁷⁰ In his *Thoughts Occasioned by the Perusal of Dr. Parr's Spital Sermon* in 1802, therefore, Godwin responded to Malthus alongside Parr and Mackintosh, but extended to him the more generous treatment to which he was entitled as an opponent who had 'neither laboured to excite hatred nor contempt against me or my tenets'.⁷¹

Indeed, Godwin took pride in having occasioned a work that showed its author to have 'made as unquestionable an addition to the theory of political economy as any writer for a century past'. He proceeded to

⁶⁹ The details of the quarrel between Parr and Godwin can be found in W. Derry, *Dr Parr; A Portrait of the Whig Dr Johnson*, Oxford, 1966, pp. 211-13. On the episode as a whole, see Marshall, *William Godwin*, pp. 222-7.

⁷⁰ *FE*, p. 183.

⁷¹ *Thoughts Occasioned by the Perusal of Dr. Parr's Spital Sermon* in *PPW*, II, p. 195.

expound Malthus's theory and concluded by saying that he admitted 'the ratios of the author in their fullest extent, and I do not attempt in the slightest degree to vitiate the great foundations of his theory'.⁷² He also accepted that 'in all old-settled countries' Malthus had demolished the 'vulgar code of morality' which made it the duty of legislators to encourage populousness, perceiving that since vice and misery were at present the main checks on increase, it was essential 'to enquire into the doctrine of substitutes'. At this point Godwin introduced another illustration of the principle of universal benevolence that was, in the eyes of his enemies at least, to compound his solecism in the *Enquiry* when commending the view that the life of Fénelon should be saved in a fire in preference to a relative or servant whose contribution to humanity at large was unlikely to be as great. He said that he could not 'regard a new-born child with any superstitious reverence'.

If the alternative were complete, I had rather such a child should perish in the first hour of its existence, than that a man should spend seventy years of life in a state of misery and vice. I know that the globe of earth affords room for only a certain number of human beings to be trained to any degree of perfection; and I had rather witness the existence of a thousand such beings, than a million of millions of creatures, burthensome to themselves, and contemptible to each other.⁷³

So taken was Godwin by the Malthusian dilemma that he proceeded to canvass other remedies, such as allowing the community to exercise control over the number of children any couple might be permitted, and by appearing to endorse some form of contraception.⁷⁴ By countenancing, if not advocating, such methods he was able to conclude that 'the evil is not so urgent, nor the limitation so narrow, as a terrified imagination might lead us to conclude'. In any event, as far as England was concerned, he accepted what he regarded as the majority view, namely that 'population has long been at a stand'. Vice and misery played their part in this, but another check was delayed marriage: 'Every one, possessed in the most ordinary degree of the gift of foresight, deliberates long before he engages in so momentous a transaction.' Such prudential restraint was at present more common among the upper and middle classes who were less oppressed and

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 198.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 199–200.

⁷⁴ 'If this subject were further pursued it would lead to many observations and details, curious and important in their own nature, but which would prove repulsive to the general reader, and would more properly find place in a treatise of medicine or animal economy': *ibid.*, p. 202.

hence more responsive to the need to preserve respectability. This provided the crucial answer to Malthus's anxieties: 'The more men are raised above poverty and a life of expedients, the more decency will prevail in their conduct, and sobriety in their sentiments. Where every one has a character, no one will be willing to distinguish himself by headstrong imprudence.' For these reasons Godwin felt that the barrier to future improvement posited by Malthus, though not to be viewed with complacency, was neither imminent nor so incapable of being solved by prudence that 'we ought to sit down for ever contented with all the oppression, abuses, and inequality which we now find fastened upon the necks, and withering the hearts, of so great a portion of our species'.⁷⁵

Malthus's opponents within the Godwinian camp were later to charge that in emphasising moral restraint in the second *Essay* he had capitulated to Godwin's position, thereby removing the entire force of the paradox which underlay the stress on vice and misery as the only checks on population increase in the first *Essay*. Malthus did not acknowledge Godwin's influence in this matter, probably because he felt it unnecessary to do so. Prudential restraint among the middle and upper classes was fully recognised as an operative check in the earlier work, but since this could take the form of practices Malthus regarded as vicious, the main change in the second *Essay* lay in emphasising its virtuous alternative, namely delayed marriage accompanied by sexual continence in the intervening period. In making this change Malthus could well have simply been exploiting the freedom that came from no longer having to sustain a polemical position in response to Godwin and Condorcet. The manner in which Godwin and Condorcet countenanced *all* forms of prudential restraint, vicious and non-vicious, could itself have provoked Malthus to underline the Christian distinctiveness of his own remedy. Indeed, the first *Essay* clearly repudiated Condorcet's recommendation of birth control in a way that later allowed Malthus to claim, quite correctly, that he had always opposed that solution.

[Condorcet] alludes either to a promiscuous concubinage, which would prevent breeding, or to something else as unnatural. To remove the difficulty in this way will surely, in the opinion of most men, be to destroy that virtue and purity of manners which the advocates of equality, and of the perfectibility of man, profess to be the end and object of their views.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ See *ibid.*, II, p. 205.

⁷⁶ *FE*, p. 154.

Nevertheless, the early exchanges with Godwin probably gave Malthus his first taste of how the population principle might be regarded by those who began from a political position that was, in some respects at least, close to his own. For example, in his *Thoughts*, Godwin had said that: 'The advocates of old establishments and old abuses, could not have found a doctrine, more to their heart's content, more effectual to shut out all reform and improvement for ever.' This could well have encouraged Malthus to include a chapter on the 'Effect of the knowledge of the principal cause of poverty on Civil Liberty' in the second *Essay*. The author of *The Crisis* would not have wished 'a doctrine which attributes the greatest part of the sufferings of the lower classes of society exclusively to themselves' to become an encouragement to governments to infringe liberties. At the same time he could not deny the conclusions of his diagnosis, namely that redundant population had made the mob an easy prey to 'turbulent and discontented men in the middle classes' – with Paine and the *Rights of Man* serving for the first time in Malthus's writings as the archetype.

Paine's error, according to Malthus, lay not in raising the question of rights but in being 'totally unacquainted with the structure of society, and the different moral effects to be expected from the physical difference between this country and America'.⁷⁷ The uniqueness of American society, as Malthus had recognised in the first *Essay*, lay in the absence of redundant population: it was the exception that proved the rule behind his principle, even though the present appearance of perpetual youth could not be indefinitely sustained. The ex-colonies of North America also enjoyed a more favourable distribution of property, from which Malthus drew the conclusion that the civil power there did not need to possess the same degree of strength as in Europe. The wider gap between the propertied and unpropertied classes in Europe also meant that redistribution through taxation in the manner proposed by Paine would have no limit. What was needed was diffusion of a knowledge of the real rights of man, including the message that the right to subsistence was not one that could be guaranteed. This was the positive Malthusian version of Burke's policy ✓ of resignation in the face of the divine dispensation; and it came from ✓ recognising that the real causes of the condition of the labouring poor ✓ lay not in government but in something that could be remedied by ✓

⁷⁷ *EPP*, II, p. 126.

their own actions. References to Christian resignation in the face of this situation, as we have noted, were carefully removed from later editions.

The political inference to be drawn from this state of affairs was that if fear of insurrection was abolished, the guardians of British liberties would be able to return to their traditional role of reforming abuses and controlling executive encroachment: 'Remove all apprehension from the tyranny and folly of the people, and the tyranny of government could not stand a moment.' Once a just appreciation of the dangers attached to population redundancy became more widespread, Malthus could allow himself to think that deformities in the constitution would become apparent to all: 'No interested defender of abuses could survive the scrutiny of enlightened public opinion' – a conclusion that displayed a faith in transparency remarkably similar to Godwin's. With false diagnoses removed: 'A tenfold weight would be immediately given to the cause of the people, and every man of principle would join in asserting and enforcing, if necessary, their rights.'⁷⁸

Fear of the mob made the case for executive tyranny easier to sustain; and it was the polarising aspects of this ancient see-saw relationship between tyranny and mob rule that made the moderate position of Whigs such as Malthus himself more urgent, and yet more difficult, to uphold. That is precisely the path Malthus trod throughout his career when faced with 'advocates for the present order' and its radical critics. As the chapter on civil liberty in the second *Essay* makes plain, political institutions were no longer mere feathers floating on the surface of human affairs. The subtitle of the work was changed to reflect Malthus's greater concern with 'the future removal or mitigation' of the consequences of the population principle. For reasons that were identical to those given by Smith, education of the populace at large at public expense became a major public responsibility, with a knowledge of the basic principles of political economy being added to a curriculum aimed at spreading literacy and numeracy. Alongside education, civil and political liberty were now acknowledged as making 'striking and incontestable' contributions to human improvement. Although Malthus believed that constitutional freedoms could have an effect that was only 'indirect and slow', they were an essential part of the process which, by conferring a degree of respectability on the lower classes, increased the chances of moral restraint being more widely adopted.

⁷⁸ *EPP*, II, p. 130.

One could say that on these matters Godwin and Malthus had succeeded through discussion in coming closer to one another on some important matters, though convergence was probably as much due to personal reflection as mutual persuasion. At the same time, however, Godwin's reply provided Malthus with another opportunity to return to essential differences in their perspectives. Godwin's attempt to deflect Malthus ('the reasonings of the *Essay on Population* did not bear with any particular stress upon my hypothesis') was, of course, resisted. If valid, Malthus believed that his reasonings applied to the whole of Godwin's speculations on political justice and the role of human institutions as the sole source of evil. The central issue of whether a solution to the problem of misery and vice could be found without resort to a 'coarse application to individual interest' could not be evaded. A sense of duty, the romantic exercise of 'noble and disinterested spirits', was not an adequate alternative, though Malthus accepted that it might be 'superadded to a sense of interest, and would by no means be without its effect'.⁷⁹

Malthus was also 'mortified' by Godwin's inference from what he had said about vice and misery that: 'The political superintendents of a community are bound to exercise a paternal vigilance and care over these two great means of advantage and safety to mankind; and that no evil is more to be dreaded, than that we should have too little vice and misery in the world to confine the principle of population within its proper sphere.'⁸⁰ He was perhaps scenting for the first time that the feature of Godwin's vision he praised – its reliance on private conscience – was capable of being combined with a positive conception of moral dependence. He certainly seems to have overlooked those parts of the *Enquiry* in which Godwin praised the efficacy of communal pressures in bringing individual behaviour into line with the social consensus.⁸¹ In his *Thoughts*, Godwin was prepared to consider community restrictions on family size, without specifying, as Malthus noted, how this would be achieved by methods that did not infringe private conscience. Malthus did not join with those who, anxious to blacken Godwin's name, had accused him of sanctioning abortion and infanti-

⁷⁹ *EPP*, I, p. 331.

⁸⁰ Godwin as quoted in *EPP*, I, p. 328.

⁸¹ For example: 'No individual would be hardy enough in the cause of vice to defy the general consent of sober judgement that would surround him . . . He would be obliged, by a force not less irresistible than whips and chains, to reform his conduct'; see *Enquiry* in *PPW*, III, p. 304. On this feature of Godwin's thinking see G. Claeys, 'William Godwin's Critique of Democracy and Republicanism and its Sources', *History of European Ideas*, 7 (1986), 262–5.

cide as means of controlling population. Nor did he pick up the oblique reference to birth control within marriage. Having already condemned this when dealing with Condorcet's hints on the subject, he could confine himself to a reiteration that 'by moral restraint I mean restraint from marriage from prudential motives, which is not followed by irregular gratifications'.⁸²

VI

The amicable relations enjoyed by Malthus and Godwin did not last, though it was not until 1820 that open hostility developed. As Malthus's reputation grew, partly at the expense of Godwin's, so Malthus felt able to remove the chapter replying to Godwin's *Thoughts* from the 1817 edition of the *Essay*. It was replaced by consideration of the latest version of the doctrine of equality – that advocated by Robert Owen in a plan to create self-sufficient pauper villages in which labour would be pooled and the results shared communally. Owen's practical achievements in organising industrial communities along co-operative lines at New Lanark, and his efforts in seeking to limit the hours worked by children in the cotton industry, had earned Malthus's 'very sincere respect'. Owen had met Godwin in 1813 and could be described as a follower of many of Godwin's doctrines, especially his necessitarianism.⁸³ This fact, and Malthus's remark to the effect that Owen's theory, being based on experience, was 'worthy of much more consideration than one formed in a closet', may have nettled Godwin. It certainly underlined his loss of pre-eminence among spokesmen for alternative visions of society. Godwin decided to make a last effort to retrieve his reputation by mounting a 600-page attack on Malthus that took him three years to complete: *Of Population; An Enquiry concerning the Power of Increase in the Numbers of Mankind, being an answer to Mr. Malthus's Essay on that Subject* (1820). In this work, all the perfectibilist speculations of his earlier science of politics were abandoned in favour of an attack on the statistical evidence underlying Malthus's geometric and arithmetic ratios.⁸⁴ Godwin now professed 'inexpressible abhorrence' to the

⁸² *EPP*, I, p. 330n.

⁸³ On Owen's relationship with Godwin, see Marshall, *William Godwin*, pp. 310–11.

⁸⁴ Godwin continued his campaign by correspondence with those who persisted in endorsing Malthus's position. In a pair of letters objecting to Sir John Sinclair's use of the population principle, Godwin gave his own statistical conclusion: 'My doctrine is, that population judging from all the satisfactory documents I have been able to obtain, has a tendency to increase at the rate of a doubling in a little more than one hundred years; but that such

conclusions drawn from the principle, withdrawing all his earlier concessions and plying Malthus with the kinds of charges from hostile critics to which the latter had by then become accustomed. These included flattering 'the vices and corruption of the rich and great', advocating vice and misery as remedies, opposing any increase in population, championing low wages, and, more surprisingly perhaps, given Godwin's earlier atheism, blasphemy.

Malthus was clearly shocked to find himself misrepresented by someone who had earlier approached his work with exemplary candour, and who had only two years earlier written to inquire as to the authority on which Malthus based his claim that the American population had doubled in less than twenty-five years.⁸⁵ He responded by writing what is perhaps his angriest response to any critic in the form of an anonymous review of Godwin's work in the *Edinburgh Review*, later inserting a curt dismissal of Godwin's book in the 1826 edition of the *Essay*.

If Godwin could have found a publisher, another bout of hostilities might have ensued from his 'Reply to the Economists', in which he returned to the ideas which had made the speculations of the *Enquiry* and *The Enquirer* so subversive of any idea of a science of political economy.⁸⁶ Although he would have preferred to concentrate solely on the rate of population increase, rather than on the larger issues raised by political economy, he attributed the delay in appearance of a review of his work in the *Edinburgh Review* to a conspiracy of silence on the part of the 'wise men of the North', the 'insolent and overweening' professors of this infant science. It was a science that owed its origins to 'one of the vilest and most unnatural corruptions of human society'. It had no part in the 'original state of man', but had been brought into existence by capital and national debt, the offspring of the 'unequal distribution of property'. In this respect at least, Godwin remained

interruptions have been found to occur from time to time in the progress of this doubling, that, upon the whole, we have no reason to believe that the world is at all more populous now, than it was three thousand years ago'; see letters to Sinclair, 16 and 21 July 1821 as reprinted in *The Correspondence of the Rt Hon. Sir John Sinclair*, 1, p. 395. See also James Mackintosh's reply to a similar letter from Godwin, 6 September 1821 in C. Kegan Paul, *William Godwin; His Friends and Contemporaries*, 2 volumes, London, 1876, II, p. 274.

⁸⁵ See letters to and from Godwin and Malthus, dated 24 and 25 October 1818 in Abinger Papers, Bodleian Library catalogue, Dep. c.525/file 12.

⁸⁶ A work with this title was advertised in the *Morning Chronicle*, January 1821; see Marshall, *William Godwin*, pp. 345-50 for the best account of the entire episode. The quotations that follow in the text are taken from a draft of this unpublished pamphlet to be found in the Abinger Papers, Bodleian Library catalogue, Dep. b.226/13.

faithful to those ideas which had led him to reject 'commercial writers', such as Smith and Hume, in his earlier work. Faced with the complexities of political economy on the subject of capital, or what those influenced by natural jurisprudence would have called 'adventitious' property rights, ignoring even the break with state-of-nature thinking to be found in Scottish writers on the conjectural history of civil society, Godwin's instinct was to believe that justice was a subject that required a *Rousseauiste* return to the 'original state of man'. This rejection of political economy, as we shall see, was to be echoed wholeheartedly by Godwin's erstwhile romantic followers long after they had rejected Godwin's views on all other matters.

It was left to Francis Place to round off this phase of the Malthusian controversy by exploiting the discrepancies between Godwin's first reply and his later book on Malthus in his *Illustrations and Proofs of the Principle of Population* (1822). Place's book is of interest for several reasons: he was a radical admirer of Godwin's *Enquiry* who later became the business adviser to Jeremy Bentham, having fallen under the spell of both philosophic radicalism and political economy as a result of his contacts with James Mill and Ricardo.⁸⁷ He also helped Owen to prepare his *New View of Society* for the press, and the two men may have been allies in seeking practical means of spreading the use of the sponge as a contraceptive.⁸⁸ Since both Mill and Ricardo were firm adherents to the Malthusian principle, including its practical conclusions regarding the Poor Law, Place was in an ideal position to reconcile his new and old enthusiasms. He did so by becoming a public advocate of birth control – far more explicit than Bentham, James Mill, and certainly Ricardo were prepared to be – despite the objections of working-class friends who argued that in so doing he was allying himself with a diagnosis which placed responsibility for poverty on the victims.

Place's *Illustrations* can briefly be described as an attempt to arbitrate between Malthus and Godwin by upholding the principle of population, while replacing Malthus's solution of delayed marriage and abolition of the Poor Laws with one that Place believed would be more effective as well as more conducive to good health and morals – contraception within marriage. It is chiefly as the opening manifesto of

⁸⁷ See G. Wallas, *The Life of Francis Place*, London, 4th edn, 1925, pp. 157–75.

⁸⁸ The tangled story of this collaboration between Owen, an avowed anti-Malthusian, and the neo-Malthusian Place can be found in D. Miles, *Francis Place; The Life of a Remarkable Radical*, Brighton, 1988, Chapter 9.

the birth control movement that Place's book became famous in his day and later. From another perspective, it can be read as a more sympathetic defence of the reasons why the working classes experienced such difficulty in following Malthus's recommended policy of delayed marriage. Having married at nineteen and fathered fifteen children, Place could hardly be accused of inexperience in such matters.

The *Illustrations* also conveniently mark the boundary between Malthus and the neo-Malthusianism of the secular devotees of political economy. Place's book is a rough guide to the interpretation that John Stuart Mill, a youthful activist in Place's birth control campaign, placed on Malthus's views when he described the beliefs of the younger philosophic radicals in the 1820s: 'This great doctrine, originally brought forward as an argument against the indefinite improvability of human affairs, we took up with ardent zeal in the contrary sense, as indicating the sole means of realizing that improvability by securing full employment at high wages to the whole labouring population through a voluntary restriction in the increase of their numbers.'⁸⁹ The principle of population could be reconciled with indefinite improvability on the basis of Benthamite rather than Malthusian or Paleyite premises, with birth control later promising to provide the key to the survival of experimental socialist communities. Although this combination of neo-Malthusianism and socialism was not fully articulated until much later in the nineteenth century, some of John Stuart Mill's most trenchant early journalism was devoted to convincing communitarian radicals that birth control was not 'a device of the rich to oppress the poor', but rather a means of enabling wage-earners to cheat employers and the aristocracy in general of the benefits they derived from low wages; it was a precondition, rather than a substitute, for more radical political change.⁹⁰

Although Malthus would have accepted the economic diagnosis behind Mill's position, he would not have given his blessing to the radical political message with which it was entwined. Radical here meant something new to a Whig belonging to Malthus's generation: it was the emerging Benthamite or philosophic type of radicalism expounded by James Mill, rather than the kind of popular or 'natural rights' radicalism associated with Paine or Thomas Spence. It also differed from the more communitarian varieties of paternalistic radicalism and proto-socialism that Malthus had encountered already in

⁸⁹ J. S. Mill, *Autobiography* in *Works*, 1, p. 107.

⁹⁰ See Mill's newspaper articles in the *Black Dwarf* written in 1823-4 in *CW*, xxii, pp. 80-100.

Godwin and Owen. Ricardo was a convert to James Mill's version of Bentham's science of government and entered parliament in 1819 as spokesman for the plan of parliamentary reform that had been formulated by Mill for the philosophic radicals. Through his contacts with Ricardo, therefore, Malthus could not fail to become aware of the possibilities of combining a political economy embodying the population principle with a case for democratic representation that rejected most of the things for which a believer in the virtues of the British system of 'mixed' government such as himself stood. When dealing with Malthus's views on constitutional matters in a later essay, this rejection of philosophic radicalism will have to be considered. For the present it can be ignored, because the battle lines constructed by Place and Mill were still those drawn between Malthusianism (with or without a prefix) and more popular and utopian forms of radicalism.

The association of Malthusianism with abolition of the Poor Laws meant that both delayed marriage and birth control were suspect among those who claimed to speak on behalf of the working classes. It seemed like a betrayal of the higher hopes embodied in the demolition of existing political and economic institutions held out by other radicals. In this respect, leading figures in the radical movement, such as Owen, despite enjoying cordial relations with Malthus himself, were not entirely wrong in believing that the Malthusian diagnosis was at the heart of the 'conspiracy' among orthodox political economists to discredit his communitarian proposals.⁹¹ Conspiracy or not, there can be no doubt about the consistency of Malthus's anti-egalitarian position. As he said in response to Owen: 'A state in which an inequality of conditions offers the natural rewards of good conduct, and inspires widely and generally the hopes of rising and the fears of falling in society, is unquestionably the best calculated to develop the energies and faculties of man, and the best suited to the exercise and improvement of human virtue.'⁹² If this argument for inequality failed, Malthus could always fall back on the population principle to show that a state of equality was incompatible with the ideas of liberty that reformers such as Godwin and Owen professed. Scarcity would sooner or later produce a situation that could only, on their own premises, be catered for by 'regulations that are unnatural, immoral or cruel'.⁹³

⁹¹ For Owen's suspicion that Malthusianism lay at the heart of objections to his schemes see *The Life of Robert Owen Written by Himself*, London, 1857-8, I, pp. 122, 155; and IA, p. 106.

⁹² *EPP*, II, p. 335.

⁹³ *EPP*, II, p. 339.

Although Malthus lent Place his only remaining copy of the first *Essay* while he was writing his *Illustrations*, Malthus did not comment on Place's work and its recommendations. This leaves a gap in our knowledge that can be filled only by recalling the precise grounds on which he condemned birth control in his most definitive statement on the subject:

I should always particularly reprobate any artificial and unnatural modes of checking population, both on account of their immorality and their tendency to remove a necessary stimulus to industry. If it were possible for each married couple to limit by a wish the number of their children, there is certainly reason to fear that the indolence of the human race would be very greatly increased; and that neither the population of individual countries, nor of the whole earth, would ever reach its natural and proper extent. But the restraints which I have recommended are quite of a different character. They are not only pointed out by reason and sanctioned by religion, but tend in the most marked manner to stimulate industry.⁹⁴

Overlooking this statement, Place thought that Malthus 'seems to shrink from discussing the propriety of preventing conception, not so much it may be supposed from the abhorrence which he or any reasonable man can have to the practice, as from the possible fear of encountering the prejudices of others'.⁹⁵ In so saying, Place was guilty of allowing his own secular notion of what a 'reasonable man' could maintain to overcome his understanding of Malthus's position. In drawing up a utilitarian balance sheet constructed along secular utilitarian lines, Malthus might have agreed with Place that, on the credit side, early marriage together with 'unnatural' practices could have a beneficial effect in reducing the vice and misery associated with promiscuity and large families. But for Malthus the balance sheet also had to make provision for that larger debit category resulting from frustration of a divine plan in which the 'goad of necessity' was essential to the cultivation of the earth and man's intellectual faculties. Despite abandoning his original theodicy, Malthus remained true to his rejection, on the basis of experience, of a world in which mind could exercise unlimited control over matters of sentiment and feeling, one of the central points at issue in his quarrel with Godwin.

Ricardo placed as much stress on population pressure as an explanation for low wages as Malthus; he also took a firm abolitionist position

⁹⁴ *EPP*, II, p. 235.

⁹⁵ *Illustrations and Proofs of the Principle of Population*, edited by Norman E. Himes, London, 1930, p. 173.

on the Poor Laws when his *Principles of Political Economy* was published in 1817.⁹⁶ Faced with Place's criticisms of Malthus on this subject in 1821, Ricardo sprang to his friend's defence, pointing out that: 'Mr Malthus be it remembered does not propose the abolition of the poor laws as a measure of relief to the rich, but as one of relief to the poor themselves.'⁹⁷ Ricardo also upheld Malthus's conclusions by informing Place that the anticipated result of abolition would be a rise in wages rather than simply a lowering of Poor Law rates. Furthermore, despite sharing Place's preference for Bentham's version of utilitarianism rather than Paley's, Ricardo had no difficulty in recognising the significance of Malthus's moral and religious beliefs.⁹⁷ He not only recognised those beliefs but complained about the effect they had in producing what was, from his point of view, a misleading mixture of moral considerations with those that belonged within the more restricted remit of the science of political economy. It led him to remind Malthus that it was the duty of the economist 'to tell you how you may become rich, but he is not to advise you to prefer riches to indolence, or indolence to riches'.⁹⁸

This was not a case of Ricardo being unable to follow a theological argument. In common with Malthus, he praised John Bird Sumner's reconciliation of the population principle with natural theology in his *Records of Creation*; and he proved an apt pupil when James Mill took up his education in this branch of knowledge.⁹⁹ Mill was inclined to believe that Malthus had fallen into Manicheism in his account of evil, adding, with all the experience of one who had forsaken his original calling as a minister of religion in Scotland: 'What a misfortune – what a cruel misfortune, it is, for a man to be *obliged* to believe a set of opinions, whether they be fit, or not, to be believed!'¹⁰⁰ For this reason, perhaps, Mill shared Place's difficulty in giving any credence to the sincerity of Malthus's beliefs. Ricardo, with more tact, merely felt that Malthus had confused his categories and smuggled some excess moral baggage into political economy. Malthus was refusing to recognise that political economy was 'a strict science like mathematics'.¹⁰¹

⁹⁶ See *Works*, I, pp. 105–6.

⁹⁷ As he wrote to Place, although Malthus's use of such terms as 'right' and 'law of nature' were inferior to those of Benthamite utilitarianism, 'his meaning cannot be mistaken'; see *Works*, IX, p. 52–3.

⁹⁸ See 'Notes on Malthus' in *Works*, II, pp. 337–8.

⁹⁹ See *Works*, VII, pp. 247–8.

¹⁰⁰ Letter to Ricardo, 1 December 1817 in *Works*, VII, pp. 212–13.

¹⁰¹ *Works*, VIII, p. 331.

Although Godwin, Owen, and other opponents of political economy rarely seem to have recognised these distinctions between the devotees of political economy, those who wished to sustain a Christian alternative to the secular version of the science associated with Ricardo and his Benthamite followers found it essential to do so. Preservation of the moral dimension that Malthus had imparted to the subject became the object of Christian versions of political economy that were propagated in the 1820s and 1830s. Anticipating a topic that will be dealt with more fully later, an indication of what was at stake can be found in the correspondence of William Whewell and Richard Jones during the period in which they were attempting to recruit Malthus to their campaign for a Baconian alternative to Ricardo's deductive version of the science. There were some broad affinities between Malthus and Jones over the use of inductive methods, but Whewell came closest to recognising what most united Malthus with Jones's aspirations when he informed Jones that 'you and Malthus belong not to the *metaphysical* but to the *ethical* school of Political Economy'.¹⁰² It was not Malthus's style to lay claim to a label that implied ethical superiority: his own emphasis on the moral dimension was as much a matter of how we come to know the world as how its institutions should be judged from a normative perspective. But if the argument of this essay is correct, it will show why he persisted in his claim, in opposition to Ricardo, that 'the science of political economy bears a nearer resemblance to the science of morals and politics than to that of mathematics'.

¹⁰² Letter to Jones, 16 August 1822 in I. Todhunter, *William Whewell; An Account of his Writings with Selections from his Literary and Scientific Correspondence*, London, 1876, II, p. 48.

Rather a matter of feeling than argument

I

While preparing to fire the opening salvo in what was to become a prolonged campaign of abuse directed at Malthus's *Essay*, Robert Southey called upon the assistance of his life-long friend John Rickman, the organiser of the first British population census: 'Do not forget Malthus's rascally metaphysics. Break him on the wheel. I will see the sentence registered. You ought to set your foot upon such a mischievous reptile and crush him. I wish with all my soul you would draw up the whole article and anatomise him alive.'¹ Rickman was to prove an invaluable ally over the years, supplying Southey with official information acquired in the course of organising three decennial censuses and as a by-product of his duties as secretary to the Speaker of the House of Commons and various committees of inquiry. He was indeed to write whole articles for Southey later, but on this initial occasion his assistance came too late to strengthen the attack on Malthus. Southey had to be content with the help provided by Coleridge's marginal notes on the second edition of the *Essay*, which were duly incorporated and embellished in the article which appeared in the *Annual Review* in 1804. Reporting on the outcome in his next letter to Rickman, Southey concluded on a truculent note:

I have shown . . . that the perfect system on [Malthus's] plan would be to breed slaves and regulate population by the knife of the sowgelder. If he replies to any effect I will gibbet him in a pamphlet, and draw and quarter him, for I have something of the same sense of strength in me in reference to

¹ Letter to Rickman, 12 September 1803 in *NL*, 1, p. 327. This was a repetition of an earlier request: 'Pray, pray set at Malthus. Put some stones in my sling to knock down that clumsy Goliath of the *philosophistuli* of the day. Send me what you will. I shall not scruple at plain language. It is my heart's desire to put his rascally book to death and damnation'; see *Selections from the Letters of Robert Southey*, edited by J. W. Warton, London, 1856, 1, pp. 224-5.

this dog that Milton must have had when he made minced meat of Salmاسius.²

Southey's language, though colourful, was by no means untypical. Malthus was to become the single most common figure whom those we now think of as the first generation of romantics, the Lake poets and some of their admirers, loved to hate.³ He appeared to personify almost everything they opposed on political and moral subjects; and the campaign to neutralise the malign influence they believed he exerted on public thinking that began with Southey's first article was sustained throughout their lives. The animosity endured the twists and turns of their personal relationships with one another, as well as their shift, already well under way when Malthus's first *Essay* appeared, from youthful republican radicalism towards what some of their contemporaries and former friends saw as ultra-Tory reaction. As we shall see, Malthus adhered to those 'true Whig principles' he had espoused in youth. So much so, in fact, that by the end of his writing career, he represented, if not a dying breed, then one that was being overtaken by the pace of political developments occurring in the early 1830s.

In tracing the origins of the dispute in this essay, and in pursuing some of its further ramifications in its successor, the political dimension must be recorded. But it must also be placed in the larger perspective provided by the intellectual and moral challenge posed by Malthus's ideas on population, his recommendations for dealing with the crisis in Poor Law administration, and the entire idea of a science of political economy which his work was increasingly taken to represent. Thus by the time that various collections of Coleridge's *obiter dicta* appeared, after his death in 1834, Malthus had long since become part of a larger target that Coleridge called, usually without discrimination, either 'Malthusian' or 'modern' political economy – a compendium term designed to cover an impoverished way of thinking about society that was materialistic, utilitarian, unpatriotic, and a potent source of dissension between classes in an already dangerously divided nation:

It is this accursed practice of ever considering *only* what seems *expedient* for the occasion, disjoined from all principle or enlarged systems of action, of never listening to the true and unerring impulses of our better nature, which has led

² Letter to Rickman, 8 February 1804 in *NL*, I, pp. 350–1.

³ This is a standard conclusion in the literature devoted to the politics of this group; see C. Woodring, *Politics in English Romantic Poetry*, Cambridge, 1970, p. 27: 'Abhorrence of *An Essay on the Principle of Population* was almost the only matter on which the major poets were firmly united.'

the colder-hearted men to the study of political economy, which has turned our Parliament into a real committee of public safety. In it, is all power vested; and in a few years we shall either be governed by an aristocracy, or, what is still more likely, by a contemptible democratical oligarchy of glib economists, compared to which the worst form of aristocracy would be a blessing.⁴

These criticisms of political economy were, of course, to be taken up for their own purposes by a succession of later Victorian sages and social commentators, especially by such literary critics of the 'disnial science' as Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin. With Christian and/or Marxian infusions added – infusions that often possessed romantic overtones of their own – it was essentially in this form that the literary critique of political economy was handed down to the twentieth century, and continues to haunt the historiography of, and cultural debate on, the consequences to British society of the industrial revolution. An examination of how the terms of this critique were set by the earliest generation of romantic critics, those close to Malthus in age, who shared much with him by way of contemporary political and economic observation, could, therefore, help to explain not merely the genesis of a significant schism, but its later development as well.

Some major turning points in the history of British constitutional and administrative practice provide essential background to the Malthusian controversy, with the Poor Law Amendment Act serving as the culminating point for this essay – an Act that continues to be attributed to Malthus's baleful influence. In the succeeding essay, other public measures – the Corn Laws, Catholic emancipation, and the First Reform Act – provide the context within which the dispute was conducted. But the cast of characters, their roles in relation to one another as well as their target, must first be reviewed.

II

Southey and Coleridge were engaged in serious journalism throughout the entire period, much of it concerned with major political and economic developments. Southey's *Sir Thomas More; Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society*, another collaborative enterprise involving Rickman, was both an expansion on ecclesiological themes that originate with Coleridge and the summation, along with Coleridge's *On the Constitution of the Church and State*, of an extended critique of

⁴ First cited in Allsop, *Letters, Conversations and Recollections of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, pp. 136–7; and then in *Table Talk*, edited by H. N. Coleridge, p. 318.

developments that could still be conveniently, if loosely, characterised as Malthusian. Wordsworth's retreat from active politics into prolonged poetic autobiography began in 1798 and was practically complete by the time he wrote the *Convention of Cintra* in 1809. Yet as John Stuart Mill found after meeting him on a pilgrimage to the Lake District in 1831, although 'one would be tempted to infer from the peculiar character of his poetry, that real life and the active pursuits of men (except of farmers and other country people) did not interest him', these were the very topics which 'occupy the greater part of his thoughts, and he talks on no subject more instructively than on states of society and forms of government'.⁵ On a less exalted plane, Wordsworth wrote electoral addresses to the freeholders of Westmorland in 1818 supporting the Tory interest of the Lowther family and opposing the Whig candidacy of Henry Brougham, whom he could damn by simply describing him as 'one of the most importunate of that class of Economists which Parliament contained'.⁶ He might have added that Brougham was an especially fervent supporter of Malthus and Poor Law amendment in parliament. By the 1830s Wordsworth was also able to make use of the public standing he had earned as a poet to register a damning verdict on the Amendment Act, as well as Whig constitutional and ecclesiastical reforms.

To the above trio can be added two of the earliest admirers of the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge: William Hazlitt and Thomas De Quincey – though the latter's contribution to the Malthusian controversy, a decidedly anti-romantic one, came only in the 1820s, after he had broken with the Lake circle. When they first met, Hazlitt and Coleridge had Unitarianism and a preoccupation with metaphysics in common. Hazlitt's first book, *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action*, a defence of imagination as the basis for both self-interested and disinterested action, was, one might say, the kind of metaphysical treatise that Coleridge often promised to write in the 1790s but consistently failed to deliver. Close on the heels of this book came Hazlitt's earliest writings on the related subjects of self-interest and benevolence raised by the Malthus–Godwin exchanges. Coleridge claimed to be the conversational source on which Hazlitt drew for both of these works, just as Hazlitt was later to accuse Godwin and De Quincey of plagiarising his anti-Malthus arguments. Who had played

⁵ Letter to J. Sterling, 20–2 October 1831, *Earlier Letters* in Mill, *CW*, xii, p. 81.

⁶ *Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, edited by W. J. B. Owen *et al.*, 3 volumes, Oxford, 1972, iii, p. 169.

what part in the initial stages of this battle clearly became a matter of some personal pride.

The occasion for Hazlitt's debut was provided by renewal of the debate on the Poor Laws provoked by Samuel Whitbread's bill in 1807, the last important attempt by a private member of the House of Commons to introduce fundamental reforms in these laws.⁷ William Cobbett offered Hazlitt space in his *Weekly Political Register* to attack the thinker whose writings appeared to be setting the tone of Poor Law discussions – though not long before this Cobbett had been hailing Malthus as the Newton of the moral sciences, as the upright Englishman who had slain the francophile Godwinian dragon.⁸ Three long letters by Hazlitt eventually grew into a rambling three-hundred page *Reply to the Essay on Population* that was to provide him with material for frequent journalistic recycling for the next twenty years, culminating in his portrait of Malthus, alongside those of Coleridge, Southey, Wordsworth, and Godwin, in *The Spirit of the Age*.⁹ Finally, constantly at work in the background, there is the least-known member of this group, Rickman, whom Hazlitt met at Charles Lamb's *soirées*, and whom he described as 'the Baron Munchausen of politics and practical philosophy'.¹⁰

✓ Southey and Rickman were united in a decidedly pro-populationist interpretation of the 'oeconomy of *national greatness*'. Patriotism underlay Rickman's case for establishing an official census in 1796. At a time when 'too small a portion of national intellect is engaged in patriotic speculations', he claimed, the census would enable a 'glorious superstructure' to be raised by 'a Government anxious for ✓ the good of its subjects'.¹¹ Pro-populationism was reinforced by ✓ concern with British military strength and irritation over the feeble- ✓ ness with which the war against France was being prosecuted. Commitment to the defeat of Napoleon after the Peace of Amiens had broken down contributed to their hostility towards Malthus, who had advertised his pacific sympathies by arguing that poverty and distress were the recruiting sergeant's best allies, making offensive

⁷ See Poynter, *Society and Pauperism*, pp. 207–22.

⁸ See H. Ausubel, 'William Cobbett and Malthusianism', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 13 (1952), 250–6.

⁹ See William P. Albrecht, *William Hazlitt and the Malthusian Controversy*, Port Washington, 1949.

¹⁰ 'On the Conversation of Authors' in *CW*, xii, p. 34.

¹¹ See *Thoughts on the Utility and Facility of Ascertaining the Population of England* reprinted in D. V. Glass, *Numbering the People*, Farnborough, 1973, pp. 106–9.

war more likely.¹² As Southey realised when recommending Rickman's abilities as a political economist over those of Malthus to the editor of the *Quarterly Review* in 1808, it helped to clinch matters by saying, quite correctly, that Rickman 'is a Crusader as to this war. Malthus will prove a peacemonger.' Awareness of the pacific implications of Malthus's views on population is equally manifest in Southey's expostulation: 'As though we did not at the moment want men for our battles!'¹³

Hence, too, Southey's impatience when faced by signs of Malthus's growing popularity with those he described as 'voiders of menstrual pollution', and his pledge that with Rickman's help he would mount 'some regular attack upon this mischievous booby'.¹⁴ In 1810 he was still meditating a 'mortal blow at Malthus, who is the especial object of my contempt and abhorrence', the results of which appeared in the *Quarterly Review* for 1812, followed by further articles on the state of the poor, at least one of which was entirely the work of Rickman.¹⁵ As the title Southey gave to his 1812 article when it was reprinted as one of his *Essays, Moral and Political* indicates – 'On the State of the Poor, the Principle of Mr. Malthus's Essay on Population, and the Manufacturing System' – he was at one with Coleridge in making Malthus serve as the symbol for everything distasteful about the inhumane tendencies of modern society:

The same temper of mind, which in old times spent itself upon scholastic questions, and at a later age in commentaries upon the Scriptures, has in these days taken the direction of metaphysical or statistic philosophy. Bear witness, Political Economy! Bear witness, Bullion and Corn Laws! Bear witness, the New Science of Population! and the whole host of productions to which these happy topics have given birth . . . The type of disease has varied at different times, but the disease remains the same – a colliquative diarrhoea of the intellect, arising from its strong appetite and weak digestion.¹⁶

¹² See *EPP*, II, pp. 100–2. This had been Coleridge's position before the Peace of Amiens convinced him that the war was a just one: see the Notebook entry in which he recorded as an example of the brutalities associated with war the way in which meat was hung outside recruiting offices; see J. Colmar, *Coleridge, Critic of Society*, Oxford, 1959, p. 17n.

¹³ See Orlo Williams, *Lamb's Friend the Census-Taker; Life and Letters of John Rickman*, London, 1911, p. 148 (hereafter *Rickman*). Southey, using Rickman's census figures for 1801, took comfort from the fact that out of a population of just under eleven million, there were nearly three million men 'capable of defending their country, making it 'apparent that we might defy the world in arms'. See 'On the State of the Poor' in *Essays, Moral and Political*, London, 1832, 2 volumes, I, p. 75.

¹⁴ Letter to Rickman, 9 March 1804, *NL*, I, p. 357.

¹⁵ Letter to Walter Savage Landor, 17 December 1810, *NL*, I, p. 546. For other references to Malthus see pp. 363, 459, 501, 551.

¹⁶ See *Essays, Moral and Political*, I, pp. 245–6.

Malthus's response to this concerted attack is remarkable for its absence. Yet while 'averse to controversy', as Ricardo noted, Malthus devoted two lengthy appendices added to the *Essay* in 1806 and 1817 to answering a variety of critics identified by name. He was also assiduous in removing or toning down passages that had given offence; and he consistently modified his position in the light of new demographic evidence and his assessment of the state of public opinion on such measures as the Poor Laws and the Corn Laws. The absence of a reply by Malthus to the early attacks by Southey and Hazlitt, therefore, despite attempts on their part to draw him out, is worth stressing.

Given the level of personal abuse coming from this quarter, combined with what can only be described as deliberate misunderstanding, it is perhaps not hard to see why Malthus took the high ground of treating their attacks as 'illiberal declamation'. Such critics were 'evidently beneath notice'.¹⁷ The *ad hominem* nature of the attack was certainly recognised by those responsible for it. For example, even Southey, for tactical purposes at least, felt it necessary to apologise for the injustice of some of his remarks.¹⁸ News of his victim's equable character had probably filtered through the circles they had in common at this time:

The folly and wickedness of this book have provoked us into a tone of contemptuous indignation; in affixing these terms to the book, let it not be supposed that any general condemnation of the author is implied, grievously as he has erred in this particular instance. Mr. Malthus is said to be a man of mild and unoffending manners, patient research, and exemplary conduct. This character he may still maintain; but as a political philosopher, the farthing candle of his fame must stink and go out.¹⁹

Hazlitt was to make a similar mock apology in the advertisement to his *Reply to the Essay on Population*, where he admitted that he had attempted to make his book 'as amusing as the costiveness of my genius would permit'. He acknowledged that 'some of the observations may be thought too severe and personal', but his defence was a blatantly self-contradictory appeal to authorial licence. First, the abuse was merited, and secondly, although he would have preferred to attack the *Essay* rather than its author, this was impossible because nobody 'troubles

¹⁷ See *EPP*, II, p. 204.

¹⁸ This could be the result of Coleridge's advice to be 'exceedingly temperate and courteous and guarded in your language' on the subject of Malthus; see letter to Southey, 25 January 1804 in *CL*, II, p. 1039.

¹⁹ See *Annual Review*, 2 (1804), p. 301.

himself about abstract reasonings, or calm, dispassionate inquiries after truth'. Ergo: 'The public ought not to blame me for consulting their taste.'²⁰

Malthus could be provoked to anger, as we have noted in the case of Godwin's final attack, and there was perhaps an oblique reply to Southey embedded in the 1806 appendix – or so Coleridge thought.²¹ This appendix is more remarkable, however, for an interesting insight into the first question to be considered here: what was it about Malthus's *Essay* that made it the *early* focus of so much emotive repugnance by the members of this group? For beneath the repeated charges of what became a ritualistic exercise there was a persistent theme which appeared quite early in the controversy. Malthus recognised this theme when speaking of what was 'rather a matter of feeling than argument' in some of his opponents' reluctance to face up to the implications of the population principle.

Many persons, whose understandings are not of that description that they can regulate their belief or disbelief by their likes or dislikes, have professed their perfect conviction of the truth of the general principles contained in the *Essay*; but, at the same time, have lamented this conviction, as throwing a darker shade over our views of human nature, and tending particularly to narrow our prospects of future improvement. In these feelings I cannot agree with them. If, from a review of the past, I could not only believe that a fundamental and very extraordinary improvement in human society was possible, but feel a firm confidence that it would take place, I should undoubtedly be grieved to find that I had overlooked some cause, the operation of which would at once blast my hopes. But if the contemplation of the past history of mankind, from which alone we can judge of the future, renders it almost impossible to feel such confidence, I confess, that I had much rather believe that some real and deeply-seated difficulty existed, the constant struggle with which was calculated to rouse the natural inactivity of man, to call forth his faculties, and invigorate and improve his mind; a species of difficulty which it must be allowed is most eminently and peculiarly suited to a state of probation; than that nearly all the evils of life might with the most perfect facility be removed, but for the perverseness and wickedness of those who influence human institutions.

A person who held this latter opinion must necessarily live in a constant state of irritation and disappointment. The ardent expectations, with which he might begin life, would soon receive the most cruel check. The regular progress of society, under the most favourable circumstances, would to him appear slow and unsatisfactory; but instead even of this regular progress, his

²⁰ *Reply* in *CW*, I, p. 179.

²¹ See letter to Sara Coleridge, 9 October 1806 in *CL*, II, p. 1191.

eye would be more frequently presented with retrograde movements and the most disheartening reverses. The changes to which he had looked forward with delight would be found big with new and unlooked-for evils, and the characters on which he had reposed the most confidence would be seen frequently deserting his favourite cause, either from the lessons of experience or the temptation of power. In this state of constant disappointment, he would be but too apt to attribute everything to the worst motives; he would be inclined to give up the cause of improvement in despair; and judging of the whole from a part, nothing but a peculiar goodness of heart and amiableness of disposition could preserve him from that sickly and disgusting misanthropy which is but too frequently the end of such characters.²²

It is doubtful if this calming homily, with its invocation of 'constant struggle' based on the more orthodox doctrine of probation that replaced the theodicy of the first *Essay*, pleased anybody outside those Anglican circles that had urged the change. But the second paragraph does address itself to a central feature of the controversy, the conflict between 'natural' and 'moral' explanations for society's ills, and the political, even psychological, attractions of retaining sanguine hopes on the moral front. Having softened the harsher polemical conclusions of the *Essay* in 1803, and having given the whole work a more positive direction by granting greater scope to human agency and institutional change, Malthus would have resisted pessimism as a description of his position, preferring some such phrase as 'based on experience'. For this Coleridge would later have substituted, with contempt, 'political empiric', a reflection of all that was base about existing ways of thinking about society rather than what was needed – a more profoundly philosophical and prophetic insight into its cure.²³ Nevertheless, Malthus's sketch of the transition from the 'ardent expectation' of youth to a sense of betrayal and misanthropy captures a significant feature of the lives of his romantic critics as they adjusted to their loss of faith in what the French revolution had promised to deliver. If Malthus had been privy to the letters that passed between Southey and Rickman, or had been alive to note the disgruntled tone of Coleridge's *Table Talk*, for example, he might have felt that they fitted his diagnosis of the state of mind rather well. As we shall see, this was one of the subjects on which friends of Malthus and Coleridge came to similar conclusions after the death of the antagonists.²⁴

²² See *EPP*, II, p. 230.

²³ For Coleridge's use of 'political empiric' as a term of abuse see *Lay Sermons* in *CW*, VI, pp. 143, 150–5.

²⁴ See pp. 395–7 below.

III

As in the case of the Malthus–Godwin dispute, however, the mature positions of the romantics need to be placed in perspective by returning to the origins of the polemic. As a result of recent detective work we certainly have enough information on the activities and writings of the Lake poets to form a clear picture of their shifting political and religious opinions in the period after 1792, when events in France took their first violent turn.²⁵ As the repository of the non-jacobin radical conscience during this period, Godwin's influence, though temporary, was crucial to all of them.²⁶ Southey was briefly enthralled by Godwin and those in his immediate circle – a fact that would be difficult to credit from his later description of Godwin's doctrines as a combination of 'brute materialism, blind necessity, and blank atheism' joined to an ethical system which in 'attempting an impossible union between stoicism and sensuality, succeeded just so far, as to deprave the morals and harden the heart'.²⁷ Wordsworth's republicanism, as expressed in his unpublished 'Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff' in 1793, was to be deepened by his acquaintance with Godwin and his reading of the *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* in 1795 – despite his subsequent decision not to mention Godwin by name when he tranquilly recollected the emotions of this period of his life in Book x of *The Prelude*.

The case of Coleridge is more complex, leaving room for differences of opinion as to what he appropriated and what he reacted against in Godwin's work. Although he responded to the request that he write a sonnet to Godwin in 1794, there was always an element of personal rivalry in their relationship. Godwin appears in Coleridge's letters and lectures in the 1790s as a threat to Coleridge's views on metaphysical and religious matters. On property, inequality, and 'artificial wants', however, Coleridge often sounds like a Christian version of Godwin,

²⁵ For a study devoted to this period see N. Roe, *Wordsworth and Coleridge; The Radical Years*, Oxford, 1988, supplemented by the same author's *The Politics of Nature*, London, 1992. Representing the older literature, Southey's early radicalism is covered in G. Carnall, *Southey and his Age*, Oxford, 1960. See also Carl Woodring's studies of *Politics in the Poetry of Coleridge*, Madison, 1961; and *Politics in English Romantic Poetry*; and James Chandler, *Wordsworth's Second Nature; A Study of the Poetry and Politics*, London, 1984. E. P. Thompson's reflections can be found in 'Disenchantment or Default? A Lay Sermon' in C. C. O'Brien and W. D. Vanech (eds.), *Power and Consciousness*, London, 1969, pp. 149–81; and in a review of Roe's first book, 'Wordsworth's Crisis', *London Review of Books*, 8 December (1988), 3–6.

²⁶ Supplementing the work in the previous note by looking at the problem from Godwin's perspective is Marshall, *William Godwin*, Chapter 8.

²⁷ *Essays, Moral and Political*, I, p. 80.

supporting the same conclusions on property with biblical arguments derived from Christ's more communistic tenets. By 1796 Coleridge was planning a full-scale alternative to Godwin's system of universal benevolence, one that would restore the domestic affections to the place in the hierarchy of emotions established by David Hartley's Christian, associationist, and necessitarian psychology. Coleridge was partly drawing on well-established themes in dissenting thought, those of Priestley especially, and partly re-emphasising revealed religion as a source of inspiration. He also detected a link between Godwin's atheism and sexual licentiousness – 'the imbrothell'd Atheist' is one of Coleridge's characterisations of Godwin at this time – and whether or not this can be attributed to a prurient streak in Coleridge, the issue could be important when considering those attitudes to conjugal affection and the sex instinct that are central to the Godwin–Malthus controversy.²⁸

Coleridge's first recorded response to Malthus's *Essay* came in a letter written in 1799 to Josiah Wedgwood, a close friend through whom he was later to become a regular beneficiary of the Wedgwood fortune. The tone was one of detached superiority: 'I must confess, that it appeared to me exceedingly illogical. Godwin's and Condorcet's Extravagancies were not worth confuting; and yet I thought, that the Essay on Population had not confuted them.' The geometric and arithmetic ratios, and the idea that vice and misery were the checks 'intended by Providence as a Counterpoise', could be found in earlier writers such as Wallace and Johan Süssmilch – an observation that was to serve as the basis for charges of plagiarism repeated later by Southey, Hazlitt, and, incidentally, Marx. Coleridge claimed to have noted his objections to Malthus before leaving for Germany with Wordsworth, but did not wish Wedgwood to draw the wrong conclusion:

do not, my dear Sir! suppose that because unconvinced by this Essay I am therefore convinced of the contrary. No! God knows – I am sufficiently sceptical and in truth more than sceptical, concerning the possibility of universal Plenty and Wisdom, but my Doubts rest on other grounds. I had

²⁸ See *Lectures 1795: On Politics and Religion* in *CW*, 1. Coleridge's opinions on Godwin are dealt with in the editorial introduction to the latter volume, pp. lxxvii–lxxx, and can be amply documented from his correspondence. For a demonstration of the extent of Coleridge's influence in subverting Godwin's *Enquiry* and converting Southey and Wordsworth to his version of Unitarianism, see also N. Trott, 'The Coleridge Circle and the "Answer to Godwin"', *Review of English Studies*, 41 (1990), 212–29, which treats Wordsworth's *The Recluse* as the visionary fulfilment of Coleridge's position.

some conversation with you before I left England on this subject; and from that time I had proposed to myself to examine as thoroughly as it was possible for me the important Question – Is the march of the Human Race progressive, or in Cycles?²⁹

This reflection was probably provoked by some conjunction between his own thinking and Malthus's discussion of 'perpetual oscillation' as the characteristic outcome of periodic pressure of population on wages and food prices, a subject to be developed by him later when engaged in dispute with Ricardo over the correct diagnosis of post-war economic distress.³⁰ Cycles were also to feature in Coleridge's writings on economic subjects, especially the second *Lay Sermon*, though this early reference could have broader moral and political connotations connected with the rise and fall of states, ideas that were also called upon by Malthus when discussing 'germs of decay' connected with commerce and manufacturing in the second *Essay*. But the choice of cycles versus progress as grounds for debate does not recur in Coleridge's subsequent treatment of Malthus, partly because Coleridge stopped reading Malthus, partly because cycles increasingly connoted something more idealistic, something to do perhaps with the opposed principles of permanence and progress expounded in *Church and State* and the role of an educated elite or 'clerisy' in resolving the tension between them.

A year or so after Coleridge's first recorded comment on Malthus the circumstances surrounding the Godwin–Malthus debate were altered as a result of those attacks on Godwin by Parr and Mackintosh mentioned in the previous essay. Godwin's dignified reply dealt with the mounting hostility faced by radicals in a manner that made Coleridge regret his earlier antagonism to someone suffering in the same cause. Despite the fact that Parr's critique echoed many of the points that Coleridge had raised against Godwin himself – concerning his atheism, his failure to have regard to the domestic affections, and the licentious influence he exerted on younger followers – Coleridge drew closer to Godwin, personally if not intellectually. In the margins of his copy of Godwin's *Thoughts Occasioned by the Perusal of Dr. Parr's Spital Sermon* he wrote: 'Tho' I did it only in the Zenith of his Reputation, yet I feel remorse *ever* to have spoken unkindly of such a Man.'³¹

²⁹ Letter to J. Wedgwood, 21 May 1799 in *CL*, I, p. 518.

³⁰ For more on this see pp. 337, 359–65 below.

³¹ See *Marginalia* in *CW*, XII (II), p. 847.

As we have seen, Godwin recognised that Malthus had *not* spoken unkindly; he was, in consequence, more than willing to grant that the population principle was a major discovery, even if he did not draw the same conclusions from it.³² Although one could say, therefore, that Godwin's generous stance was available to the romantic critics, it was not the response they chose to give. Indeed, Godwin's concessions to Malthus provide the next piece of evidence on Coleridge's evolving attitude towards Malthus: he made a solitary marginal comment in which he expressed surprise that Godwin had gone so far as to admit Malthus's principle:

Strange that G[odwin] should so hastily admit principles so doubtful in themselves, and so undoubtedly dreadful in their consequences. There exists no proof, and no probability has been evinced by Malthus, that an excess of population arising from *physical* necessity has introduced *Immorality*, or that Morality would not, in itself have contained the true, easy, and effectual Limitation. The whole question is a business of *which is the cause? which the effect?* Good heavens! it is proved, that no Country yet exists, not capable under a moral government of sustaining more than its [present] Inhabitants – not even China, whose population is yet the effect of wicked and foolish Laws preventing Emigration.³³

This comment is significant because it reveals an early rejection of any diagnosis entailing the possibility of over-population. It also focusses on what was to become a central theme of the dispute by maintaining that vice and misery were not the result of 'physical necessity' but of the failure of 'moral government' to be established. Although it reflects the necessitarian views that Coleridge shared with Godwin at this time, this was to remain a position that united the romantic critics. While the political institutions – or more usually, the forms of moral regeneration on the part of the higher and lower classes – required to achieve 'moral government' might change as their views developed, the underlying opposition to natural or 'physical' causes endured. The anti-perfectibilist paradoxes stressed in Malthus's first *Essay* had made an indelible impression that was to survive the changes he made to his position, as well as the shifts in the allegiances of his romantic critics.

In the years leading up to the publication of Malthus's second *Essay* in 1803, followed by further editions in 1806 and 1807, there were other developments that help to explain why Coleridge, Southey, and Hazlitt

³² See pp. 273–6 above.

³³ *Marginalia* in *CW*, XII (II), pp. 848–9.

decided to focus their attention on Malthus. The transition from an anonymous octavo in 1798 to the large quarto version of the *Essay* was itself an indication that Malthus's contribution had gone beyond a speculative debate on the conditions under which perfectibility might or might not be achieved. Malthus was bidding to become, and was being welcomed as, a serious contributor to political and moral science. The early years of the new century, and especially the experience of acute grain scarcity and rapidly rising expenditure on poor relief, gave prominence to the practical questions Malthus had raised. Coleridge was aiming at this expanding target when he read the 1803 edition of the *Essay* in order to help Southey castigate its author. In contrast to Godwin at this time, Coleridge and Southey appear to have decided that Malthus was someone whose reputation and influence had prospered in the post-revolutionary atmosphere of persecution, whereas the position they had adopted was in retreat and disarray. The first *Essay* coincided with Coleridge's announcement of his disenchantment in 'France: An Ode', the work that was originally entitled 'A Recantation'. Although they no longer accepted Godwin's secular and rationalist version of perfectibilism, and had given up hopes of establishing an ideal Pantisocratic community along Godwinian lines on the banks of the Susquehanna, Coleridge and Southey resented the way in which Malthus had appeared to benefit from the reversal of radical hopes. The fact that he had apparently gained this advantage by an easy victory over Godwin, whose position they had out-grown, added another dimension to their enmity. A reply to Malthus also had to serve the purpose of distancing themselves from Godwin.

Malthus was now seen as a prime example of that emerging strand of public philosophy Coleridge wanted Wordsworth to combat when he set him the task of writing *The Recluse* in 1799, namely 'a poem, in blank verse, addressed to those, who, in consequence of the complete failure of the French Revolution, have thrown up all hopes of the amelioration of mankind, and are sinking into an almost epicurean selfishness, disguising the same under the soft titles of domestic attachment and contempt for visionary *philosophes*'.³⁴ Southey's first assault on Malthus could well have been the prose equivalent of this, directed at a prominent example of epicurean selfishness. Hazlitt was

³⁴ Letter to Wordsworth, 10 September 1799 in *CL*, I, p. 527. Coleridge defined epicureanism in 1802 as 'a philosophy which regards man as a mere machine, a sort of living automaton, which teaches that pleasure is the sole good, and a prudent calculation as the only virtue'. See *Essays on His Times* in *CW*, III (1), p. 513.

also to take up this theme from a more persistently radical standpoint, accusing Malthus of having revived a Mandevillian paradox by showing that 'our duty and our vices both lean the same way, and that the ends of public virtue and benevolence are best answered by the meanness, pride, extravagance, and insensibility of individuals'.³⁵ As noted already, this was one of the few places where Malthus showed his awareness of the criticisms coming from this quarter.³⁶

Unfortunately, there is little in the marginal notes Coleridge drew up for Southey that gives much idea of his reactions to the philosophical and theological underpinnings of Malthus's position – subjects on which Coleridge's own thinking was by no means settled at this time. One remark is critical of Malthus's failure to define the basis of his moral judgements on vice and virtue. In view of Coleridge's later antagonism to utilitarian arguments (of the kind, incidentally, that Malthus *did* define in the *Essay* by reference to Paley), it is interesting to note that in 1804 Coleridge was still prepared to employ consequentialist criteria in the manner of both Godwin and Malthus: 'Vice and Virtue subsist in the agreement of the habits of a man with his Reason and Conscience, and these can have but one moral guide, Utility or the Virtue and Happiness of Rational Beings'. Faced with a remark by Malthus to the effect that European emigration, entailing the extermination of native peoples in thinly populated countries, could be questioned from 'a moral view', Coleridge, perhaps recalling the personal dream embodied in the Pantisocratic scheme, retorted with simple utilitarian arithmetic: 'If it be immoral to kill a few Savages in order to get possession of a country capable of sustaining a 1000 times as many enlightened and happy men, is it not immoral to kill millions of Infants and Men by crowded Cities, by Hunger, and by the Pox?'³⁷ Since Malthus had made a special point of associating the growth of cities and manufacturing activities with vice and misery in both the 1798 and 1803 versions of the *Essay*, he hardly needed Coleridge to remind him about the moral hazards of crowded cities. But whereas Coleridge saw this as yet another failure of 'moral government', Malthus treated it initially as a by-product of population pressures, later adding the effect of war as a contributory cause. Here, then, was a common preoccupation and a sharp division of opinion about the direction of cause and effect.

³⁵ See his *Reply* in *CW*, I, p. 182.

³⁶ See Malthus's denial of Mandevillism cited on p. 240 above.

³⁷ See *Marginalia* in *CW*, XII (III), p. 806.

Coleridge's notes show no sign that he was interested in the theological dimension of Malthus's case against Godwin. What seems clear from Coleridge's lectures on revealed religion in the 1790s, however, is that his theology placed far greater emphasis on Christ's gospel than ever Malthus did outside his sermons. The changes Malthus made to bring his thinking on the state of probation into line with Anglican orthodoxy in 1803 would not have commended themselves to Coleridge, even if he had bothered to notice them. Malthus's theology was too closely identified with Paleyite forms of natural religion – in which the benevolence of the Deity was proved, Newtonian fashion, by reference to observed order and design – to satisfy Coleridge's later retreat from utilitarian or 'external' proofs of faith.³⁸ Coleridge does refer, however, to the biblical command 'Increase and Multiply', a remark expanded on by Southey to become a charge of blasphemy that Malthus always took great pains to deny. If theology played any part in making the attack on Malthus more virulent, its contribution was indirect, with an unexpected twist being imparted by Malthus's membership of the established church. It arose from Coleridge's movement away from Unitarianism towards the Church of England in the late 1790s – a move that was complete by 1806, one of the auxiliary reasons for which was that 'he saw with what readiness [the Unitarians] received and adopted the atrocious, the *in any, in every* sense, hateful opinions and views of Malthus and the so-called economists'.³⁹ As we have noted in the case of Godwin's final projected 'Reply to the Economists', Malthus was now firmly established as the symbol of the economists' viewpoint on human affairs.⁴⁰

Godwin's tactless statement in his *Thoughts* which suggested that he endorsed some form of abortion or infanticide (a charge that Southey and Hazlitt pressed home for rhetorical effect, despite Godwin's explicit disclaimers) drew two comments from Coleridge that were to be central to both Southey and Hazlitt later.⁴¹ The first was made in the margins of the *Essay*:

³⁸ For Coleridge's later remarks on Paley see *Lay Sermons* in *CW*, vi, pp. 186–7, where he also credits Hazlitt with exposing Paley's sophistry. This was another subject on which Coleridge had reversed his opinions: in 1793 he had followed Frensdorff's admiration for his former tutor by praising Paley's *Reasons for Contentment*; see *CL*, i, p. 48. The opposition to Paley's system of 'selfish prudence' began in *The Friend*, 1808. See J. Morrow, *Coleridge's Political Thought*, New York, 1990, pp. 75–8.

³⁹ See T. Allsop, *Letters, Conversations and Recollections*, i, p. 61.

⁴⁰ See pp. 280–2 above.

⁴¹ For Godwin's disclaimer see *PPW*, ii, p. 211–13. For Hazlitt's apology to Godwin for his 'joke' about infanticide see a letter dated 6 August 1807 in *The Letters of William Hazlitt* edited by

The whole Question is this: Are Lust and Hunger both alike Passions of physical Necessity, and the one equally with the other independent of the Reason and the Will? Shame upon our Race, that there lives the Individual who dares even ask the Question!⁴²

The second appears in a letter to Southey:

I beseech you to scourge [Malthus] for that accursed Sophism. I mean, the ridiculing Godwin etc for even hinting the *possibility* of Exposure and Abortion, and disguising from his Readers, that he (as far as he pleads against the hopes of the progressive Improvement of mankind) is pleading for the real existence not only of these Crimes, but of a thousand others, and of the *misery and brutal Ignorance*, the production of which does alone render those Actions crimes! And if he does not plead against the possibility of progressive Improvement, he is clearly a convert to the Godwinian Doctrine – for where in God's name do they differ? If man can restrain his passions, in a conceivable state of knowledge and good Nurture, what is to stop this Improvement? or to prevent this Happiness? Is he by growing a little better become a *Reprobate*; i.e. hopeless of being ever better?⁴³

Although this was a private observation, it marks the true beginning of the polemic – not least because Southey was to make the charge of illogicality contained in the final sentence the centre-piece of his first public attack: 'The ground I have taken is this – that [Malthus] supposes lust to be like hunger an appetite of physical necessity when he argues against Godwin, that when he proposes his own damned plan he founds it upon the possibility of moral restraint, and the practical virtue of chastity – ergo the scorpion strikes his tail into his own head – the end of his book confuting the beginning.'⁴⁴ Coleridge had set the terms in which all future criticism of Malthus by the first generation of romantics was to be conducted. He was cast in a particular role by the first *Essay* as someone who had treated the sex instinct as uncontrollable.⁴⁵ By so doubting the chances of improvement, he became at best a *de facto* apologist for vice and misery, at worst an advocate for them as necessary checks. A diagnosis of the *consequences* of excess population was now to be treated as the preferred

H. M. Sikes, New York, 1978, p. 93: 'You stood a little in my way, but I was determined not to lose my blow at [Malthus].'

⁴² See *Marginalia* in *CW*, xii (iii), p. 806.

⁴³ 11 January 1804 in *CL*, II, p. 1026.

⁴⁴ Letter to Rickman, 8 February 1804 in *NL*, I, p. 350.

⁴⁵ A tradition that has been revived in our own day. Thus one modern reading of the sexual dimension of the dispute follows Coleridge and Hazlitt in treating Malthus as someone who saw sex as an addiction, 'centering and negating women, while negating but then valorizing men'; see C. Siskin, *The History of Romantic Discourse*, New York, 1988, p. 170.

remedy. In view of Malthus's unequivocal disavowal of this reading of his work in his reply to Godwin's *Thoughts* and in the 1806 and 1817 appendices, it is hard not to see this as another example of wilful misrepresentation.⁴⁶ Malthus also stressed that his theory showed that rising standards of living were not merely possible, but entirely compatible with increasing population.⁴⁷ This did not prevent him from becoming the butt of some coarse jokes from Southey about John Ox being more manageable than John Bull, and the need to 'rear our own opera singers, and reform our church music according to Italian tastes' – remarks implying that Malthus opposed marriage *tout court* and *any* increase in population.⁴⁸ Coleridge, Southey, and Hazlitt clung to the original Godwinian position by denying that population could be excessive while any part of the world remained uncultivated. It followed that what appeared to be the results of over-population should always, as a matter of principle, be attributed to failures to find solutions that entailed positive changes in social institutions and moral attitudes. After 1803 there was scope for agreement with Malthus on some of these subjects, but the basic Malthusian hypothesis entailing the here-and-now nature of population pressure, regardless of the existence of uncultivated land, was denied.

The new emphasis Malthus placed on moral restraint in 1803 was intended as a qualification to the earlier stress on natural causes. It opened the door to a fuller consideration of the ways in which education, improved living standards, and the diffusion of civil and political liberties could have a positive, though indirect, influence on the incidence of poverty. Similarly, the elaborate use of historical and anthropological evidence in the second *Essay* was designed to show how the same natural propensities could lead to different outcomes, depending on modes of subsistence, cultural practices, and political institutions. Hazlitt stood this on its head by treating Malthus as a monomaniac who believed that all vice and misery was attributable to population, regardless of

⁴⁶ See *EPP*, I, p. 328. In 1806 he repeated that: 'It is an utter misconception of my argument that I am an enemy to population. I am only an enemy to vice and misery, and consequently to that unfavourable proportion between population and food which produces these evils'; *EPP*, II, p. 205. And in 1817: 'I have not considered the evils of vice and misery arising from a redundant population as unavoidable, and incapable of being diminished. On the contrary, I have pointed out a mode by which these evils may be removed or mitigated by removing or mitigating their cause'; *EPP*, II, p. 234. Once the reading had been given currency, however, Malthus's clerical disciples took pains to show why it was a misreading, and how that misreading might have occurred; see remarks on Sumner and Coplestone, pp. 315–17 below.

⁴⁷ See for example *EPP*, I, pp. 439–40; and II, pp. 70, 81, 93–4, 108–9, 205–6, 210, 234–5.

⁴⁸ The joke appears in Southey's first review of Malthus in *Annual Review*, 2 (1804), 301.

circumstances.⁴⁹ Malthus's 'concession' over moral restraint was interpreted simply as evidence of his illogicality or insincerity. Only the simple binary choice between nature and culture was available, and in the eyes of his romantic critics Malthus was to remain guilty of reversing the proper order of causation. All that was needed to complete the stock list of charges was to show that the arithmetic and geometric ratios were either elaborate tautologies or untruths, and that whatever was original in the *Essay* had been plagiarised.

IV

Having arrived at this interpretation of the underlying theory, the only new elements added to the romantic critique concerned Malthus's controversial proposals for abolition of the right to relief under the Poor Law, greatly assisted by the infamous simile based on 'nature's mighty feast'. On the basis of this simile, Southey charged that Malthus either wished to starve the ignorant poor into celibacy or into acquiring a prudent regard for the future that could be expected only of those who were already enlightened and virtuous. His popularity as an author was due, therefore, to the economic and spiritual comfort his remedies gave to the pockets and consciences of those who were safely seated at the feast.⁵⁰ Nine years and two editions later he was still repeating this charge, despite the removal of the offending passage – evidence, perhaps, that Southey was either using the best material to hand for a personal attack, or, more probably, that he never bothered to read any of the later editions.

Although claims to superior humanity when faced with the plight of those requiring poor relief were being registered by Southey, as they have been by many subsequent commentators, it is difficult to see on what grounds they can be sustained. It is one thing to recoil at the idea of the indigent poor being denied access to the feast (though the image of an overcrowded table appears in Coleridge's later economic writings), but repudiating Malthus's belief that the allowance system had become part of the problem rather than the solution does not make those who do so, *ipso facto*, more humane.⁵¹ The claim is

⁴⁹ See Letter v of Hazlitt's *Reply* in *CW*, I, pp. 232–84.

⁵⁰ *Annual Review*, 2 (1804), 299.

⁵¹ But see, for example, Carnall's knowing comparative statement that: 'It might be unfair to Malthus to say that he was unconcerned about the miseries of the world, but no one would claim that these miseries made him lose any sleep. He looked at the world with the feelings of a man who was assured of his place at the table of nature Southey was unlike Malthus in understanding the condition of those who had no place'; *Southey and his Age*, p. 66.

especially difficult to sustain when, as we shall see, there is a great deal of evidence to show that Malthus's opponents came to share that belief.

Needless to say, the charge of hard-heartedness was one that Malthus always denied when it was made by those who were not moved by 'ignorance or malice' – another remark that perhaps betrays his awareness of the romantic critique. When Whitbread hinted at this, Malthus had responded by saying that:

To those who know me personally, I feel that I have no occasion to defend my character from the imputation of hardness of heart; and to those who do not, I can only express my confidence that when they have attended to the subject as much as I have, they will be convinced that I have not admitted a single proposition which appears to detract from the present comforts and gratifications of the poor, without very strong grounds for believing that it would be more than compensated to them by the general and permanent improvement of their condition.⁵²

He was also sufficiently sensitive to charges of wishing to protect the property rights of rate-payers to make the following disclaimer: 'If all could be completely relieved, and poverty banished from the country, even at the expense of three-fourths of the fortunes of the rich, I would be the last person to say a single syllable against relieving all, and making the degree of distress alone the measure of our bounty.'⁵³ In 1800 Malthus had drawn attention to the unwanted side-effects of the allowance system, but had praised the 'honour, the humanity and generosity of the higher and middle classes' for this response to the crisis, recognising that there was no alternative in the circumstances.⁵⁴ In essence, this was to be his attitude towards immediate post-war scarcity as well, defending the short-term results of the Poor Laws on humanitarian grounds, while advocating abolition as the best long-run solution.⁵⁵ In his *Letter to Whitbread*, he also made it clear that public opinion was crucial to the success of any attempt to reform or abolish

⁵² See *A Letter to Samuel Whitbread*, 1807 in Malthus, *Works*, iv, pp. 8–9. Whitbread responded by saying that Malthus had 'totally misunderstood' his meaning: 'I had observed the effect of the Work upon some who have considered it superficially and thence I was led to say that a strict guard ought to be placed upon the Heart of the Reader lest it should become hardened in the Study: but I was far from apprehending that my meaning could have been so misconstrued, as to induce any one to imagine I attributed hardness of Heart to the Author.' See letter to Malthus, 5 April 1807 in *Selected Papers*, edited by Satoh *et al.*

⁵³ See *EPP*, II, p. 161.

⁵⁴ See *An Investigation of the High Price of Provisions* in *Works*, vii, p. 9.

⁵⁵ See A. Digby, 'Malthus and Reform of the English Poor Law' in M. Turner (ed.), *Malthus and his Time*, New York, 1986, pp. 157–69.

the Poor Laws: he would 'be very sorry to see any legislative regulation founded on the plan I have proposed, till the higher and middle classes of society were generally convinced of its necessity, and till the poor themselves could be made to understand that they had purchased their right to a provision by law, by too great and extensive a sacrifice of their liberty and happiness'.⁵⁶ The main burden of his attack on the details of Whitbread's scheme was to point out their probable effect in lowering average wages. Since Malthus made higher living standards and stability of employment, let alone the 'happiness and virtue' of the poor, his main criteria for judging progress in the *Essay*, he had every right to feel aggrieved when Hazlitt and others associated him with remedies that included 'stinting' wages.⁵⁷

In the heat of debate it was unlikely that Malthus's disclaimers and qualifications would be given a fair hearing. Indeed, Hazlitt was to repeat every one of Southey's charges in 1807. In attacking Malthus for the public attitudes his work was said to foster, rather than for what Malthus actually said, Hazlitt gained a polemical advantage without having to make a constructive contribution to debate on a subject that he otherwise treated as of paramount importance. As Henry Crabb Robinson, a friend of Hazlitt's at the time, reported after reading the *Reply*: 'It is rich in good things without itself being a good thing. It is acute, but pert; argumentative, but the argument is directed more against inessential parts of the book he writes against than against the system itself.'⁵⁸

✓ Although much of Hazlitt's attack turns on Malthus's alleged lack of sympathy for the poor, the *Reply* has little to say, one way or the other, about the details of the Whitbread Bill, the ostensible reason for returning to Malthus in 1807. Whitbread's proposals laid great stress on the education of the poor, a point on which he was strongly supported by Malthus. Hazlitt treated this idea light-heartedly: teaching the poor to read might result only in them reading bad books. Not being a 'child of poverty' himself, Hazlitt charged, Whitbread lacked the essential qualification for putting himself forward 'as the dispenser of good or ill to millions of his fellow beings'.⁵⁹ By mentioning Jesus Christ as a relevant standard of comparison, however, it is hard to see how

⁵⁶ See *Works*, IV, p. 7.

⁵⁷ See Hazlitt's *Reply* in *CW*, I, p. 189.

⁵⁸ See Edith J. Morley, *Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and Their Writers*, London, 1938, 3 volumes, III, p. 844.

⁵⁹ See *Reply* in *CW*, I, p. 186.

Whitbread could have met the required qualification. Hazlitt was simply striking an attitude when he said that if the poor have only such champions as Whitbread and Malthus they should be left alone, especially when one of his most insistent charges against Malthus was that his views had encouraged indifference to the poor on the part of the rich. Hazlitt's remarks on vexatious curbs on the liberties of the poor echo Malthus's complaint against the current administration of the Poor Law. Indeed, towards the end of his *Reply* Hazlitt candidly acknowledged exactly what Malthus was advocating, namely that, he thought 'the poor laws bad things; and that it would be well, if they could be got rid of, consistently with humanity and justice'.⁶⁰ The burden of his attack on Malthus, however, was that he had diverted attention from what Hazlitt regarded as the chief root of evil – 'the increasing tyranny, dependence, indolence, and unhappiness occasioned by other causes', where these other causes are merely suggested. The utopian high ground was being taken – from which a far better future could be espied – at the expense of attention to practical remedies of the kind that both Malthus and Whitbread were considering.

Southey's writings are far more explicit on the subject of remedies for poverty; they also contain a diagnosis – much of which was shared with Coleridge – that was distinctive to, and became definitive of, the romantic position on social and economic questions. It allowed no concessions to the Malthusian perspective: on that subject the die had long been cast. In 1812 Southey continued to follow the line established in his first attack, still claiming that Malthus's victory over Godwin was based on a sophism, and that the theory would be true only 'if the whole earth were fully peopled and fully cultivated'. Pro-populationism was also unabated, with Bishop Berkeley being cited for his wisdom in pointing out that 'the strength of kingdoms consisted mainly in the *number* of their inhabitants, and that the true policy of governments is not to prevent their subjects from multiplying, but to provide uses and employment for them as fast as they multiply'.⁶¹ Over-population was attributable only to defects of policy. With this as given, other reasons for what was recognised as a disastrously deteriorating situation had to be found.

Southey broadened his diagnosis of British problems by dealing with the immiseration of the poor as the most recent disaster in an historical

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 1, p. 355.

⁶¹ *Essays, Moral and Political*, 1, pp. 94–5.

process that began with the withdrawal of monastic protection after the English Reformation. This provided a setting in which two new elements could be introduced: first, a greater emphasis on the manufacturing system as the cause of poverty and moral degradation; and secondly, a note of growing anxiety about 'the horrors of a *bellum servile*', a potential revolt of the masses that could be triggered by Malthus's policy of abolition and almost anything else happening during the war and post-war period.⁶² The abolition of feudal vassalage, the elimination of monastic charity, and the decline in standards of religious instruction available to the urban poor from the clergy of the national church had all played their part in setting the scene for contemporary moral decline – Southey's equivalent to what Coleridge diagnosed, as we shall see in the succeeding essay, as the 'over-balance of the commercial spirit'. The manufacturing system had sucked the lower classes into towns which possessed none of those 'gentle and genial influences' connected with their rural birth-place. The attachments arising from 'long connection, and the remembrance of kind offices received, and faithful services performed' had been replaced by employments 'equally pernicious to mind and body'. The moral and religious instruction of the children brought to factories by the waggon-load had been overlooked. Hence the rootless violence of the urban mob, Luddism, the murder of prime ministers (Spencer Perceval), and attacks on the royal family. What most concerned Southey about urban manufacturing was the existence of a growing population removed from the paternalistic institutions of rural life, more drawn to dissent, if not irreligion, and increasingly showing signs of a capacity to combine effectively, as Peterloo was to demonstrate in 1819.

Restoration of public order, therefore, through control over the seditious activities of the press and prosecutions of radical demagogues, came high on Southey's list of priorities. The social and economic solutions he favoured also required a strong government capable of undertaking 'a liberal expenditure on public works, by colonizing our waste lands at home and regularly sending off our swarms abroad'.⁶³ Post-war retrenchment in public expenditure was the last thing needed. The war itself had shown what could be accomplished when the nation decided to employ its tax revenues and unique capacity for creating public credit for genuinely public purposes, which now included

⁶² See *ibid.*, I, p. 94.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, II, p. 26.

monuments to Nelson and Wellington as well as roads, harbours, churches, colleges, and land reclamation. A national education scheme was also proposed, though it was to be organised under the auspices of the Church of England – that is, Andrew Bell's scheme rather than the version by Joseph Lancaster supported by Whigs and dissenters. Savings banks and sponsored emigration to Canada, Cape Colony, and America make up the rest of the practical remedies, though Southey also obliged Rickman by outlining the benefits of one of his friend's pet ideas, the establishment of *béguinages*, convents for lay women. This was to be the basic formula adopted in Southey's *Colloquies*, with what by then had become the usual asides against those 'miserable politicians who mistake wealth for welfare in their estimate of national prosperity', and political economy as the source of these materialistic beliefs.⁶⁴

V

Behind the scenes, however, there were signs of tension between Southey and Rickman on these matters. While Rickman fully endorsed Southey's anxieties about the possibilities of violent revolution, he feared that educational schemes would simply add to the risk of sedition: 'My feeling is against the modern rage for education, because it savours of the mock philanthropy and liberality which during my time have been the curse of Europe.'⁶⁵ Moreover, his knowledge of the relevant statistics prevented him from accepting Southey's attempts to connect the rise of manufacturing with increased pauperism. He pointed out that the numbers in receipt of relief were lower in manufacturing counties such as Lancashire than in rural counties such as Sussex, and that the life expectancy of the poor had actually increased. More to the point, he believed that the differences were attributable to the use of the allowance system in granting Poor Law relief in agricultural counties.⁶⁶ Although Rickman had little success in modifying Southey's view of the manufacturing system, with regard to the Poor Law he was increasingly influential in changing (even writing)

⁶⁴ See *Sir Thomas More; Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society*, London, 1829, 2 volumes, 1, pp. 158–9, and II, pp. 172–3.

⁶⁵ See Williams, *Rickman*, p. 176.

⁶⁶ 'An explanation of this will perhaps lead you to different views of the poor-rate plan of relief, which in agricultural counties operates as a mode of equalising wages according to the number of mouths in a family I do not approve of this, nor of the poor laws at all'; see letter to Southey, 12 March 1813 in Williams, *Rickman*, pp. 167–8, 182.

the position adopted by Southey in his *Quarterly Review* articles. While these continued to uphold the principle of public relief, the injurious nature of current methods of administration in encouraging population redundancy and causing demoralisation was emphasised. By 1817 Southey was supporting the position advocated in the Sturges Bourne Select Committee report on the Poor Laws and welcoming the prospect of a 'gradual extinction of these laws, and the restoration of that English character in the lower classes which, of late years, they have been so rapidly destroying'.⁶⁷ Solutions such as employment on public works were acceptable, as was recruitment into the armed forces and assisted emigration, but reduction in poor rates and criticism of the liberality with which the Poor Laws were being administered became a prominent feature of the joint articles.⁶⁸

Despite these moves in what can be described only as a Malthusian direction, Southey and Rickman continued to proclaim the differences between their diagnoses of population redundancy and Malthusian ones:

Let it not, however, be supposed that we assent in any degree to Mr. Malthus's philosophy, and ascribe this redundancy to some necessary evil in the system of nature. It has arisen wholly from our system of society. As little would we be supposed to agree with Mr. Malthus in his reprobation of the poor-laws ... The mischief which the poor-laws produce has arisen wholly from their mal-administration or perversion; the system itself is humane, just, necessary, befitting a Christian state and honourable to the English nation.⁶⁹

We see the same mixture in Coleridge. Outbursts against Malthus ('he who would prevent the poor from rotting away in disease, misery, and wickedness, is an enemy to his country!') were combined with statements condemning the Poor Laws ('I hold it impossible to exaggerate their pernicious tendency and consequences').⁷⁰

Rickman's letters to Southey provide more eloquent testimony to the change that was taking place in their assessment of the Poor Laws behind the anti-Malthusian front which their earlier attacks on Malthus obliged them to sustain.⁷¹ Chiefly as a result of the rise in poor rates and revelations of administrative breakdown, Rickman persistently

⁶⁷ Letter to Walter Savage Landor, 17 September 1817 in *NL*, II, p. 174.

⁶⁸ See *Quarterly Review*, 12 (1815), 261, 269, 306; and *ibid.*, 18, (1818), 259–61.

⁶⁹ *Essays, Moral and Political*, II, pp. 210–11.

⁷⁰ See *The Friend* in *CW*, IV (1), p. 240 and *Lay Sermons* in *CW*, VI, p. 221.

⁷¹ The argument here is fully developed by Poynter, *Society and Pauperism*, pp. 250–4, the only modern work that does justice to Rickman's influence.

attempted to stiffen Southey's resolve by curbing any tendency towards sentimentality:

As to the poor rate question, pray prepare a good common place in praise of *selfishness*, the only mover of large beneficial action, because general . . . A rule of reasonable duress must be general, mere sustenance of the cheapest kind, and nothing better *by law*, whereupon in walks industry, care and thrift in the poor; genuine humanity – alms judiciously bestowed – circles of endeared dependents – active and passive happiness to the rich. The poor must thus attain good character or fall upon the *legal* sustenance, which very soon none would fall upon, because they who had not friends . . . would find establishments in aid of the *friendless*, and those behaving well would attain friends. The world would all be bound together by the mutual tye [sic] of good character, and our English age would assure the purity which our degree of civilisation would then be the measure and indication of, instead of the antagonist. But you must steel your soul for a short time for future good. Bread and water and straw for all who have not character to elicit, or industry to acquire, better maintenance. That each man shall take care of his own peculiar affairs, and that no man shall have a right to *demand* another's property beyond the civilised propriety of not being starved, must be the beginning of future good . . . if I can put into you a temporary severity for final good purposes, we will overthrow all the evils of human society, by abolishing poor rates, and introducing universal good character instead. Charity in the large sense, shall then be at least as wide as England.⁷²

Rickman's chief concern centred on the effect of poor rates as an invasion of the 'sacredness of private property':

The poor in fact are authorised to plunder the rich by law, when in time all must become poor and barbarian. Never was so unjust an agrarian law . . . The poor then have no *right* to relief, they must be made *to ask* and to *demand* it; and in case of bad character, the overseer, if confirmed by the decision of the magistrate shall be enabled to refuse it, and send the poor man of lazy habits to the workhouse; thus to be fed on the lowest species of fare that any workingman in Great Britain eats.⁷³

By 1827 Rickman had become thoroughly misanthropic:

I find that if I add annotations to the Poor Law essay, they will be of hopeless character, as my reflections have led me to a conviction, that the increase of poor rates took place from increase of kindly feeling towards the lower classes, which operated early in your life-time and mine upon magistrates first, who were disposing of other people's money. Since that [time] the same feeling has operated more extensively, and an imperceptible reliance on this has caused undue increase of population. We cannot make the poor comfortable without

⁷² Letter to Southey, 8 May 1817 in Williams, *Rickman*, pp. 193–4.

⁷³ Letter to Southey, 22 October 1817, in *ibid.*, pp. 196–7.

making them increase and multiply, and as humanity is not likely to retrograde, poor rates will not diminish; perhaps we ought not to wish it . . .⁷⁴

For those who still feel the need for a candidate for the role of backstairs legislative genius to explain the Poor Law Amendment Act, Rickman can legitimately be proposed for the purpose – or rather, perhaps one should say that he was keen to propose himself for the purpose. When he thought a future Tory ministry under Sir Robert Peel was likely to tackle the problem, he boasted that he ‘could fit up the apparatus readily, having not only *arguments* but *clauses* ready drawn in store’.⁷⁵ As a parliamentary draftsman, his credentials for occupying this role seem better than those of Bentham or Malthus, the two suspects usually taken in for questioning on this subject, with Bentham often seeming to be the more likely culprit, not least because two of his followers were members of the commission, with one of them, Edwin Chadwick, becoming responsible for writing large parts of the report. As Rickman’s warnings to Southey reveal, the chief ingredient in his proposals would have been a stern version of what became known after 1834 as the ‘less eligibility’ principle. The ‘hopeless character’ of his reflections on this subject, however, sprang from his belief that it was not possible to ‘make the poor comfortable without making them increase and multiply’. Rickman had arrived by a circuitous route at the position from which Malthus had started.

By the time Rickman had done so, however, Malthus had long ceased to uphold that position in its original form. Indeed, he had begun the process of revision when he acknowledged the evidence which revealed, contrary to his original expectations, that the Poor Laws had not had the effect of lowering the age of marriage in England. Malthus’s opinions, towards the end of his career, on what should be done with the Poor Laws will be considered in the final part of this essay. But it is worth noting here that Rickman’s hopelessness was not shared by those clerics and liberal Tories who were responsible for developing Malthus’s position in the post-war period, and whose writings, it can be argued, were responsible for laying the groundwork for the direction taken by amendment in the 1834 Act.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Letter to Southey, 27 November 1827 in *ibid.*, p. 237.

⁷⁵ Letter to Southey, 24 April 1831 in *ibid.*, pp. 306–7. He made the same claim to Peel himself; see the letter to Peel, 1 June 1831, covering a packet of material representing his interest in the Poor Laws over the past twenty-five years: British Library, Peel Papers, Volume CCXXXI, Add.MSS 40402, f. 86.

⁷⁶ On the role of liberal Tories in relation to reform of the Poor Laws see P. Mandler, ‘The Making of the New Poor Law *Redivivus*’, *Past and Present*, 117 (1987), 131–57; and the debate

For example, John Bird Sumner, the cleric who did most to make Malthusian ideas acceptable to Anglican intelligence, was also appointed to the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws in 1832. He had earned the right to membership through his 'Malthusian' articles on the subject in the *Quarterly Review*. Ricardo, in his only intervention in the dispute between Malthus and his romantic critics, had welcomed Sumner's sympathetic review of the 1817 edition of Malthus's *Essay* in the *Quarterly* as evidence that 'the reveries of Southey on questions of Political Economy' were no longer to be 'admitted in any respectable journal'.⁷⁷ It was certainly a sign that the ultra-Tory form of paternalism on this matter was in retreat – in this quarter at least. Sumner also wrote the article on the 'Poor Laws' for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in 1824, an article that represents in some respects the culmination of a series of revisionist contributions to Poor Law debate by liberal Tories such as John Davison and Edward Coplestone, two members of the 'Noetic' school centred on Oriel College, Oxford.

In 1819, Coplestone had succeeded in removing any remaining harshness left by memories of Malthus's references to the shortage of seats at 'nature's mighty feast'. He also capitalised on the patchwork revisions in Malthus's treatment of the Poor Laws by dealing with the question of relations between rich and poor as part of the Christian doctrine on charity. Building on Sumner's *laissez-faire* reinterpretation of this doctrine in the *Records of Creation*, Coplestone argued that the forces of demand and supply provided the natural rewards and punishments that were an integral part of God's system of incentives and reinforcements. At a time when secular political economists in Britain did not employ *laissez-faire* as a slogan, Coplestone emblazoned *Laissez-nous faire* on the title page of his first major publication on political economy.⁷⁸

Coplestone maintained that the 'great merit and the everlasting value' of Malthus's *Essay* consisted in laying bare an impious misunderstanding of the role of legislation in human affairs which had had the practical effect of undermining true Christian benevolence and virtue:

aroused by this article in the same journal, 127 (1990), 183–201. See also the same author's 'Tories and Paupers: Christian Political Economy and the Making of the New Poor Law', *Historical Journal*, 33 (1990), 81–103. On the role of liberal Tories more generally see Hilton, *Corn, Cash, Commerce* and *The Age of Atonement*; and P. Mandler, *Aristocratic Government in the Age of Reform*.

⁷⁷ Letter to Hutches Trower, 26 January 1818 in *Works*, vii, p. 247.

⁷⁸ *A Letter to the Right Honourable Robert Peel on the Pernicious Effects of a Variable Standard of Value, especially as it regards the Condition of the Lower Orders and the Poor Laws*, Oxford, 1819.

The fundamental mistake to which I allude is the confusion of moral duty with the task of legislation. That what all individuals *ought to do*, it is the business of the laws to *make* them do, is a plausible position, and has actually been adopted by some of the ablest and most virtuous men. But nothing in reality is more fallacious – nothing less congruous with the nature of man and with that state of discipline and trial which his present existence is clearly designed to be. In the first place, it destroys the very essence not only of benevolence, but of all virtue, to make it compulsory: or to speak more properly, it is a contradiction in terms. An action to be virtuous must be voluntary. It requires a living and a free agent to give it birth.⁷⁹

In the name of a higher paternalism, this served as an attack on a more dependent form of paternalism that had come into being with the allowance system. Charity, Coplestone argued, was a relation between individuals rather than something that could be done ‘by proxy’ through laws: ‘To throw off the care of want, and disease, and misery upon the magistrate, is to convert humanity into police, and religion into a statute-book.’⁸⁰ Coplestone also made an important clarification of Malthus’s position when he denied what had made Rickman so melancholy, (namely that it was impossible to make the poor comfortable without increasing their numbers.) The ‘cheering inference’ he drew was that ‘it may be possible to provide by law for *preserving* life, without encouraging the *propagation* of it’.⁸¹ A method of administering relief that carefully observed this distinction would make abolition unnecessary. It allowed Coplestone to hope ‘that indigence arising whether from infirmity, age, infancy, great number of children, and even accidental failure of employment, may possibly be relieved by law – not fully and adequately to our feelings – yet permanently and systematically, without necessarily extending the evil – and that in proportion to the improvement of society, this relief may safely be afforded on a more liberal scale’.⁸² The allowance system, as Malthus had argued, was an interference with the laws of supply and demand; it had adulterated a natural system of wage determination by mixing it with alms, leading to a disastrous confusion of free labour with parochial labour. In place of this form of assistance to able-bodied labour, Coplestone advocated administering relief through select vestries operating under restraints on the discretion of single magistrates according to what later became known as the ‘less eligibility’

⁷⁹ E. Coplestone, *A Second Letter to the Right Honourable Robert Peel*, pp. 17–18.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 33.

principle. Once this principle had been fully established as everyday parochial practice, other positive remedies could be countenanced: temporary schemes of public employment, loans to the unemployed, and parochial schools and benefit societies.

The ultimate object of any [legislation] was to reduce the proportion of the population who were in need of public assistance, thereby abolishing the idea of 'the class of poor as a sort of permanent body – as possessed of positive rights and interests in their corporate capacity'.⁸³ The poor would be encouraged to see themselves as prudent individuals, some of whom 'from time to time may have lost their station as component members of society' and have therefore become dependent on charity: 'By the nature of things theirs is a lower condition than any employment however menial – and it is an inversion of the order of things to make it the title to privileges of any kind.' Coplestone was attempting to embody two axioms enunciated earlier by his colleague, John Davison: 'first, that *every man should work for himself*, which has been rudely discountenanced by the practice of our Poor Laws, and the next, that *every man should save for himself*, an axiom which benefit clubs, combined parochial funds, and some other plans, trample under foot.'⁸⁴ Since preservation and propagation could be distinguished, Coplestone welcomed those changes Malthus had made to the *Essay* which showed his recognition that the Poor Laws had not in fact increased the risk of early marriage. A major element in the thinking that went into the Poor Law Amendment Act, distinguishing abolition from reform, had been put in place.

Sumner's membership of the Royal Commission ensured that a position akin to Coplestone's updated version of Malthusianism was available to the Commission, but it was another member, Nassau Senior, who, alongside Chadwick, was to take responsibility for writing large parts of the report. Senior had described Malthus a few years earlier as 'our most eminent living philosophical writer', admittedly doing so in the course of maintaining, for reasons that will be considered in a subsequent essay, that population pressure had largely abated in civilised countries like Britain – a position reflected in the report's finding that such pressure was no longer the chief cause of pauperism.⁸⁵ It may have been with such supporters as Sumner and Senior in mind that William Empson, a colleague and friend of

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁸⁴ John Davison, *Considerations on the Poor Laws*, Oxford, 1817, p. 19.

⁸⁵ See *The Poor Law Report of 1834* edited by S.G. and E. O. A. Checkland, London, 1974, p. 484.

Malthus, claimed that: 'If the poor law amendment bill has been difficult to carry, even under existing circumstances – it would have been absolutely impossible, unless Mr. Malthus had stood in the gap for so many years, bearing the brunt of argument and obloquy, fearless of danger, regardless of every interest but the interests of truth.'⁸⁶

It is a measure of the complexity of the underlying issue, however, that while some of Malthus's friends considered the amendments proposed to be an extension of his logic, inveterate opponents regarded the report of the Royal Commission as a sign that the country had been rescued from Malthusian influence. Speaking on behalf of Michael Sadler, the standard-bearer for the Tory humanitarian position in 1834, an exponent of extending the Poor Law to Ireland, and the author of the last major attack on Malthus to appear during his lifetime, Robert Seeley, Sadler's first biographer, took comfort from the fact that

while there was much that was harsh and objectionable in [Lord Althorp's] plan, there was still nothing of Malthusianism in it. No taking away or abridging the right of relief; no badge of crime inflicted on the distressed; but a distinct adherence to the ancient law. We are not expressing a decided approval of the measure, when we admit or rather assert, that it was a very different one from what Mr. M[althus] and his disciples would have counselled.⁸⁷

Paradoxically, there may be something to be said for the conclusions of both Empson and Seeley. Those who adhered to Seeley's opinion, however, are correct only if a distinction is made between the caricature called Malthusianism, and the position Malthus himself had arrived at on Poor Law reform during the decade that preceded the setting up of the Royal Commission. A concluding comparison of this position with Wordsworth's criticisms of the Act will bring this home.

VI

In common with Southey and Coleridge, Wordsworth's enmity towards Malthus survived into old age. Again, this tenacity is all the more remarkable when the signs of capitulation to the Malthusian diagnosis and chief remedy for poverty are taken into account. Thus in responding in 1831 to a letter from Lady Beaumont, who had remarked

⁸⁶ 'Life, Writings, and Character of Mr Malthus', *Edinburgh Review*, 64 (1837), 502.

⁸⁷ [R. B. Seeley], *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Michael Thomas Sadler, M.P., F.R.S.*, London, 1842, p. 198.

that Malthus's doctrines were 'the most selfish that the rich ever propounded for the poor', Wordsworth's agreement contained a significant qualification that, alongside a common caricature of Malthus's position, went some way towards acceptance of delayed marriage as a solution:

It is monstrous to affirm with Mr. Malthus, that the World is overpeopled – yet they err grievously on the other side who talk as if there were no obligations upon people to reflect before marriage how their children are to be maintained. If impolitic or unjust laws stand in the way of the earth being as productive as it might be, and impediments are thus thrown in the way of marriage, that is no reason why poor people should go about marrying as fast and as recklessly as they can – still less is it a reason, as Mr. M[althus] lays down, that they should not marry at all.⁸⁸

Passage of the Amendment Act by the Whig reforming ministry provided Wordsworth with an opportunity for more considered reaction in the lengthy postscript he added to an edition of his poetry that appeared in 1835. Malthus was not mentioned, but the provisions of the Act were attributed to 'the doctrines of political economy which are now prevalent'. Against these doctrines, Wordsworth urged 'one of the sacred claims of civilised humanity', namely that 'all persons who cannot find employment, or procure wages sufficient to support the body in health and strength, are entitled to a maintenance by law'. The Poor Law Commissioners, as Wordsworth acknowledged, did not intend to abolish this entitlement, but he felt that the regulations of the Act would have the effect of negating the underlying principle, with the likely result that claimants for assistance would be degraded. Six years earlier he had accepted that Irish poverty made it doubtful if the English Poor Law in its old guise could be introduced there – a position that Malthus had also upheld in his evidence to the Select Committee on Emigration in 1826.⁸⁹ On English soil, however, Wordsworth believed that circumstances were more propitious: 'Englishmen have ... by the progress of civilisation among them, been placed in circumstances more favourable to piety and resignation to the divine will, than the inhabitants of other countries, where a like provision has not been established.' This meant that 'a christian government, standing *in loco parentis* towards all its subjects', was in a position to seal their patriotic allegiance by endorsing the right to relief. Need as well

⁸⁸ Letter to Lady Beaumont, 8 July 1831, *Letters*, v, pp. 405–6.

⁸⁹ Third Report of Select Committee on Emigration in 1827 in *Parliamentary Papers*, 1826–7, v, p. 537.

as favourable circumstances supported this conclusion in a nation where so many were at the mercy of forces connected with commerce and manufacturing that lay beyond the resources of individual prudence and foresight to counteract. Wordsworth recognised that it was still necessary to encourage these virtues, but felt that any shortcomings and abuses in the unreformed Poor Law could be rectified by returning to a situation in which parochial relief was administered 'under the care of the upper classes, as it ought to be'. Wherever this was still the case, with funds being 'raised and applied under the superintendence of gentlemen and substantial proprietors, acting in vestries, and as overseers, pauperism has diminished accordingly'.⁹⁰

As we have seen, Malthus had not wished to press his abolitionist solution during any of the crises in which the Poor Laws remained the chief source of relief. By 1821, when faced with reports on the successes of his Scottish admirer, Thomas Chalmers, in abolishing public provision for the poor in a manufacturing town, Glasgow, Malthus confessed that he had

almost despaired on the subject, and almost begun to think that in a highly manufacturing state where so large a portion of the population must be subject to the fluctuations of trade, and the consequent sudden variations of wages, it might not be possible entirely to give up a compulsory provision without the sacrifice of too many individuals to the good of the whole.

Even so, Malthus remained concerned about the problem of vagrancy under any purely voluntary system of provision for the poor, and advised Chalmers to pay more attention to this problem in his future work.⁹¹

In the following year, he was more frank in distinguishing his position from that of Chalmers, and like Wordsworth, though on grounds that do not make deference to the upper classes and Christian resignation the crucial factor, he cited the peculiarity of English conditions:

I see little prospect at present of the opinion against the system of the Poor Laws becoming sufficiently general to warrant the adoption of measures for their abolition. The subject of population is no doubt very much more generally understood than it was; but the actual situation of England *with* her poor laws, and her comparative exemption from famines and excessive poverty, together with a great fear of the increase of mendicity, operate very

⁹⁰ See Postscript, 1835 in *Prose Works*, III, pp. 240–8.

⁹¹ Letter to Chalmers, 25 August 1821, CHA.4.18.21 (Chalmers Papers, New College, Edinburgh).

powerfully on the public mind, and it certainly would not do to attempt a fundamental change, without a pretty general conviction of the importance of it, among the higher and middle classes of society, and the best informed among the labouring classes. Practically therefore I am inclined to look forward to the first improvement as likely to come from an improved administration of our actual laws, together with a more general system of education and moral superintendance. I really think now that the principle of population is more generally understood, that something considerable may be done in this way, if while we administer relief more judiciously, we take great care not to remove or weaken the indirect effects of the poor law in checking population. The obligation on each parish to support its own poor has certainly had a great effect in checking the building of numerous and wretched hovels; and though it would be most desirable on other accounts to have the freest possible circulation of labour, yet I think that anything like an abolition of the present laws of settlement would be accompanied with more evil than good. On this account I have been rather afraid of some of Mr. Scarlett's amendments relating to settlements, particularly as any great change in this respect would not agree well with the contemporaneous limitations of the assessments.⁹²

Although Malthus did not remove the plan for abolition from the final edition of the *Essay* in 1826, his last public pronouncement on the subject in 1830 shows that the considerations advanced in his letters to Chalmers were still operative:

If it be generally considered as so discreditable to receive parochial relief, that great exertions are made to avoid it, and few or none marry with a certain prospect of being obliged to have recourse to it, there is no doubt that those who were really in distress might be adequately assisted, with little danger of a constantly increasing proportion of paupers; and in that case a great good would be attained without any proportionate evil to counter-balance it.⁹³

Malthus's doctrine of proportions as applied to the construction of a utilitarian balance sheet of gains and losses was still at work. He was also revealing his acceptance of Coplestone's distinction between propagation and preservation.

⁹² Letters to Chalmers, 21 July 1822, CHA.4.21.51. Much the same opinion was expressed to Chalmers on 9 November 1822 when Malthus noted 'that it will be found much more difficult to get back into the right course in England, where we have long deviated from it, than in Scotland where the aberrations have been comparatively trifling and only for a short time. From the opinions which have appeared to me most generally prevalent and particularly from the present temper of the House of Commons, I own that I have latterly felt myself compelled to restrain my hopes of anything like a complete abolition of the Poor Laws, and to satisfy myself with the prospect of an amelioration of the present system' (CHA.4.21.54).

⁹³ *A Summary View of the Principle of Population*, 1830, which originally appeared as the article on 'Population' for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in 1824, as reprinted in Malthus, *Works*, iv, p. 238.

In the absence of any specific reaction on Malthus's part to the provisions of the Amendment Act, this evidence, taken in conjunction with the letters to Chalmers, will have to stand. It is entirely in harmony with what we know about Malthus's unwillingness to press any principle as a guide to policy, regardless of actual circumstances – where these had to include regard for the existing state of public opinion. Another example of this frame of mind will be considered in the next essay when dealing with the Corn Laws. It also seems possible to suggest that Malthus was sufficiently content with improvements in methods of Poor Law administration at the local level, where the burden of assessments was felt, for him to have laid greater stress on this than the more controversial Benthamite, or centralising, features of the legislation. Malthus's conclusions on Poor Law reform were based on a less hierarchically paternalist set of assumptions than those of Wordsworth; they embodied the regard for the 'unlimited exercise of private judgement' that had enabled him to share common ground with Godwin; and they also found expression in the far less radical ideas of liberal Tories such as Davison, Coplestone, and Sumner. That Malthus's conclusions were much closer to the position of the Lake poets than they would have cared to acknowledge, however, seems a fitting conclusion to this phase of the Malthusian controversy.

A manufacturing animal: things not persons?

The manufacturing system has been carried among us to an extent unheard of in any former age or country; it has enabled us to raise a revenue which twenty years ago we ourselves should have thought it impossible to support, and it has added even more to the activity of the country than to its ostensible wealth; but in a far greater degree has it diminished its happiness and lessened its security. Adam Smith's book is the code, or confession of faith, of this system; a tedious and hard-hearted book, greatly over-valued even on the score of ability, for fifty pages would have comprised its sum and substance . . . That book considers man as a manufacturing animal – a definition which escaped the ancients: it estimates his importance, not by the sum of goodness and of knowledge which he possesses, not by the virtues and charities which should flow towards him and emanate from him, not by the happiness of which he may be the source and centre, not by the duties to which he is called, not by the immortal destinies for which he is created; but by the gain which can be extracted from him, the *quantum of lucretion* of which he can be made the instrument.

Robert Southey, 'On the State of the Poor', *Quarterly Review*, 1812

I

Southey's attribution of responsibility to Smith for providing a 'confession of faith' designed to fit the manufacturing system was probably the first of its kind. By substituting a later coinage, the industrial revolution, one arrives at a stereotypical connection between political economy and the industrial form of capitalism that was to achieve canonical form in Marx's hands, and has therefore persisted in some circles to this day. Smith had not always had this negative role in the thinking of the romantics. The Pantisocratic scheme of co-operative life and labour took heart from a Godwinian, or leisure-based, reading of

Smith's observation that present standards of living in commercial societies could be maintained when only one-twentieth of the population was employed productively.¹ Moreover, we find Rickman writing to Southey during the period of grain scarcity at the turn of the century that: 'The mob (high and low) prate about monopoly: and if Mr. Pitt had not luckily in his youth read Adam Smith, by this time England would have been a scene of injustice, and the future summer had produced an absolute and fatal famine.'² Smith's defence of grain dealers and farmers, to which this refers, was also endorsed by Coleridge, to judge from newspaper articles he wrote excusing farmers from charges of monopolistic behaviour at this time – a position he continued to hold when scarcity returned in the post-war period.³ But having decided, largely as a result of the encounter with Malthus, that the entire science of political economy was the emblem or source of so much they deplored about the emerging modern world, it would have been impossible for the romantics to exclude its acknowledged founder from criticism later. For the same reason, perhaps, one finds no recognition in their writings of any of the issues considered in the next essay, those that distinguished the Malthusian version of political economy from its Ricardian alternative.

Southey seems to have been more proud to claim that he was one of the first to attribute the increasing misery of the poor to the manufacturing system. The claim rests on Southey's pseudonymous *Letters from England* published in 1807, and it is one that has been upheld by later commentators.⁴ Establishing priority in such matters is hazardous and ultimately fruitless. As 'anticipations', it would not be difficult to cite Smith on the 'mental mutilation' created by the narrow tasks involved

¹ For the reference to Smith in the Pantisocratic scheme see Mrs Henry Sandford, *Thomas Poole and his Friends*, London, 1888, 2 volumes, 1, pp. 97–8. For a recent re-examination of the connection see Roe, *The Politics of Nature*, pp. 49–51. For Godwin's emphasis on leisure, or absence of toil, see p. 258 above.

² Letter to Southey, 27 December 1800 in Williams, *Rickman*, p. 37.

³ Coleridge's journalism in the *Morning Post*, influenced by the intelligence provided by Thomas Poole from his rural base, may account for his position on farmers; see *Essays on His Times* in *CW*, III(III), pp. 40–58 (conjectured or collaborative attribution); and *ibid.*, pp. 298–303 for an 1811 article in *The Courier* on the price of grain which cites Burke's *Letters on a Regicidal Peace*, but not *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*, the more relevant text on this occasion. For a later defence of 'Capitalists and Storekeepers, who by spreading the dearness of provisions over a larger space and time prevent scarcity from becoming real famine', see *Lay Sermon*, *CW*, VI, p. 168.

⁴ See *Letters from England* by Don Manuel Alvarez Espriella *Translated from the Spanish*, 1807, Letters 36, 38, 40–1. Southey cited himself in his 1812 work on the state of the poor; see *Essays, Moral and Political*, I, pp. 117–18. His claims to priority have been upheld by Carnall, *Southey and his Age*, pp. 67–8; and Williams, *Culture and Society*, pp. 40–1.

in the division of labour, or Burke's remarks on the 'pestiferous occupations to which by the social oeconomy so many wretches are inevitably doomed'. Even Godwin's distaste for the 'slavery' associated with manufactured luxuries could be mentioned as a possible 'influence'.⁵ More to the point of this essay, however, one of the many ironies and artifices of the Malthusian controversy can be found in the fact that Malthus had originally treated the growth of 'unwholesome' urban manufacturing activities as an unfortunate by-product of population pressure in 1798. This diagnosis was made more elaborate when he dealt with Britain as a 'landed nation' that had perilously increased its dependence on manufacturing in the 1803 *Essay* – probably the last edition read by Southey.⁶ The ironies were to become manifest as Malthus and his romantic critics, chiefly in this case Coleridge, developed their diagnoses and remedies for Britain's economic situation in parallel with one another during and after the Napoleonic wars. This essay will begin by considering these parallels – an exact term on this occasion because, however close they came, there was no inter-communication or sign of mutual recognition.

II

Any treatment of Coleridge's political economy has to be undertaken in the face of several initial disadvantages. Looking back from the entrenched positions of a later period, from the ritualised dismissals of the 'so-called' science of political economy and the embellishments added by later protagonists, there seems no room for sensible exchange, let alone compromise. The dispute had acquired stern philosophical policemen anxious to protect Idealism from any invasion of Empiricism and the 'mechanic philosophy', the Organicism of the Coleridgean 'Idea' from taint of self-interested Individualism, the universalism of Kantian Reason from circumstantial and prudential Understanding, Platonism from Aristotelianism, Noumena from Phenomena, Cultivation from Civilisation, Worth from Value, Welfare from Wealth, and so on. As in all such disputes, the 'other' provides a negative definition of self. Even John Stuart Mill's famous attempt to

⁵ For a wide-ranging study of those influences that actually lay behind Southey's position, including the eighteenth-century debate on luxury, see D. Eastwood, 'Robert Southey and the Intellectual Origins of Romantic Conservatism', *English Historical Review*, 104 (1989), 308–31.

⁶ See pp. 266–8 above for Malthus's position at this time.

encapsulate the differences between Bentham and Coleridge for the purposes of reconciling them is more memorable for the former than it is for the latter. Furthermore, Mill's sympathy for Coleridge's moral and political ideas did not extend to his economic pronouncements: 'In political economy especially he writes like an arrant driveller, and it would have been well for his reputation had he never meddled with the subject.'⁷ This verdict has understandably been provocative to Coleridgeans, and has led to various attempts to rescue and promote the insights contained in Coleridge's writings.⁸ Viewing these insights through a Malthusian lens – which, as we shall see, is by no means the same as that employed by Mill, yet has the virtue of being the one chosen by the romantics themselves – does not resolve the unresolvable, but it does illuminate some incongruous elements in the controversy.

Although Coleridge's suspicions about prevailing forms of political economy constructed along utilitarian lines appear early, some of its seventeenth- and eighteenth-century exponents, especially Josiah Child, James Steuart, and Adam Smith, as well as the French *économistes*, were clearly part of his omnivorous reading, with Steuart probably being favoured over Smith as a result of the larger role accorded to the statesman in managing national affairs.⁹ At one time or another Coleridge wrote on many of the topics to which the science was being applied: war finance and the national debt, the bullion question, children's hours of work in factories, the Corn Laws, and the causes of post-war depression. If he stopped short of claims to have refounded the science himself, he could still entertain hopes of a more acceptable form of political economy emerging. Rickman was the focus of these hopes for a time: 'In whatever part of Christendom a genuine philosopher in Political Economy shall arise, and establish a system including the laws and the disturbing forces of that miraculous

⁷ 'Coleridge' in Mill, *CW*, x, p. 155.

⁸ The work usually cited as having demonstrated Coleridge's credentials in this field is W. F. Kennedy, *Humanist Versus Economist: The Economic Thought of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Berkeley, 1958. Much of this book is preoccupied with showing that Coleridge was a flawed precursor of the modern insights provided by Keynes and American Institutionalism.

⁹ See his letter to Poole, 7 May 1802 advising him on what to read among the political economists, namely to 'skim over' Smith and the French authors, remembering 'that it is a Science in its Infancy – indeed, Science it is none', while admitting that Poole might become 'a Benefactor to your Species by making it so'; *CL*, II, p. 799; and similar advice to John Taylor in 1825, where he claimed to have 'attentively read' Steuart, Smith, Malthus, and even Ricardo, finding 'a multitude of Sophisms but not a single just and important Result which might [not] far more convincingly be deduced from the simplest principles of Morality and Common Sense'; *CL*, v, p. 442. The reliance on Steuart is stressed in Kennedy, *Humanist versus Economist*, pp. 22, 26–8, 68–9.

machine of living Creatures, a Body Politic, he will have been in no small measure indebted to you for authentic and well guarded documents.¹⁰ Strategically placed at the centre of Westminster affairs, supplying Southey and Coleridge with advice on topics that by the 1820s had been taken up by a large section of the contemporary political spectrum, from liberal Tories to Whigs and philosophic radicals, Rickman fully endorsed their dislike for what passed as the science in parliament.¹¹ With his superior access to 'well-guarded documents' and the results of parliamentary inquiries, he may have encouraged his friends to think that a political economy that was both more patriotic and Christian was within their grasp. We have seen what Southey's collaboration with Rickman generated and can now consider Coleridge's most extensive contributions to political economy in the miscellany that made up *The Friend* (1809–10, reissued in 1818) and in the second *Lay Sermon* (1816–17).

The Friend can certainly be taken as a partial statement of Coleridge's mature political philosophy – of the position he had struggled to arrive at since forsaking his radical beliefs.¹² While proclaiming the essentially Kantian quality of reason as the basis for morality, thereby distancing himself from systems of obligation such as Paley's, which equated morality with self-interest and expediency, Coleridge was equally anxious to show the dangers of attempting to apply the conclusions of reason directly to political affairs. These were matters of understanding based on prudence and degree, where custom, circumstance, historical experience, and expediency could be the only sound guide to practice. In this respect, his criticisms of Rousseau, the French *économistes*, Paine, and political reformers at home, as represented by Major Cartwright and Cobbett, as well as his defence of inequality of property, show Coleridge in distinctly Burkean mood – especially in those parts implicitly comparing his own political posture with that of Burke.¹³

¹⁰ Letter to Rickman, 17 July 1812 in Williams, *Rickman*, p. 162.

¹¹ See letter dated July 1831 cited in *ibid.*, p. 303: 'Tonight they talk of banking and currency, which touches upon the new light of political economy, which one of my left hand debaters just now ycleped a science, without joking in the least.'

¹² For two recent and contrasting interpretations of *The Friend* see J. Morrow, *Coleridge's Political Thought*, who sees it as Coleridge's 'first reasonably systematic statement of a political philosophy' (p. 74), and D. Coleman, *Coleridge and The Friend, 1809–10*, Oxford, 1988, who sees it as 'an exercise not so much in principles as in muddy thinking and anxious equivocation' (p. 1).

¹³ See especially *The Friend*, *CW*, IV (1), pp. 188–9. Hence too the justice of Deirdre Coleman's remark that: 'Ostensibly, his strategy is to reveal Burke as a man who, like himself, had always held sufficiently large and progressive views to endear him to both political parties. The real point of the analogy is, however, a deeper one: that neither he nor Burke deserve

While the parallels with Burke's politics should not be over-emphasised, the role of sincere patriot adopted by Coleridge in *The Friend*, upholding the need for national consensus in the face of war with France, carries a specific message in those parts that deal with taxation and the national debt that merits description as Burkean – in one of its senses at least. The object of the exercise was to discredit Paine's and Cobbett's arguments on the oppressiveness of war taxation by upholding what would have been a 'Court' view of the subject when it was first enunciated during the eighteenth century. National debt differs from private debt in being owed by the nation to itself – or, as this was put by Jean-François Melon in 1736, the payment of interest on the debt was merely a matter of the left hand paying the right hand. Since this was a position that both Hume and Smith had attacked, it is not surprising to find Coleridge arguing that Hume had been alarmist in his warnings about this ruinous expedient: the growth in national wealth had made worries about the burden of debt seem outdated.¹⁴ At a time when increasing debt and taxation served the supreme patriotic purpose of supporting Britain's armies and navies, there was no scope for considering the kinds of injustice that might arise from the unequal incidence of taxation, the relative weights borne by rich and poor, debt-holder and taxpayer.¹⁵ The national debt was responsible for that 'indissoluble union' between all the various interests that make up society. As Coleridge later explained, he had placed the best construction on taxation and debt by emphasising its 'fairest and most animating features' because it was the duty of the patriot to do so at a time when the war effort was under attack.¹⁶ He acknowledged that there were constitutional 'evils' attached to the institution of public credit, but the promised treatment of these was not delivered. The relevant Burkean comparison here is with the *Letters on a Regicide Peace* in which Burke dealt with the treacherous and faint-hearted of his own

the charge of apostasy because they had always been conservatives': *Coleridge and The Friend*, p. 121.

¹⁴ See *The Friend*, *CW*, IV (1), pp. 234–6.

¹⁵ Contrast this with an earlier Coleridge stance: 'Can we go on this way? ... No industry, no labour, can support themselves under such burthens; and the rapid and sure consequence must be the extinction of all the active class of society and that we shall soon have but two orders, the rich few, into whose hands all the opulence of the kingdom will devolve, and the poor dependent on their benevolence; for it is always to be remembered that taxation does not carry treasure out of the country. It only takes it from the many and gives it to the few; but this in truth impoverishes the whole, since all the active powers of a nation are paralysed, and the bulk of the poor become dependent on *bounty* instead of labour for their daily bread' (*The Watchman* in *CW*, II, p. 110).

¹⁶ See *Lay Sermon* in *CW*, VI, p. 214.

day by drawing attention to the strengths of the British economic system, including the institution of public credit, where an explicit contrast with the fundamental flaws in French political and economic institutions could be drawn.¹⁷

Once freed from the remnants of Godwin's influence, Coleridge also showed that he accepted the conclusions of what can only be described as Smithian thinking on the benefits of commercial society and the related aims of government in economic matters. The positive ends of government, he maintained, were to ensure easy access to the means of subsistence (what either Adam Smith, or an ingenious note-taker attending the lectures, had referred to clumsily but suggestively as 'come-at-ability'), a proper share of 'comforts and conveniences' arising from the social division of labour for the mass of society, together with, for the individual, 'the hope of bettering his own condition and that of his children'.¹⁸ The only respect in which this does not conform with the aims of Smith's science of the legislator, even with their wording, lies in the final end or goal of government, namely that it should develop 'those faculties which are essential to his human nature by the knowledge of his moral and religious duties' – a standard feature of the teachings of Smith's more pious teacher, Francis Hutcheson.¹⁹ Coleridge claimed that the British government had yet to succeed in achieving the final goal. There were also hints that the state as opposed to government – where the former was a creature of Reason rather than Understanding – should reserve to itself the higher organic purpose that was to be developed in *Church and State*.

Coleridge's treatment of tax and debt in *The Friend* was taken over into the second *Lay Sermon*, where it continued to serve as an answer to 'demagogues' such as Cobbett who attributed distress to the burden of regressive taxation and corruption. It also acquired an extra dimension as part of an attempt to explain the post-war depression. The transition from war to peace, and demobilisation of the army, throwing soldiers 'back on the Public, and [sending them] to a table where every seat is pre-occupied', had led to the collapse of the high wages and prices

¹⁷ Compare Burke's position as expounded on pp. 216–17 above with Coleridge: 'In France there was no public credit, no communion of Interest: its unprincipled Government and the productive and taxable Classes were as two Individuals with Separate Interests'; see *The Friend* in *CW*, iv (i), p. 236.

¹⁸ *The Friend* in *CW*, iv (ii), pp. 201–2.

¹⁹ For the contrast between Smith and Hutcheson on this matter see Winch, *Adam Smith's Politics*, pp. 106–7. For Coleridge's view see *The Friend* in *CW*, iv (ii), pp. 201–2, 207.

achieved through the 'universal stimulant' of war, when Britain had 'almost monopolised the commerce of the world'.²⁰ Hurried retrenchment in government expenditure combined with abandonment of the income tax had placed a greater burden on other taxes, thereby adding an extraordinary disturbance to the normal fluctuations created by credit and speculative trading. Malcontents had fastened on to this situation, crying out against pensions and sinecures, and encouraging the destruction of machinery, failing to appreciate that 'the majority of the poor deluded destroyers owe their very *existence*' to such machinery.²¹

Behind these temporary disturbances, however, lay a more fundamental problem, the 'overbalance of the commercial spirit in consequence of the absence or weakness of the counter-weights'. Here Coleridge's diagnosis was as much social and spiritual as economic. The problem could be attributed to the decline of 'the ancient feeling of rank and ancestry' which had acted as a counterweight to the pursuit of wealth in the past – the kind of theme that Southey was to make his own in the *Colloquies*. To this was added the 'general neglect of all the austerer studies' (philosophy, theology, and mathematics) in favour of 'physical and psychological Empiricism'. Anticipating the idea of an established 'clerisy' in *Church and State*, Coleridge argued that an intellectual and religious counterweight was needed to offset the mechanical and material aspects of the current disposition to overvalue riches. More immediate practical remedies were scarce, though a proposed end to lotteries and other temptations to vice and folly, rather bathetically, was given prominence. Favourable mention was also given to the moral education of dependants, the regulation of children's hours of work, and the adoption of the cow-system by the poor.

Coleridge now regarded agriculture as an activity that had a special relationship to 'the maintenance, strength, and security of the state', but whose countervailing power had been weakened by commercialisation. Unlike some German romantics, notably Adam Müller, Coleridge did not ascribe commercialisation of land to Adam Smith, though it would have been a legitimate ascription if Smith's views on primogeniture, or indeed those of James and John Stuart Mill, had been noticed.²² Coleridge favoured revival of the idea of landholding as a

²⁰ *Lay Sermon* in *CW*, vi, p. 157.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

²² For a consideration of Coleridge's views in relation to those of Müller on this subject see U.

trust that reflected the identity between the landed interest and that of the nation at large. Landowners were advised to improve estates without immediate regard for their rent rolls.²³ How exactly this trust was to be exercised according to non-commercial criteria is not made clear. Indeed, clarity was almost ruled out by the deferential tone of a work addressed to the higher and middle classes ('It would border on an affront to the understandings of our Landed Interest, were I to explain in detail what the plan and conduct would be of a gentleman'). The blame for depriving labourers of smallholdings, thereby forcing the children of the 'peasantry' into urban 'manufactories', was placed on agents and farmers rather than landlords.

Coleridge's letters and other journalistic writings in 1815 show that he could be highly critical of the use of landowning power in parliament to secure passage of a Corn Law that would preserve the higher rents achieved during the war.²⁴ On this occasion, sympathy with the high prices faced by the poor was uppermost in Coleridge's mind. Later, in *Church and State* and in comments made on the Corn Laws towards the end of his life, higher considerations were invoked to justify the wisdom of this protective legislation. Echoing Burke, the 'Landed Order' became 'the guardian and depository of the *Permanence* of the realm'. Special significance was also attached to the agrarian way of life, indicating the need to preserve national self-sufficiency:

Those who argue that England may safely depend upon a supply of foreign corn, if it grew none of its own or an insufficient quantity, forget that they are subjugating the necessaries of life itself to the mere luxuries or comforts of society. Is it not certain, that the price of corn abroad will be raised upon us immediately as it is known that we must buy – and when that is once known, in what sort of situation shall we be? Besides the argument supposes that agriculture is not a positive good to the nation taken as a mode of existence for the people – which is false and pernicious – and if we are to become a great horde of manufacturers, shall we not even more than at present excite the ill will of all the manufacturers of other nations?²⁵

Coleridge's change of heart on the Corn Laws, his belief that 'the nation that cannot even exist without the commodity of another

Vogel, 'Markets and Communities – A Romantic Critique', in M. Moran and M. W. Wright (eds.), *The Market and the State*, London, 1991, pp. 24–42.

²³ *Lay Sermons* in *CW*, vi, pp. 214–18.

²⁴ See letters to R. H. Brabant and Cottle, 10 March 1815 reporting on a speech he had made at Calne in support of a petition against the Corn Bill; *CL*, iv, pp. 549–50, 552.

²⁵ See *Table Talk* in *CW*, xiv (1), pp. 476–7, 486.

nation, is in effect the slave of that other nation', and the simple counterpositioning of agriculture versus manufacturing, bring his views more firmly into line with those of Southey, Rickman, and Wordsworth.²⁶ They also provide the basis for comparison with Malthus's views on the same question as they developed after 1815.

III

Malthus's agrarian sympathies and persistent attempts to theorise and provide remedies for Britain's unbalanced growth in successive editions of the *Essay* were brought to a head by the debate on renewal of the Corn Laws in 1815. It was during this debate that Malthus openly declared what was becoming obvious to readers of the sections of the *Essay* dealing with agricultural and manufacturing systems, namely his support for retaining a measure of protection to domestic agriculture. This was to be an important turning point in Malthus's career. As he realised when arguing that agriculture constituted an exception to the general principle in favour of free trade, he had placed himself squarely at odds with many of those fellow political economists who shared his commitment to Smith's system of natural liberty. This divided him from Whig friends on the *Edinburgh Review*, with the result that while he could still count on their support on matters connected with population and the Poor Laws, its pages were made available to him only to register his last reply to Godwin. It was also to be the first of several major sources of disagreement on doctrinal and policy questions that separated Malthus from Ricardo and his followers – the subject of the succeeding essay.

As Ricardo recognised, Malthus's departure from the Smithian path on the subject of agricultural protection did not involve a fundamental matter of principle. Malthus had as much regard for the general presumption in favour of non-intervention in economic affairs as his more orthodox opponents: he needed no lessons from them on the

²⁶ Southey's last article for the *Quarterly Review*, 51 (March 1834) was devoted to the Corn Law debate. It adopted an almost identical protectionist stand on grounds of security in subsistence matters, drawing attention to the dubiousness of a policy that would increase the competitiveness of British manufacturers at the cost of international ill will. For a more general endorsement of self-sufficiency by Rickman, see letter to Southey, 25 November 1816 in Williams, *Rickman*, p. 186. See also Wordsworth's letter on the Corn Law of 1815, regretting the high price at which corn imports were to be allowed, but deploring the 'errors of the mob' and describing the advocates of the Corn Law as the 'friends of the poor'; letter to Sara Wordsworth, 16 March 1815 in *Letters*, III (II), p. 219.

economic advantages of free trade.²⁷ But his attitude to such principles, whether on free trade or population, was that they should not be made the grounds for implementing policies regardless of actual conditions and counteracting circumstances. Malthus's main reasons for treating agriculture as an exception to the general rule have been mentioned earlier: they centre on national security, the need to compensate for the various disadvantages from which agriculture suffered in attracting capital in competition with commerce and manufacturing, and concern about the healthiness and stability of life in manufacturing towns.

On the last of these points Malthus's attitude gradually became more accommodating to manufacturing, particularly after the disappearance of the Napoleonic threat had reduced the urgency attached to national security. Not only did he believe that conditions were improving as a result of factory legislation and private humanitarian initiatives, but he increasingly saw that manufactured goods were capable of inspiring a taste for comforts among the working classes. This could only fortify their interest in exercising moral restraint – a stronger version of the diffusion of luxury argument that he had used against Paley as early as 1803, and was later, in partial ignorance of the trend of Malthus's thinking, to be used against him by others.²⁸ In one other respect, however, Malthus's basic case in favour of agricultural protection acquired an additional feature: he came to believe that higher food prices, when compensated by increased money wages, would enable wage-earners to exert greater command over the non-agricultural 'conveniences and luxuries of life'.

Yet at no point did any of these arguments blunt Malthus's appreciation of the likely benefits that would come from abandoning protection, chiefly an expansion of Britain's trade in manufactured goods and a higher rate of economic growth. It was solely a matter of balancing the alternatives, where regard for the susceptibilities of anti-Corn Law opinion and the 'moral' costs to wage-earners not only had to be taken into account but might acquire overriding status: 'If a country can only be rich by running a successful race for low wages, I

²⁷ Ricardo's recognition was expressed as follows: 'This principle is one of the best established in the science of political economy, and by no one is more readily admitted than by Mr. Malthus. It is the foundation of all his argument, in his comparison of the advantages and disadvantages attending an unrestricted trade in corn'; see *Works*, IV, p. 32.

²⁸ See pp. 272–3 above and p. 374 below.

should be disposed to say at once, perish such riches!²⁹ This was another of those remarks that perplexed Ricardo: from his point of view Malthus was mixing moral and economic categories at all stages of the analysis.³⁰

There is evidence to suggest that, as in the case of the Poor Laws, Malthus underwent a gradual change of opinion on agricultural protection that can be attributed to his appreciation of the increased proportion of wage-earners' income spent on manufactured conveniences, improvements in living and working conditions in towns, and the effect of Huskisson's liberalisation measures in reducing the barriers to trade in manufactured goods. Nevertheless, he retained the chapter endorsing the Corn Laws in the 1826 edition of the *Essay*, merely adding a long footnote to reinforce his recognition of the 'unsocial tendency' of all restrictions. He also registered his appreciation that at a time when trade in other goods was being liberalised 'it would be greatly desirable that foreign nations should not have so marked an exception as our present corn-laws to cast in our teeth'.³¹ He reiterated his position in favour of restrictions in the second edition of the *Principles*, but removed some specific arguments in favour of protection. By 1832 he could agree that a 'moral advantage' could be secured by repeal, where this referred to the removal of widespread public resentment over the use of landowner influence in parliament to keep food prices high.³² There was nothing new in this: as early as 1813 he had said that 'one never ought to hear the interests of landlords and farmers'.³³ When he became aware of the popular resentment aroused by the Corn Bill in 1815, he wrote to Horner saying that: 'I remain firm in my opinion as to the Policy of some Restrictions, but though I would not yield to the mob, I should be disposed to yield to the prodigious weight of petitions, and let the people have their way.'³⁴

One more piece of evidence has recently come to light: a letter written in 1833 which concludes with the following statement: 'Still I am for the removal of the restrictions, though not without fear of the

²⁹ *PPE*, I, p. 236.

³⁰ '[Malthus] first begins by disputing the position whether certain measures will make corn cheap, but before the end of the argument he is endeavouring to prove that it would not be expedient that it should be cheap, on account of the moral effects it would have on the people. These are two distinct propositions'; see *Works*, II, pp. 337-8.

³¹ *EPP*, II, p. 75.

³² See letter to Chalmers, 6 March 1832, CHA.4.185.32 (Chalmers Papers, New College, Edinburgh).

³³ See letter to Horner, 16 June 1813 in *Horner Papers*, edited by Bourne and Taylor, p. 764.

³⁴ Letter to Francis Horner, 14 March 1815, *ibid.*, p. 834.

consequences.' This follows rehearsal of what those consequences could be, namely that money wages would fall in line with food prices, leaving wage-earners disappointed; and that, despite the boost it would give to foreign trade, 'during the process of the change, there will probably be more thrown out of work than in any other case of the restrictions of freedom of trade, on account of the largeness of the concerns'.³⁵ As we shall see, Malthus was always acutely sensitive to the short-term problems of adjusting from one economic state to another. It will also be apparent that if Malthus had changed his attitude to the expediency of Corn Laws, he continued to worry about the appropriate weights to be attached to long-familiar considerations when taking the kind of calculated risk involved in a major policy decision.³⁶

In another respect the episode reveals Malthus in an entirely consistent light – consistent in his hesitations and anxiety to strike the right balance. Coleridge, on the other hand, to judge from his last remarks on the Corn Laws, had finally settled on a polar position. Malthus could advise landowners to have regard to their long-term interests in preferring tenants who would be improving farmers rather than those who simply offered the highest rent – a case where long-term interest should outweigh short-term gain. He could also urge that uncultivated land should be brought into use and landowners encouraged to improve their estates – by special incentives if necessary. Unlike Coleridge, however, he did not deliver sermons to the higher classes on their paternalistic duties, probably because he recognised that any appearance of alliance with any single producers' interest was incompatible with the scientific claims of political economy. With regard to the Poor Laws, he had denied that property rights should stand in the way of adequate solutions to poverty, and he remained faithful to Smith's idea that the interests of consumers were the ultimate public interest which it was the duty of political economists to serve. This did not prevent Malthus from being subject to charges of serving the landowning interest at the time and subsequently, thereby compounding his popular reputation for hard-heartedness with another that suggested the taint of corruption and special pleading. It seems

³⁵ See Bette A. Polkinghorn, 'An Unpublished Letter from Malthus to Jane Marcet, January 22, 1833', *American Economic Review*, 76 (1986), 845–7.

³⁶ For an alternative interpretation that sees this as 'a profound reorientation of analytical perspective' see S. Hollander, 'Malthus's Abandonment of Agricultural Protectionism; A Discovery in the History of Economic Thought', *American Economic Review*, 82 (1992), 650–9. My conclusion is closer to that enunciated by John Pullen in 'Malthus on Agricultural Protection: An Alternative View', *History of Political Economy*, 27 (1995).

worth noting, however, that Horner and Ricardo, two staunch advocates of repeal of the Corn Laws, went out of their way to defend Malthus's reputation for candour on this subject.³⁷

Malthus could not follow Coleridge in regretting the commercialisation of agriculture. For Malthus the question was whether or not there was some artificial bias operating *within* a commercialised system that discouraged agricultural improvement and investment, and prevented the maximum surplus from being achieved. As in the case of Smith, Malthus was making recommendations for a second-best world in which sacrifices had to be made in order to gain what could only ever be *net* benefits. While these contrasts between Coleridge and Malthus conform, in some respects, with the stereotypes of the idealistic humanitarian concerned with pure forms versus the realistic economist exercising a calculating cost-benefit mentality, Malthus can hardly be accused of sticking narrowly to what belonged to man considered solely as 'manufacturing animal'. National security, moral health, and political stability were an integral part of his assessment of the Corn Laws, as well as the other topics on which he increasingly found himself divided from an emerging consensus that was forming around Ricardo's ideas. Ricardo often accused Malthus of allowing these moral considerations to obscure his understanding of the self-regulating properties of any economic system. In any debate about wealth versus welfare, or whether man was being regarded purely instrumentally, of all the members of the political economy community that formed around Smith's ideas in the first decades of the nineteenth century, Malthus is the least open to charges of thinking solely in terms of the 'quantum of lucre' man could be made to yield.

Southey's allegation on this subject, cited in the epigraph to this essay, was echoed by Coleridge in his *Lay Sermons* when dealing with the human costs associated with adjustments to new economic states, on this occasion when speaking of what became known as trade cycles. Coleridge's remarks on this subject are often cited to distinguish between the mechanistic, self-adjusting effect of economic cycles on

³⁷ '[Malthus] has I think some erroneous opinions respecting the expediency of a free trade in corn, but they are honest conscientious opinions. From the respect which is paid to every thing that comes from him his views on this subject may have had great weight in influencing the judgements of those who were finally to decide on the question in Parliament, but he was never consulted by those who originated the measure, and his opinions were only collected from his writings, which did not appear till after the measure was before Parliament.' See Ricardo, *Works*, VIII, p. 101. For Horner's acknowledgment of Malthus's 'candour' see *Horner Papers*, edited by Bourne and Taylor, p. 815.

‘things’ (the political economists’ perception) and ‘persons’ (his own and that of humanitarians more generally):

But Persons are not *Things* – but Man does not find his level. Neither in body nor in soul does the Man find his level! After a hard and calamitous season, during which the thousand Wheels of some vast manufactory had remained silent as a frozen water-fall, be it that plenty has returned and that Trade has once more become brisk and stirring; go, ask the overseer, and question the parish doctor, whether the workman’s health and temperance have found *their* level again!³⁸

For reasons that will become clearer when the differences between Malthus’s and Ricardo’s diagnoses of post-war depression are considered later, Malthus held that ‘irregular movements’ resulting from the ‘stimulus’ and ‘check’ to population growth and capital accumulation were more characteristic of life under the manufacturing system than regular growth and rapid adjustment to new equilibria as conceived by Ricardo. He also reminded his friend that oscillations in economic activity constituted ‘serious spaces in human life’ for those affected. Making due allowance for the more neutral-sounding language of utilitarian calculation, there is no essential difference between Coleridge’s observation and the following one by Malthus on these ‘spaces’:

They amount to a serious sum of happiness or misery, according as they are prosperous or adverse, and leave the country in a very different state at their termination. In prosperous times the mercantile classes often realise fortunes which go far towards securing them against the future; but unfortunately the working classes, though they share in the general prosperity, do not share so largely as in the general adversity. They may suffer the greatest distress in a period of low wages, but cannot be adequately compensated by a period of high wages. To them fluctuations must always bring more evil than good; and with a view to the happiness of the great mass of society, it should be our object, as far as possible, to maintain peace, and an equable expenditure.³⁹

Charges of having regard for things rather than persons were singularly inappropriate when levelled at Smith as well as Malthus. Nor would they have been particularly telling if directed at Ricardo and his followers – though for reasons that will be considered later, it was the *beneficial* connections between wealth and human welfare that were stressed by them. Ricardo’s combination of his political economy

³⁸ *Lay Sermons* in *CW*, vi, pp. 206–7. The reference to things finding their level also runs through many of Coleridge’s unflattering remarks about political economy in *Table Talk* in *CW*, xiv (1), p. 383.

³⁹ See *PPE*, i, pp. 521–2.

with opinions on constitutional politics that were those of a follower of Bentham and the philosophic radicals would, however, have been a far worthier target for the Lake poets – had they chosen to make them so. But this combination did not achieve prominence until the 1820s, whereas their hostility to Malthus's politics made an early appearance, probably in 1808, when Southey correctly diagnosed that Malthus was a 'peacemonger'. The political dimension of the Lake poets' attack on what Malthus represented must therefore be given fuller consideration.

IV

Even if it had not been obvious from the sentiments on war, and on civil and political liberty, endorsed in the *Essay*, the fact that the *Edinburgh Review* was the most consistent of Malthus's defenders would have confirmed his status as some kind of Whig. Sydney Smith had supported Malthus as early as 1802 ('Mr Malthus took the trouble of refuting [Godwin]; and we hear no more of Mr. Godwin').⁴⁰ While Jeffrey did not succeed in getting Horner to deliver his review of the *Essay on Population*, he made some amends himself by expounding Malthus's ideas sympathetically in the course of replying to two of Malthus's early critics, Hazlitt and Robert Ingram.⁴¹ Neither Southey nor Coleridge, who made their livings from journalism, could afford to remain above the surface of political events and competing personalities for long, and Southey undoubtedly took pleasure in opposing any author favoured by a Whig journal edited by Jeffrey: it became a form of revenge for the wounding reviews of the Lakeland school of poetry that appeared in its pages.⁴² Despite his differences of opinion with the *Edinburgh Review* over the Corn Laws, Malthus remained on good terms with all the founders; he also retained his membership of the 'King of Clubs' which met at Holland House. Indeed, for someone who was often accused of variability and indecision in his economic opinions, Malthus's political allegiances were highly consistent in their moderate Whiggishness.

Although Malthus's expectations at the time of the French revolution

⁴⁰ *Edinburgh Review*, 1 (1802), 89.

⁴¹ *Edinburgh Review*, 16 (1810), 464–76. For the story surrounding the non-appearance of Horner's review see *Horner Papers*, edited by Bourne and Taylor, pp. 39–40, 100–2, 295, 321, 463.

⁴² See e.g. Southey's letter to Sir Walter Scott, 24 December 1810: 'I am not sorry to see the Edinburgh professing their belief in Malthus at the very time when I am making ready to come upon that precious philosophist, or philosophicide, with a thunderclap.' See *NL*, 1, p. 551. See also Carnall, *Southey and his Age*, pp. 99–100.

were not ardent in the way that Coleridge's or Wordsworth's certainly were, neither can they be described as anti-jacobin. In the 1790s he could have occupied common ground with his romantic critics on such matters as opposition to the war against France and Pitt's repressive measures at home. As was noted in discussing the early Malthus–Godwin exchanges, when in London, Malthus mixed in precisely those dissenting circles centring on Joseph Johnson and the Aikin family whose names were also prominent, as friends and publishers, in the lives of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey, and Hazlitt during this period. William Frend, in particular, was a significant figure in the lives of both Malthus and Coleridge, having been their tutor at Jesus College.⁴³ Malthus left Cambridge in 1788, three years before the events that led to Frend being expelled from the University, but his close friend, William Otter, was one of the minority of Jesus dons who voted against Frend's expulsion. We also know that Malthus kept in touch with Frend and other Unitarians when he moved to London, retaining these friendships throughout his life. Coleridge, Southey, and Wordsworth, however, dropped these friends when their political and religious affiliations changed, and when attitudes to the prosecution of the war against France became the touchstone of party allegiance.⁴⁴ Coleridge's second *Lay Sermon* was, in fact, to become the occasion for settling scores with former Unitarian friends.⁴⁵

Although by no means a political tract of the kind he had written in *The Crisis*, the treatment of civil and political liberty that Malthus added to the *Essay* in 1803 and modified and expanded in 1806 and 1817, when civil dissent and post-war distress was at its height, is still the work of a moderate Whig anxious to preserve the middle ground between extra-parliamentary radical discontent and executive tyranny by removing those fears which had led the 'country gentlemen' to relax their traditional role as opponents of ministerial encroachment. If the poor could be educated to see that only a small part of their immediate distress could be attributed to government, they would be less likely to follow 'general declaimers', thereby enabling a just apportionment of the causes of unhappiness as between population pressure and defects

⁴³ In fact, Coleridge's conversion to Unitarianism and radicalism has been attributed to the influence of Frend. For a detailed study of Coleridge's contacts with Frend and the circle to which he belonged when he moved to London see Roe, *Wordsworth and Coleridge*, Chapter 3.

⁴⁴ On the involvement of dissenters in general and the Aikin family in particular in anti-war propaganda see Cookson, *The Friends of Peace*. On the desertion of former friends by Southey and Coleridge see Anna Letitia Le Breton, *Memories of Seventy Years*, London, 1884, pp. 76–7.

⁴⁵ See *Lay Sermons* in *CW*, vi, Appendix C.

in government to be established. Though 'indirect', Malthus held from 1806 onward that the contribution of government to prosperity was 'striking and incontestable'. Once a calmer state of opinion had been established, the process of gradual reform 'which the lapse of time, and the storms of the political world have rendered necessary' could be resumed in order 'to prevent the gradual destruction of the British constitution'. After security of property, the best guarantee for the diffusion of prudential habits is 'that respectability and importance which are given to the lower classes by equal laws, and the possession of some influence in the framing of them. The more excellent therefore is the government, the more does it tend to generate that prudence and elevation of sentiment by which alone poverty can be avoided.'⁴⁶

Malthus was certainly not without his own fears of what Southey described as *bellum servile* – fears that centred, as in Southey's case, on the political instability associated with urban manufacturing in England. He regretted that the risk of mob tyranny had made him – 'a friend to freedom and an enemy to large standing armies' – accept the necessity for some curbs on liberty and the use of military power during the period of extreme food scarcity at the turn of the century: 'If political discontents were blended with the cries of hunger, and a revolution were to take place by the instrumentality of a mob clamouring for want of food, the consequences would be unceasing change, and unceasing carnage, the bloody career of which nothing but the establishment of some complete despotism could arrest.'⁴⁷ These fears were confirmed in 1817 by outbreaks of machine breaking and by the activities of 'popular orators' such as Henry Hunt.⁴⁸ This made it impossible for Malthus to interpret Peterloo in the way that his radical friends, Ricardo and James Mill did, namely as a worrying sign that magistrates were interfering with legitimate rights of assembly, and as evidence of 'the occasional turbulence of a manufacturing district, peculiarly unhappy from a very great deficiency of a middle rank'.⁴⁹ For Mill at least, Peterloo was also a negative sign of the benefits that would flow from education and a free press.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ *EPP*, II, p. 131.

⁴⁷ See *EPP*, II, p. 124.

⁴⁸ *EPP*, II, p. 135.

⁴⁹ The opinion expressed in Mill's *Essay on Government* as reprinted in J. Lively and J. Rees (eds.), *Utilitarian Logic and Politics*, Oxford, 1978, p. 94.

⁵⁰ See letter to Ricardo of 7 September 1819 in Ricardo, *Works*, VIII, pp. 58–9; and Ricardo's letter to Hutches Trower, 11 September 1819, p. 80.

On Peterloo, therefore, Malthus had more in common with Southey and Coleridge:

I can hardly contemplate a more bloody revolution than I should expect would take place, if Universal suffrage and annual parliaments were effected by the intimidation of such meetings as have been latterly taking place. These people have evidently been taught to believe that such a reform would completely relieve all their distresses; and when they found themselves, as they most certainly would, entirely disappointed, massacre would in my opinion go on till it was stopt by a military despotism. In the case of a revolution in this country, the distress would be beyond comparison greater than in France. In France the manufacturing population was comparatively small, and the destruction of it which took place, was not so much felt; but in England the misery from want of work and food would be dreadful. I hope and trust that these extremities may be avoided.⁵¹

Where Malthus differed from his romantic critics, however, can be found in the concluding remark to the same letter: despite his anxieties, he declared himself still to be ‘a decided friend to a moderate reform in Parliament’ – a political divergence that was to widen dramatically in the period running up to Reform Bill. It also seems unlikely that Malthus would have gone to the same lengths as Southey in advocating ‘restrictive measures to check the diffusion of licentious principles, and curb the audacious spirit of blasphemy and treason’, calling for the banning of newspapers and the transportation of the organisers of such events.⁵²

Although, for Malthus, moderate reform did not mean the radical programme of representation based on numbers alone, it could entail adjustments in the mixture of elements represented in the constitution, and certainly entailed an attempt to remove the most obvious sources of civil dissent. One of these sources for Malthus had always been the failure to repeal the Test and Corporation Acts, the earliest of the constitutional reforms to which he had committed himself in *The Crisis*. To this, in a pair of *Edinburgh Review* articles he wrote on Ireland in 1808, was added Catholic emancipation: ‘Let the Irish Catholics have all that they have demanded; for they have asked nothing but what

⁵¹ See letter to Ricardo, 14 October 1819 in Ricardo, *Works*, VIII, pp. 107–8. The contrast between Malthus’s Whiggism and the radicalism of Ricardo and Mill is dealt with more extensively in Collini *et al.*, *That Noble Science of Politics*, pp. 83–4, 87–8, 124–6.

⁵² See Southey’s letter to General William Peachey, 15 October 1819, enclosing a petition to the King pledging the support of the ‘Nobility, magistrates, Gentry, Clergy and Freeholders of Cumberland’ to such a course of action; see *NL*, II, pp. 202–3; and letter to Neville White, 20 November 1819, in *Life and Correspondence of Robert Southey*, edited by Charles Southey, London, 1849–50, IV, p. 360.

strict justice and good policy should concede to them. Let them not only enjoy all the civil advantages of the British constitution, but give them a church establishment, like Scotland.⁵³

These articles are remarkable for filling a major gap in Malthus's treatment of Irish population experience in the *Essay* – a gap which he was one of the first to acknowledge.⁵⁴ They also contain a forthright bill of condemnation of English rule under several headings: religious animosity against the Catholic majority by the Protestant ascendancy, the 'narrow spirit' of mercantile restrictions on Irish manufacturing and food exports, corrupt administration, and the festering injustice of tithes. Here was a case where political considerations took priority over economic ones. Whereas remedying the poverty created by population pressure in a country where potato subsistence was easily acquired entailed difficulties that could be only indirectly overcome by legislation, the elimination of all discrimination in matters of civil rights would immediately remove injustices that had strengthened the hand of agitators and threatened the mutual benefits that could be derived from the Anglo-Irish union. Bonaparte's successes provide a background to these articles, which show that Malthus may not have been entirely foolish in entertaining the idea of a career as a political journalist:

[Ireland] is the country the loss of which is daily risked by the inhuman cry of no popery, by the bigotry and littleness of one part of an administration, and by the tergiversation and inconsistency of the other. It is really sickening to think that at a period when every heart and hand is wanted to rally round the last remains of liberty in Europe, a set of men should be found at the head of affairs, who are either absolutely incapable, from narrowness of intellect, of profiting by the great lessons of experience that are daily unfolding themselves; or, whatever their opinions may be, are willing to sacrifice them and the country at the shrine of present place and emolument.⁵⁵

While such remarks reflect the temporary politics of the day, it also seems worth noting that Malthus's insistence on giving priority to civil

⁵³ See *Edinburgh Review*, 14 (1809), p. 169; and *ibid.*, 12 (1808), p. 353, as reprinted in *Works*, iv, p. 67.

⁵⁴ See his statement in the anonymous review that: 'Ireland has increased with extraordinary rapidity; and this fact affords so striking an illustration of the doctrines which Mr. Malthus has advanced that we are surprised that he did not enter into it in more detail': *Works*, iv, p. 26.

⁵⁵ *Works*, iv, p. 66. For Jeffrey's pleasure in having recruited such a fine example of the Whig species see the letter to Malthus dated 21 April 1808, congratulating Malthus on the 'manly and temperate tone' of his patriotism and the 'plain and enlightened benevolence' of opinions that were 'more consonant with my own sentiments and impressions than anything I have yet met with in the writings of my contributors' as cited in James, *Population Malthus*, pp. 149–50.

and political liberty in the Irish case was confirmed in evidence he gave to the Select Committee on Emigration eighteen years later and three years before Catholic emancipation was granted in 1829.⁵⁶

On this question Malthus could hardly have been further from the fears that dominated the thoughts and writings of Southey, Coleridge, and Wordsworth, for whom Catholic emancipation represented the greatest threat to British national security and constitutional stability. Coleridge's rhetorical statement in *Church and State* – a product of his reflections on this issue – to the effect that nobody could pretend to regard emancipation as a 'direct remedy' for Irish discontents is a fairly accurate description of what Malthus had in fact contended in 1808. Far from wishing to establish the Catholic church in Ireland, Coleridge maintained that 'at no time and under no circumstances has it ever been, nor can it ever be, compatible with the spirit or consistent with the safety of the British Constitution, to recognise in the Roman Catholic Priesthood, as now constituted, a component Estate of the realm'.⁵⁷ Southey's campaign against emancipation was of longer duration and more explicitly anti-papist, having begun in 1809 with an almost exact inversion of the argument put forward by Malthus. Too many concessions had already been made to Irish Catholics, and granting emancipation would do nothing to remedy the undoubted miseries of the people at large. The Catholic priesthood was itself one of the chief propagators of the ignorance that lay behind Irish poverty. The English church and state stood or fell together, making it a 'self-evident absurdity' to grant power within the state to those who were hostile to its church. By 1812 Southey was willing to concede commutation of tithes and admission of Catholics to places of 'emolument, trust, or honour', on condition that they should never be admitted to parliament where their professed allegiance to a foreign power would constitute a threat to a Protestant church and state which no formal oaths could annul. Wordsworth's forebodings on the Catholic question, though they remained in private circulation, were no less intense and based on similar fears for an established church that would have to compete with an evangelising Church of Rome for allegiance.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ See his evidence to the Select Committee on Emigration, 1826–7, *Parliamentary Papers*, v, Answer to question 3313.

⁵⁷ See *Church and State* in *CW*, x, p. 156.

⁵⁸ See letters to Charles Blomfield and Christopher Wordsworth, 3 and 13 March 1829 in *Letters*, v (11), pp. 36–46, 50–2.

late Burke's doctrine that 'in a Christian commonwealth the church and state are one and the same thing, being different integral parts of the same whole' lay at the heart of the Lake poets' opposition to Catholic emancipation. The idea of British nationality supported and embodied in the true religion of Protestantism, yet endangered by papists and non-believers (atheists, deists, and non-Trinitarians) could also claim a Burkean licence. There was an element of Burke too, as already noted, in Coleridge's contrast between the principles of permanence (associated with land-ownership) and progress (associated with commerce and the professions) in *Church and State* – though the idea of these opposed principles underlying civilisation being mediated and given cultural significance through a clerisy acting within a third estate, an independent National Church, belongs to Coleridge alone. Indeed, its very independence as a separate corporate entity, guaranteed by its own endowment and consecrated to the service of 'Nationalty', distinguishes it from the more usual cases for established religion, with their more or less frank political endorsement of the status quo.⁵⁹ In this respect alone could it be said that Coleridge was sensitive to the kinds of consideration that lay behind Adam Smith's warnings about religion calling on the aid of politics and the clergy of a wealthy established church losing contact with those they were supposed to serve. Only by possessing autonomy could the Church act as an educational counterweight to the commercial spirit of the age – the idea that proved so attractive to John Stuart Mill as well as later 'Broad Church' Coleridgeans.

On other matters of constitutional reform, Coleridge, Southey, and Wordsworth had become decidedly antipathetic to any change. During and after the war, their main emphasis fell on the need for strong government equipped with executive powers to control the press and punish the activities of radical demagogues, whether by hanging or transportation. Spiritual regeneration was the main hope for the people at large, and Coleridge's *Lay Sermons* made it clear that they were to learn their rights and duties by other means than as members of the political nation. Membership of the Church conferred equality in the sight of God, 'the only pure democracy', but on matters involving the state, unequal interest groupings based on class and economic status constituted the established order.⁶⁰ His private

⁵⁹ On the peculiarities of Coleridge's concept of a national church and the distinctions between it, the state, and the Christian church, see Morrow, *Coleridge's Political Thought*, pp. 142–54.

⁶⁰ See *Table Talk* in *CW*, xiv (1), p. 263.

reflections on the events which preceded passage of the Reform Bill, later made public in his *Table Talk*, were more alarmist than anything in his published writings.⁶¹ He was supported in this by Wordsworth, who prayed for forgiveness to those 'who have already gone so far towards committing a greater political crime than any recorded in history'.⁶²

By contrast with these Tory sentiments, some of which merit the label carnivorous, Malthus appears to have been a classic example of the Whig herbivore, welcoming, albeit timidly and retrospectively, the incorporation of the middle classes into the political nation achieved by the Reform Act. The welcome was expressed in a long footnote intended for addition to the second edition of the *Principles*. The inclusion of a remark on such a divisive political event in a work devoted to the exposition of economic principles is itself further confirmation of the more inclusive strategy that Malthus always followed. The footnote was introduced as a qualification to his expression of anxiety that without primogeniture the British constitution would lose its character as a result of power falling exclusively into the hands of merchants and manufacturers:

This was written in 1820. Imperious circumstances have since brought on a reform of a more sudden and extensive nature than prudence would have perhaps suggested, if the time and the circumstances could have been commanded. Yet it must be allowed, that all which has been done, is to bring the practical working of the constitution nearer to its theory. And there is every reason to believe that a great majority of the middle classes of society, among whom the elective franchise has been principally extended, must soon see that their own interests, and the interests and happiness of those who are dependent upon them, will be most essentially injured by any proceedings which tend to encourage turbulence and shake the security of property. If they become adequately sensible of this most unquestionable truth, and act accordingly, there is no doubt that the removal of those unsightly blots, of those handles, which, with a fair show of reason, might at any time be laid

⁶¹ For a typical Coleridge view: 'The miserable tendency of all is to destroy our Nationality, which consisted in our Representative Government, and to convert it into a degrading Delegation of the Populace. There is no Unity for a People but in Representation of National Interests; a Delegation from the Passions or Wishes of the People is a rope of Sand': *Table Talk* in *CW*, xiv (1), pp. 220-1.

⁶² See Letter to Lord Lonsdale, 24 February 1832 in *Letters*, v (11), p. 497. The Reform Bill was unjust as well as inexpedient, paving the way 'for spoliation and subversion to any extent which the rash and iniquitous may be set upon'. The towns would not benefit from being enfranchised, and once embarked down this slippery slope the aristocratic principle would be endangered. For Wordsworth's opinions on the Reform Bill, see *ibid.*, pp. 455, 458, 468, 488-91, 496-501, 513-15, 530, 588, 657, 711, 717.

hold of to excite discontents and to stir up the people, will place the British Constitution upon a much broader and more solid base than ever.⁶³

✓ The removal of 'unsightly blots' that might be used to stir up
 ✓ discontent, gradual renovation as a means of preserving historical
 ✓ continuity and staving off revolution, has legitimately become one of
 ✓ the meanings attached to 'Burkean' as an adjective.⁶⁴ In this sense
 Malthus was a Burkean Whig who continued to reject the kind of
 politics espoused by Burke and his ultra-Tory supporters during the
 war with France, and during the post-war period in which Catholic
 emancipation and the Reform Bill were to move to the head of the
 constitutional agenda.

Thomas Babington Macaulay, who was to define the Whig version of the Burkean position during the Reform Bill debates with a good deal more confidence than Malthus, made efforts to rescue Burke from Southey's embrace.⁶⁵ Despite a marked penchant for the eighteenth-century authors he read as a young man, however, Malthus never seems to have overcome his earlier Foxite dislike of Burke's desertion of the Whig cause: there are no references to Burke in his writings apart from the implicit ones distancing himself from Burke's *Reflections* in the first *Essay*.⁶⁶ The erastian after-taste that some have detected in Burke's equation of the laws of commerce with the laws of God when preaching Christian resignation to the poor is absent in Malthus. Moreover, while Burke's defence of established institutions invested unintended consequences with an air of pious celebration of the subconscious mysteries of custom and habit, Malthus adopted a plainer style of utilitarian reasoning that left no room for concealment and imposture. He might be more cautiously empirical than Ricardo, but he was equally committed to theory as a guide to wise action in political affairs. The *Essay* contained a chapter 'Of the necessity of general principles' designed to illustrate Hume's maxim that 'of all sciences, there is none where appearances are more deceitful than in politics', and to guard against an inductivist fallacy of thinking that what might be true in

⁶³ *PPE*, II, p. 270.

⁶⁴ On this form of 'Burkeanism' see J. W. Burrow, *A Liberal Descent*, pp. 2, 22-3, 108.

⁶⁵ Although Macaulay acknowledged some affinities between Southey and Burke, 'a much greater man', he added the following comment: 'But Mr Burke assuredly possessed an understanding admirably fitted for the investigation of truth, an understanding stronger than that of any statesman, active or speculative, of the eighteenth century, stronger than every thing, except his own fierce and ungovernable sensibility. Hence he generally chose his side like a fanatic, and defended it like a philosopher.' See 'Southey's Colloquies on Society' in *Lord Macaulay's Essays*, London, 1886, p. 98.

⁶⁶ See pp. 252-3 above.

local circumstances could be extended to the whole of society.⁶⁷ In opposing the utopianism of Godwin and Condorcet, or the premature generalisations of Ricardo and his followers, Malthus appealed to experience in Newtonian fashion. He did not appeal in Burke's manner to the prescriptive mysteries of historical experience, to what could barely be articulated, and then only by the knowing few.⁶⁸ The goad of necessity and the psychological argument designed to show that man was incapable of acting except on the basis of previous knowledge of pleasant or unpleasant experience entails an ability on the part of *all* to understand and act, and having acted to assume moral responsibility for the consequences. Providing the education, in the broadest sense, that was needed to achieve this state of responsible understanding takes the place occupied by deference and resignation in Burke's way of thinking.⁶⁹

A central role for deference within a stable society of ranks and orders was clearly part of Wordsworth's vision, as we have seen in the case of the Poor Laws. Paternalism, the other side of the deference relationship, was implied by Southey's account of the depredations inflicted on Britain by the manufacturing system and by Coleridge's remarks on the over-balance of the commercial spirit. Clerisy, according to Coleridge's *Church and State*, might perform some of the functions assigned by Burke to the 'natural' aristocracy. What appears most to set these admirers of Burke apart from him, however, was their wholehearted acceptance (Rickman apart) of education of the people at large as an urgent element in any solution. That they favoured the Anglican scheme proposed by Bell contrasts with Malthus's willingness to collaborate with Lancastrian dissenters as well, but suggests only a more sectarian position on the subject, one that fitted well with their patriotic fears for the future of the established Church. Biblical knowledge would have been a shared commitment, though one suspects from the tone of Coleridge's *Lay Sermons* that there would have been greater emphasis on spiritual uplift, and on collective duties rather than individual responsibilities, in the Lake poets' version of moral education. It is equally obvious, however, that, unlike Malthus, they would

⁶⁷ See *EPP*, II, pp. 185–96.

⁶⁸ On this aspect of Burke see p. 180 above.

⁶⁹ It may, however, be interesting to notice that Malthus's friend, William Otter, in the course of his official duties as Bishop of Chichester, did couple Malthus with Burke when he cited the latter's remarks on resignation from *Thoughts and Details* in his sermons; see *Sermon upon the Influence of the Clergy in Improving the Condition of the Poor*, Shrewsbury, 1818, pp. 19, 28; and *Reasons for Continuing the Education of the Poor at the present Crisis*, Shrewsbury, 1820, p. 11.

not have countenanced the inclusion of an 'empiric' science such as political economy as part of any educational curriculum, whether at the village level or as preparation for carrying out the duties of a civil servant in India – the latter role being the one that provided Malthus with his own living as a teacher at the East India College. Having decided that political economy had fallen into the wrong hands, that it was irrevocably tied, in Coleridge's phrase, to 'an almost epicurean selfishness', they would not have wished to see its influence diffused, its scientific claims extended and made more precise, and its value as a guide to legislation demonstrated in practice. Yet that, of course, is precisely what Malthus and Ricardo, the leaders of the post-Smithian generation of political economists, considered to be their avocation. By the end of the Napoleonic wars they would also have prided themselves in establishing a number of propositions that advanced the science beyond the state in which it had been left by the founding father. The next essay is devoted to a consideration of these advances and the bifurcation in the original Smithian inheritance that resulted from the different directions in which Malthus and Ricardo sought to take the science.

The bountiful gift of Providence

Is it not . . . a clear indication of a most inestimable quality in the soil which God has bestowed on man – the quality of being able to maintain more persons than are necessary to work it? Is it not a part, and we shall see further on that it is an absolutely necessary part, of that surplus produce from the land which has been justly stated to be the source of all power and enjoyment; and without which, in fact, there would be no cities, no military or naval force, no arts, no learning, none of the finer manufactures, none of the conveniences and luxuries of foreign countries, and none of that cultivated and polished society, which not only elevates and dignifies individuals, but which extends its beneficial influence through the whole mass of the people?

T. R. Malthus, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Progress of Rent*, 1815

I

Malthus's description of the surplus accruing to land in the form of rent as God's gift neatly combines a doctrine in political economy with natural theology in a way that encapsulates the spirit, if not the substance, of his contribution to the post-Smithian version of the science. The doctrine also happens to be one for which Malthus could register legitimate claims to subjective originality as its co-discoverer or rediscoverer.¹ Together with the population principle, the theory of rent was one of the chief ideas contributed by Malthus to the re-evaluation of Smith's political economy which took place during the first decades of the nineteenth century. Divergent applications of the

¹ Edward West and Ricardo published similar accounts of rent in 1815, though Ricardo acknowledged Malthus's claims to priority. When these matters became of importance to the first histories of the science, it was noted by J. R. McCulloch, with perhaps a touch of Scottish national pride, that James Anderson had advanced the same theory in a work published in 1777 that had gone unnoticed; see *A Discourse on the Rise, Progress, Peculiar Objects and Importance of Political Economy*, London, 1824, a work that was added to McCulloch's editions of the *Wealth of Nations* from 1828 onwards.

theory of rent to policy, and equally divergent interpretations of what the theory implied for other aspects of the science, were also an early and persistently central feature of the disagreements between Malthus and Ricardo. From what has been said earlier, it will come as no surprise that Ricardo objected to the providentialist language of Malthus's statement of the nature of rent. In another comment marking the difference between the secular and religious viewpoints on political economy, Ricardo commented on the notion of 'gift' as follows:

I do not agree that in a treatise on Political Economy it should be so considered. The gift is great or little according as it is more or less, not according as it may be more or less morally useful. It may be better for the health of my friend that I should restrict him to a pint of wine a day, but my gift is most valuable if I give him a bottle a day. The question is not whether the Creator did not consult our real happiness by limiting the productive powers of the land, but whether the fact be not, that he has so limited it – while He has given us an unbounded supply of water, of air, and has set no limits to the use we may make of the pressures of atmosphere, the elasticity of steam and many other services rendered us by nature.²

Malthus had enunciated the new theory of rent in the course of making his contribution to the Corn Law debate, though it had been part of his teaching at the East India College for some years, and was a development, based on the law of diminishing returns in agriculture, of the arithmetic ratio posited in the first *Essay*. The theory removed the ambiguities of the *Wealth of Nations* on this form of income accruing to landowners by showing more precisely why it obeyed different laws from those underlying wages and profits, and hence why it should not be included as one of the components of 'natural' price. Ricardo, who had probably been familiar with the new view of rent for some time, incorporated it as part of his contribution to the Corn Law debate in his *Essay on the Influence of a Low Price of Corn on the Profits of Stock*, which also served as a reply to Malthus's case for retaining protection.

- ✓ The Malthus–Ricardo theory of rent, as it became known, supported
- ✓ the conclusion that, in the absence of improvements in agricultural
- ✓ technology, the price of food was determined by the cost of growing it
- ✓ either on the most marginal or least fertile soil, or on already-cultivated
- ✓ land that required the application of labour and capital in increasing
- ✓ dosages to achieve the same output. Rent considered as a share in the annual income of a nation, therefore, was the aggregate surplus paid to

² See *Notes on Malthus* in Ricardo, *Works*, II, p. 210.

landowners as a class after the necessary costs of food production – wages and the profits on capital – had been met. It was received by individual landowners on a differential basis determined by inherent differences in the relative fertility of the different plots of land they owned, with any income they received from improvements they had introduced being treated separately as profits on capital. It differed in this respect from what was paid as actual or contractual rent. It could also form part of the income of the farmer or cultivator, the crown, the Church, or the landlord, depending on legal or customary tenure arrangements and the degree of competition, as opposed to the inertia of custom, that existed between farmers for the most fertile land. Its chief difference from other forms of income lay in the fact that rents were determined by the demand for food. In slogan form, this became a conclusion that rents were high because the price of food was high, rather than vice versa. The passivity of rent as a form of income, if not its illegitimacy, was underlined.

In the *Wealth of Nations* Smith had spoken of landowners as loving to reap where they had not sown – a view that suggested their incomes did not depend on any special effort.³ This opinion, however, conflicted with other parts of the work in which rent was treated not as a surplus but as one of the necessary costs of production, and hence part of ‘natural’ price – an ‘error’ which Hume was the first to notice.⁴ Simond de Sismondi, at this time a French disciple of Smith, had reinforced this conclusion by speaking of rent as ‘purement nominale’, as ‘le résultat de l’augmentation de prix qu’obtient un vendeur en vertu de son privilège’.⁵ David Buchanan, an Edinburgh journalist who scooped a long-standing plan of Malthus by bringing out an edition of the *Wealth of Nations* with his own observations in 1814, had also commented acutely that: ‘Other men love also to reap where they never sowed; but the landlords alone, it would appear, succeed in so desirable an object.’⁶ Smith’s idea that the interests of landowners could never come into conflict with the national interest because their incomes rose with opulence and the resulting growth of population was seen as in need of fairly drastic revision. As Buchanan acknowledged,

³ *WN*, I.vi.8.

⁴ ‘I cannot think, that the Rent of Farms makes any part of the Price of the Produce, but that the Price is determined altogether by the Quantity and the Demand’; see letter to Smith, 1 April 1776 in *Corr.*, p. 186.

⁵ *Richesse commerciale*, Geneva, 1803, as cited by Malthus in *Nature and Progress of Rent* in *Malthus, Works*, VII, p. 117.

⁶ *Wealth of Nations*, edited by David Buchanan, 4 volumes, Edinburgh, 1814, IV, p. 80.

the population principle had been Malthus's first important contribution to the process of revamping Smith's conclusions on the connections between wages and economic growth.⁷ The new theory of rent seemed likely to continue the process in a direction that emphasised potential social conflict as well as the limits to progress. Rent could be seen as a form of monopoly return to a passive class, as a transfer payment to them by other members of society in their capacity as consumers of necessities.

Within a post-war context in which price and rent levels were dominated by the Corn Laws, and with a parliament equally dominated by the landowning interest, this question was never simply one of theory. Commenting on Smith's conclusion that landowners were distinguished from mercantile interest groups in being incapable of misleading the legislature, Buchanan had said: 'The truth is, that all the different orders of society are liable to be warped by their own partial views, and when these are at variance with the public good, they seldom hesitate which to prefer.'⁸ Francis Horner's angry comment on the Corn Law Bill provides a further insight into the changes that were occurring in the way some of Smith's successors now viewed the subject:

It is this audacious and presumptuous spirit of regulating, by the wisdom of country squires, the whole economy and partition of national industry and wealth, that makes me more keenly averse to this Corn Bill of theirs than I should have been in earlier days of our time, when the principles of rational government were more widely understood, and were maintained by stronger hands at the head of affairs.⁹

It was against this background that Malthus and Ricardo made their respective contributions to the Corn Law debate. As we have noted earlier, Malthus was anxious to maintain strict impartiality between the various producer interests likely to be affected by any change. In his *Inquiry into the Nature and Progress of Rent*, however, Malthus combated the interpretations of rent advanced by Sismondi and Buchanan. The finite nature of the earth and the scarcity of fertile soils did lend an air of *partial* monopoly to rent, but Malthus sought to place the matter in a more harmonious light by connecting it with the population principle and the inherent peculiarities of subsistence goods. An increasing supply of these generated, through population increase, their own

⁷ *Ibid.*, iv, pp. 103-4 and 131.

⁸ *Ibid.*, i, p. 422n.

⁹ *Horner Papers*, edited by Bourne and Taylor, p. 818.

demand. This contrasted with other goods that could be made to yield a monopoly return by virtue of any natural or artificial scarcity which raised the price above necessary costs of production. Luxuries, such as rare wines, were not food: the demand for them was 'exterior to, and independent of, the production itself', whereas in the case of food, 'the demand is dependent upon the produce itself'. The surplus accruing as rent, therefore, should be seen as an accurate measure, though one that declined as land was subject to more intensive cultivation, of the 'bountiful gift of Providence'. What was originally a pure gift came at a higher price to those who were late arrivals to a more crowded Garden of Eden. Nevertheless, it remained a gift because it took the form of a surplus.

By contrast, Ricardo's *Essay on Profits* enunciated a position closer to the one expressed by Sismondi and Buchanan. Rent, he declared, was never a new creation of revenue, but always part of a revenue already created.¹⁰ Reversing one of Smith's most confident assertions, Ricardo argued that 'the interest of the landlord is always opposed to the interest of every other class of society'.¹¹ This applied not simply to protection but to agricultural improvements as well. The inversion of Smithian and, later, Malthusian logic was completed by the argument that, far from receiving only a temporary benefit from protection and the retardation of improvement, landowners were the only class to obtain a permanent benefit from such eventualities. It also followed that they were the only class who would suffer permanent loss from free trade in foodstuffs, which is one reason why the Anti-Corn Law League were disinclined to use the more divisive Ricardian formulation. According to this formulation, the Corn Law was not as Malthus had posed it, a measure that might temporarily have an adverse effect on some interests, chiefly those connected with commerce and manufacturing; it would permanently benefit one class – a class that Ricardo did not hesitate to call the 'unproductive class' – at the expense of all others.¹²

Ricardo denied that these striking conclusions were motivated by animosity towards the landowning interest. For his part, Malthus, while acknowledging that landowners 'do not so actively contribute to the production of wealth', remained faithful to Smith's conclusion that their 'interests are more nearly and intimately connected with the

¹⁰ Ricardo, *Works*, IV, p. 18.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹² See *Principles in Works*, I, pp. 312–14; and II, pp. 199–200.

prosperity of the state'.¹³ As we shall see, he also maintained that landowners made a special (non-active) contribution to wealth generation through unproductive consumption. Despite this major cleavage, Malthus accepted Ricardo's disavowal of any political animosity towards the landowning interest in the same spirit that Ricardo had defended Malthus from the opposite charges:

It is somewhat singular that Mr. Ricardo, a considerable receiver of rents, should have so much underrated their national importance; while I, who never received, nor expect to receive any, shall probably be accused of overrating their importance. Our different situations and opinions may serve at least to shew our mutual sincerity, and afford a strong presumption that to whatever bias our minds may have been subjected in the doctrines we have laid down, it has not been that, against which it is most difficult to guard, the insensible bias of situation and interest.¹⁴

Ricardo's *Essay on Profits* was to acquire broader significance when, with the active encouragement of James Mill, he made it the foundation for the deductive model of growth and distribution that he published in his *Principles of Political Economy* in 1817. This work advanced an explanation for the long-term decline of profits that was to become one of the hallmarks of Ricardian political economy. As in the case of the *Essay on Profits*, Ricardo maintained that the only permanent or long-term reason for the decline of rates of profit on capital, in an economy restricting food imports, was the higher cost of supporting labour by means of food raised on marginal land. By contrast with Smith and Malthus, this meant that falling profits (now firmly labelled the income of the 'productive class' to show that profits were the main motive and source of capital accumulation) had a mono-causal explanation: rising wage costs. This ruled out, except as temporary phenomena, one of the other causes to which Smith and Malthus attributed falling profits, namely capital accumulation itself. With the publication of the *Principles* in 1817, the Ricardian system was born. For the next decade at least, it was to command the allegiance of a small band of able proselytes. It was the source of those doctrines McCulloch was to popularise in the pages of the *Edinburgh Review* and in his article on 'Political Economy' for the *Supplement to the Encyclopaedia Britannica*. In bowdlerised form, with some characteristically dogmatic ideas added, it was to provide the substance of what James Mill taught

¹³ See *Grounds of an Opinion on the Policy of Restricting the Importation of Foreign Corn* in Malthus, *Works*, vii, p. 167.

¹⁴ *PPE*, I, p. 238n.

his talented son from the tender age of thirteen onwards, and later expounded in his own 'school book' on the *Elements of Political Economy* in 1821.

Finding himself at odds with the Ricardian system on many points, believing in fact that it was 'a precipitate attempt to simplify and generalise' on subjects that were still *sub judice*, Malthus responded by producing his own version of the *Principles of Political Economy considered with a view to their Practical Application* in 1820 – while still claiming that the time was not ripe for 'a new systematical treatise'. For the next few years Malthus found himself in friendly correspondence with Ricardo on the matters that divided them, and in less friendly open debate with Ricardo's followers in an effort to show where they had erred in departing from Smithian doctrines as reinterpreted by himself. The vigour with which McCulloch and James Mill disseminated the Ricardian position established what looked like a public monopoly – of attention if not the truth.¹⁵ With regard to the latter, Malthus's comment on Macvey Napier's decision to commission McCulloch to write the article on political economy for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* is a fair reflection of his position at this time:

I am fully aware of the merits of Mr. M'Culloch and Mr. Mill, and have a great respect for them both; but I certainly am of opinion, after much and repeated consideration, that they have adopted a theory which will not stand the test of experience. It takes a partial view of the subject, like the system of the French economists; and like that system, after having drawn into its vortex a great number of very clever men, it will be unable to support itself against the testimony of obvious facts.¹⁶

When Malthus followed this up with an attempt to show where the 'new school' had departed from what was sound in the *Wealth of Nations* and his own work, making use of the pages of the Tory *Quarterly Review* for the purpose, he provided the youngest scion of Ricardianism, John Stuart Mill, with an opportunity to practise irony at his expense in the recently founded Benthamite organ, the *Westminster Review*.¹⁷ More-

¹⁵ The rapid rise of Ricardianism as orthodoxy has naturally generated a large literature, of which one of the earliest contributions is still the most comprehensive and suggestive; see S. G. Checkland, 'The Propagation of Ricardian Economics in England', *Economica*, 16 (1949), 40–52. For a study that deals with both the rise and decline of Ricardian economics see M. Blaug, *Ricardian Economics*, New Haven, 1958. See also F. W. Fetter, 'The Rise and Decline of Ricardian Economics', *History of Political Economy*, 1 (1969), 67–84 for an account of the ways in which a myth of Ricardian dominance was sustained.

¹⁶ Letter to Napier, 5 January 1822 in *Selections from the Correspondence of the Late Macvey Napier*, London, 1879, pp. 31–2.

¹⁷ See 'On Political Economy' originally published in *Quarterly Review*, 1824 in Malthus, *Works*,

over, whatever friendly accommodation Malthus and Ricardo might reach on their differences of opinion on the subject of rent, it was clear to their respective opponents and supporters that Ricardo's interpretation had placed a potent weapon in the hands of those who wished to fortify the philosophic radical attack on the aristocratic nature of British society and the oligarchic nature of its constitution. McCulloch refused to follow James Mill in drawing radical conclusions from the rent doctrine, earning a public reproof from Mill failing to follow Ricardian logic to its proper conclusion.¹⁸ On such matters, McCulloch adopted a Whiggish position that was closer to the one taken by Malthus. This did not prevent him from being one of the most implacable opponents of Malthus's 'poisonous nostrums' – a reminder that one cannot equate political sympathies with economic doctrines, a truth which the example of De Quincey was later to reinforce. Those who were drawn to Malthus's mixture of natural theology and political economy, whether for intellectual, political, or religious reasons, however, found it necessary to attack Ricardo's discordant interpretation of the consequences of diminishing returns – a subject that will be considered below when dealing with Malthus's relationship to his various clerical followers.

No less fraught with political significance was the position taken by Malthus on the related question of primogeniture, a legal practice that had profound implications for efficient land use and constitutional stability. Left to his own devices in the *Principles*, Ricardo chose not to deal with the sensitive political matters raised by primogeniture; it was not the kind of subject that lent itself to his narrower, 'mathematical' conception of the science. He was made aware of the potential radical significance of the rent doctrine by his mentor in political matters, James Mill – never one to miss an opportunity to make use of doctrines that would press home the inequities of Britain's aristocratic form of government.¹⁹ On such matters Ricardo took a more moderate position, though when he allowed himself to be drawn into discussing primogeniture by Malthus's treatment of the subject in his *Principles*, he took a less alarmist view of the likely effect of its abolition on the subdivision of agrarian properties as well as the 'duration of free govern-

vii, pp. 257–97; and 'The Quarterly Review on Political Economy' (originally published in the *Westminster Review* in 1825) in Mill, *CW*, iv, pp. 23–43.

¹⁸ See *SEW*, pp. 341–2.

¹⁹ See *ibid.*, pp. 338–42 for Mill's proposals for taxing the increment in rents that could be attributed to population growth rather than any foresight by landowners.

ments'. He reasoned that the rationality of economic agents in making marriage decisions, in apportioning property between children, and in realising the benefits of consolidating land holdings would soon counterbalance any initial adverse effects – another case of Ricardo displaying stronger belief in the power of markets to enforce the logic of self-interest.²⁰

Smith had considered primogeniture to be a major hindrance to economic efficiency in agriculture and a source of inter-generational injustice. Such notions of justice do not figure in Malthus's treatment of the question, and since he believed that the efficiency argument was subject, like much else, to the doctrine of proportions, it was not something that could be settled without regard to local circumstances. Primogeniture could lead to a vicious inequality of ownership, such as could be observed during the feudal period and in countries like Poland. On the other hand, there were also dangers of excessive equality and sub-division, such as Malthus believed to be true of Ireland and likely to become true in France as a result of its post-revolutionary laws of inheritance. In the latter cases there was a danger of creating land-holdings that were too small to be capable of exploiting agricultural improvements, thereby increasing vulnerability to extreme scarcity or famine. To this basic economic case, however, Malthus added two elements, the first of which derives from a Whiggish adherence to the virtues of Britain's 'mixed' constitution, while the second involves a novel set of economic arguments derived from the importance he attached to his concept of 'effectual demand'.

The constitutional argument was a traditional one. Whereas France was at perpetual risk of 'military despotism' as a result of the elimination of a landed aristocracy capable of exercising a check on arbitrary executive powers – what Montesquieu had referred to as 'intermediate bodies' and Burke had decried when noting the motley composition of the French National Assembly – Britain represented a case where the golden mean had been discovered. The existence of primogeniture had not prevented the normal operations of commerce and manufacturing from reducing the larger inequalities associated with feudalism. It had also had a beneficial effect in forcing younger sons 'to be the founders of their own fortunes', thereby infusing 'a greater degree of energy and activity into professional and commercial exertions than would have taken place if property in land had been more equally divided'. The

²⁰ For his disagreement with Malthus on the abolition of primogeniture see *Notes on Malthus* in *Works*, II, p. 387.

goad of necessity, one could say, could be as effective in improving the habits of the idle rich as it was in the case of the improvident poor. Direct tampering with the institution would therefore create more evil than good, largely because the 'liberties and privileges which have so long distinguished Englishmen, are mainly due to a landed aristocracy'.²¹ At this point Malthus reverted to one of Smith's arguments. Any weakening of the aristocracy would mean that 'merchants and manufacturers would have the greatest influence in its councils', with the results predicted by Smith, namely that 'the interests of these classes [would] not always prepare them to give the most salutary advice' – a sentiment, one feels, that must have sounded more old-fashioned in 1820 than it did in 1776.²² Malthus, as we have seen in the preceding essay, was to modify his constitutional views as a result of the Reform Act. On the second of his additional arguments in favour of primogeniture, and on the need to protect rental incomes, those considerations connected with his anti-Ricardian theory of effectual demand, however, he was to remain adamant in the face of considerable hostility from Ricardians. Since the precise nature of Malthus's heterodoxy on this matter is closely connected with his diagnosis of post-war depression, it can be most conveniently considered in that context.

II

The disagreement between Malthus and Ricardo over agricultural protection had become one that was largely a matter of public expediency and timing. Malthus's most profound heresy in the eyes of Ricardians lay in the linkage he made between his interpretation of rent as a bountiful gift of God, and his refusal to accept the conclusions of what its originator, Jean-Baptiste Say, called *la loi des débouchés*. This law consisted of a set of propositions designed to prove that the aggregate supply of economic goods and services always generated sufficient income to guarantee that the aggregate demand for those goods and services would be adequate. Where the power to purchase existed, it was assumed that the will would always follow. A related proposition held that the only motive of those supplying goods to the market was to facilitate their demand for other goods to satisfy wants that were capable of unlimited expansion. At least two significant

²¹ *PPE*, 1, pp. 437, 507.

²² *PPE*, 1, pp. 438–9.

conclusions could be derived from what might at first seem to be a mere accounting convention that was tautologous in a barter economy, but required some special assumptions to retain any plausibility when dealing with a money economy: general over-production was impossible in the short term, and excess capital accumulation was incompatible with the condition of a growing economy over the longer term.²³

Although the concept of effectual demand, treated separately from the conditions underlying the aggregate supply of goods, featured in the *Essay*, in his pamphlet contributions to the Corn Law debate, and in his private correspondence with Ricardo, Malthus's heresy on both these fronts was first given extensive airing in his *Principles*. The alternative form of analysis Malthus was proposing served a dual purpose: it was the basis for his diagnosis and remedies for the post-war depression, and it also became part of his account of the preconditions for stable long-term economic growth. One of the reasons for the unsatisfactory nature of the Malthus–Ricardo confrontation on this matter lies in the fact that the two applications, short and long term, could not readily be separated from one another. The former is most readily appreciated now as the 'Keynesian' one, while the latter has a provenance that approximates more to a theory of economic development, a comparative treatise 'on the immediate causes of the progress of wealth', as Malthus called it in his *Principles*. It matches in this respect what Malthus had done in documenting the universality of the population principle over time and space in his second *Essay*.

According to Malthus's short-term diagnosis of the post-war situation, depression was triggered by the fall in corn prices after exceptionally good harvests in 1814–15. The resulting fall in the incomes of landowners and farmers, accompanied by a failure of money wages to fall in line with food prices, had led to a reduction in agricultural employment and a fall in the home demand for manufactured goods. This in turn had led to export markets being over-supplied and a consequent decline in mercantile incomes. The extent of the depression was partly connected with the extraordinary stimulus given to population and productive capacity during the war, and partly with other special factors such as demobilisation of the army, high taxes, rising national debt, and a decline in the general price level due to a reduction in the money supply. Here was a situation in which rents,

²³ From an enormous modern literature on the implications of Say's Law, the following can be recommended as both accurate and accessible: W. J. Baumol, 'Say's (at least) Eight Laws, or What Say and James Mill May Really Have Meant', *Economica*, 44 (1977), 145–62.

profits, wages, and prices were simultaneously depressed, with redundant capital being driven to find employment abroad. Such a combination of circumstances, Malthus believed, could not be reconciled with two of Ricardo's leading doctrines: the explanation for profit decline in terms of higher wages resulting from diminishing returns in agriculture (a limiting but not a determining case in Malthus's opinion); and Ricardo's unwillingness to regard the post-war depression as involving a general as opposed to a partial glut. Whereas Ricardo and his followers treated the depression and unemployment as a problem of maladjustment due to a mismatch between demand and supply in individual markets, Malthus regarded it as evidence of a general deficiency in aggregate demand in relation to aggregate supply, leading all markets to become overstocked, with profits being lowered for reasons unconnected with a rise in wages caused by the increasing cost of domestically produced foodstuffs.

In his *Principles*, Ricardo had treated the post-war depression as an example of those 'temporary reverses and contingencies' resulting from 'sudden changes in the channels of trade'. Such changes were a serious inconvenience to 'rich and powerful countries' possessing large stocks of fixed capital which could not readily be shifted to other employments. What he was keen to stress, however, was that such revulsions were 'an evil to which a rich nation must submit'; they should certainly not be confused with 'a diminution of the national capital and a retrograde society', even though the two states of affairs might appear to be accompanied by similar external signs. Retrogression was 'always an unnatural state of society', and while Ricardo conceded, as a matter of theory at least, that beyond a certain point further advance might be arrested, he emphasised the differences between the hypothetical 'stationary state' at the end of this road and a condition of retrogression or stagnation.²⁴ Depression, therefore, was not a 'natural' cyclical occurrence arising out of the inherent nature of the economic system; it was the result of external disturbances such as war, or changing technology and tastes, that presented temporary adjustment problems. The duration of these problems would be long or short depending on the ease with which capital and labour could be shifted in response to new market opportunities. Since the problem was one of *relative* demand for goods and services, however, rather than a general deficiency,

²⁴ See Ricardo, *Works*, 1, Chapter 19.

adjustment could be left to market processes, with low and high wage and profit levels playing their normal role in reallocating capital and labour from less to more rewarding outlets. When the adjustment proved to be more prolonged than he originally expected, Ricardo had recourse to the kind of explanation that any believer in the effectiveness of market incentives would employ: it was simply due to the failure of rational agents to respond to the signals.²⁵ Ricardo's policy prescriptions to deal with post-war distress, therefore, were to return the currency to a proper metallic base and restore the conditions for economic growth by encouraging investment, chiefly through a reduction in taxes and the burden of national debt, while at the same time persevering in the removal of obstacles to the free mobility of capital such as the Corn Laws which also exerted a downward pressure on profits and provided a motive for flight of capital abroad.

Malthus was broadly in agreement with Ricardo's monetary aims. Contrary to the views of some pro-inflationist writers, he was not in favour of increasing the quantity of money as a means of raising prices on grounds of the temporary nature of the stimulus, and the secondary role played by money in the process of expansion or contraction in real wealth, not to mention the redistribution effect of inflation in favouring capitalists as opposed to those living on fixed incomes.²⁶ Nevertheless, cycles or oscillations in economic activity had always been an integral part of Malthus's analysis of population response. They were also to provide him with an analogy in the case of saving and investment over time. Just as there were limits to the rate of increase in population which could be sustained without reducing wages and damaging living conditions, so there were limits to the volume of savings that could be reinvested with any hope of obtaining a return that would cover costs and give an adequate incentive to continue production. Over-population and over-accumulation could result from responses to earlier

²⁵ See, for example, Ricardo's letter to Malthus, 9 October 1820: 'The difficulty of finding employment for Capital ... proceeds from the prejudices and obstinacy with which men persevere in their old employments, - they expect daily a change for the better, and therefore continue to produce commodities for which there is no adequate demand. With abundance of capital and a low price of labour there cannot fail to be some employments which would yield good profits, and if a superior genius had the arrangement of the capital of the country under his controul, he might, in a very little time, make trade as active as ever. Men err in their productions, there is no deficiency of demand.' See *Works*, VIII, p. 277.

²⁶ *PPE*, I, pp. 513-14. For an account of those respects in which Malthus differed from the inflationists see S. G. Checkland, 'The Birmingham Economists, 1815-1850', *Economic History Review*, I (1948), 6-9, 18.

stimuli created by conditions of high wages and profits. Equally, just as population pressure on wages called for constraint over marriage and birth rates, so post-war distress dictated a policy of constraint over the conversion of savings into productive investment. Malthus was opposed, therefore, to Ricardo's idea that what was needed most was an increase in capital accumulation under circumstances in which profits and trade were generally depressed. Nor was he convinced that the chief priority lay in reducing taxes and the burden of the national debt.

The population parallel also consorted well with Malthus's attitude to short-term remedies. As we have noted earlier, Malthus saw no conflict in upholding the short-term benefits of the Poor Laws, while advocating their long-term abolition.²⁷ Equally, temporary expedients were warranted in order to bring the economy through a cyclical downturn involving an excess of productive potential over effective demand. From a long-term perspective, while 'the excitement of a prodigious public expenditure' could generate an increase in national income, it was not something that should be adopted as a wise course of action; it could result only in 'excessive borrowing' and 'increased misery among the labouring classes'. The effect of increased public expenditure from higher taxes or increased debt was, in this respect, 'like the unnatural strength occasioned by some violent stimulant, which, if not absolutely necessary, should be by all means avoided, on account of the exhaustion which is sure to follow it'.²⁸ Nevertheless, if, as a result of the necessities of war finance, the violent stimulant had already been administered, the lesson to be drawn was that the resulting evil should be mitigated by gradual removal of the stimulus. Rapid reduction of public expenditure and taxes would not benefit the majority, the labouring classes, if it led to a further decline in the demand for labour under conditions of unemployment. In advocating that there should be no sharp reduction of taxes or retirement of debt, it does not seem anachronistic to describe Malthus as counselling 'management' of public expenditure levels. For similar reasons, he also advocated caution in the removal of protective duties on goods that were competitive with the products of domestic industries, and was anxious to find ways of affording relief to the unemployed by encouraging those capable of increasing the demand for 'unproductive labour' to do so.

²⁷ See p. 302 above.

²⁸ *PPE*, I, p. 519.

The introduction of Smith's distinction between productive and unproductive labour at this point is another peculiarity of Malthus's position. Although Ricardo accepted this distinction, it suggested to him that stimulating economic growth through capital accumulation was the best cure for post-war depression. Malthus, on the other hand, having refused to accept (that aggregate supply and effective demand always marched in step with one another,) employed the distinction to suggest that unproductive expenditure on luxuries and other items that did not add to productive capacity was the appropriate remedy for general over-production. This is where the advantages of rent as a surplus accruing to a particular class of potential unproductive consumers came into the picture. Smith's 'proud and unfeeling landlord', the recipient of rent, was reinstated as a consumer of luxuries, as a source of unproductive expenditure that did not add to the capacity of the economy to produce material goods. Under the special circumstances of the post-war period, 'landlords and persons of property' should be encouraged 'to build, to improve and beautify their grounds, and to employ workmen and menial servants'. They were being enjoined to take up the slack created by the reduction in unproductive expenditure on war. Alternatively, Malthus argued that relief might take the form of activities 'the results of which do not come for sale into the market, such as roads and public works'.²⁹ Such diversions of expenditure away from productive employments, though not justifiable under conditions of full employment, were 'exactly what is wanted' as a counter-balancing factor when there was 'a failure of national demand for labour' connected with a sudden shift from the unproductive labour of war towards the productive employments of peacetime. As Malthus became increasingly aware of the pejorative connotations of the term 'unproductive', however, especially when attached to the expenditure of the landowning classes, he substituted what he hoped would be more neutral language by speaking simply of 'personal services'.

It will now be clear why it makes sense to say that Malthus was closer to Coleridge and Southey than to Ricardo on the causes of and remedies for post-war depression, though his analysis of tax and debt in the context of effectual demand was, to say the least, a good deal more elaborate. It was precisely because Malthus appeared to be lending respectability to the kinds of popular remedies for depression that Coleridge, Southey, and many others were canvassing that made his

²⁹ *PPE*, I, p. 511.

heresy so damaging in the eyes of Ricardians, who thought of themselves as serious students of political economy, pledged to defending the cause of science against less sophisticated 'mercantile' nostrums. A similar battle had been fought earlier, when various neo-physiocratic ideas had been advanced by William Spence and others to show that Napoleon's trade blockade, while damaging to British commerce and manufacturing, could not undermine the essential agrarian basis of prosperity.³⁰ James Mill played a part in combating Spencean fallacies in a work entitled *Commerce Defended* which had expounded Say's Law for the first time in English; and he stressed the doctrine in his *Elements*, choosing Malthus as his main target when attacking the general glut heresy.³¹ McCulloch found Malthus's views on capital accumulation 'absolutely disgraceful', and was only prevented from using the appearance of Malthus's *Principles* as the occasion for cutting his reputation down to size by Francis Jeffrey's unwillingness to allow him space in the *Edinburgh Review* to do so.³²

In 1823, John Stuart Mill, at this stage still very much an echo of his father's opinions, described Malthus's 'favourite doctrine of over-production' in terms that reflect the political priorities of philosophic radicalism as well as a difference of theoretical opinion within the science: 'A more mischievous doctrine, we think, has scarcely ever been broached in political economy: since, if we are liable to have too large a produce, a Government must be highly praiseworthy, which in its loving kindness steps forward to relieve us of one part of this insupportable burden.'³³ The sarcasm here reveals the political dimension: any suggestion that unproductive expenditure by a corrupt form of government was necessary to recovery could not be accepted by any self-respecting radical, such as Ricardo and both Mills, in their slightly different ways, most certainly were.³⁴ Equally, Malthus's support for unproductive expenditure on personal services by those in receipt of rental and other forms of income that were large enough to permit expenditure on luxuries was hardly likely to commend itself to those pledged to the elimination of an aristocratic society and form of

³⁰ On this debate see R. L. Meek's articles on 'neo-physiocracy' reprinted in his *The Economics of Physiocracy, Essays and Translations*, London, 1962, pp. 313-63.

³¹ See *SEW*, pp. 332-7.

³² For McCulloch's animus towards Malthus and his complaints against Jeffrey see his letters to Ricardo, *Works*, VIII, pp. 139, 167, 312, 378.

³³ *Morning Chronicle*, 5 September 1823 in Mill, *CW*, XXII, p. 58.

³⁴ Sarcasm of a gentler kind was present in Ricardo's comment that according to Malthus's logic, the best remedy would be an increase in state expenditure on the army and a doubling in the salaries of civil servants; see *Works*, II, pp. 421, 450.

government. Such opinions merely compounded Malthus's reputation for being, once more, in polite language, overly sympathetic to land-owners' interests. Defence of Say's Law was to become one of the youthful Mill's main avocations during this period.³⁵ Indeed, the continuation of this defence in his *Principles of Political Economy* in 1848, together with his decision to codify the science around Ricardo's ideas, later helped to confirm the heterodox nature of Malthus's contributions to the science – beyond the population principle, at least, on which subject, as we have seen, Mill can best be described as a neo-Malthusian zealot.

III

The stark conflict between Ricardo and Malthus on depression also underlay their differences over the essential preconditions for the maintenance of stable growth. On this subject Malthus was denying the second implication of Say's Law, namely that there were no circumstances in which capital accumulation could be regarded as excessive. With effectual demand introduced as one of the preconditions for sustaining not merely the level of employment but the economic dynamism of society, such a condition was entirely possible. Indeed, Malthus believed that lack of effectual demand could be observed at work over long stretches of the European past and in all present societies which had yet to achieve the conditions for sustained growth, where the evidence of Alexander von Humboldt on Spanish America played a major illustrative role in supporting Malthus's case. It was in this context that Malthus made what is probably his most audacious use of another variation on the luxury theme. If luxury expenditure on unproductive labour or personal services was an essential component of effectual demand, supplementing what was spent on productive labour through the demand for necessities, the distribution of income, including the manner in which income is acquired, becomes one of the circumstances that needs to be brought into any account of how growth has occurred and the prospects for its future continuance.

Thus expressed, there might appear to be little novelty in Malthus's position: after all, the shift in expenditure patterns by feudal land-

³⁵ See his attack on William Blake, who sympathised with Malthus's diagnosis of post-war depression, in 'War Expenditure' in Mill, *CW*, iv, pp. 1–22; and the second of his *Essays on Some Unsettled Questions in Political Economy*, written in 1829–30, in *ibid.*, pp. 262–79.

owners from maintaining menial servants and men under arms to the trivial luxuries produced by the towns plays a prominent role in Smith's account of the origins of European opulence. Once the transition from feudal to commercial society had been achieved, however, Smith's emphasis moved away from consumption patterns towards frugality, and in favour of increasing the proportion of the total work-force that was employed productively rather than unproductively, as the clue to the maintenance of growth. Malthus had queried the doctrine that capital accumulation would always be beneficial in the first *Essay*; and his elaboration of this idea in the *Principles* enabled Ricardians to claim that they, rather than Malthus, were Smith's natural heirs on this matter, whatever criticisms Ricardo might make of Smith's explanation for declining profits and its effect on the sources of and incentives for accumulation.³⁶ The lines of inheritance were made more complex, however, by the fact that Malthus could legitimately counter-claim that he had retained a firmer hold on Smith's more commonsensical explanation for declining profits as a demand and supply phenomenon turning on the availability of investment opportunities (what Malthus called the 'field of employment') and competition between capitalists to exploit them. What was happening at the margin of cultivation was a cause of declining profits, but it was by no means the sole cause. Further obscurities entered the picture when Malthus pledged his allegiance to two central Smithian propositions, namely that mere hoarding was irrational and that: 'What is annually saved is as regularly consumed as that which is annually spent, and nearly in the same time too; but it is consumed by a different set of people.'³⁷ Ricardians regarded these propositions as irreconcilable with Malthus's heterodox views on excessive capital accumulation.

✓ The novelty (or error) in Malthus's position derived from his belief that unproductive expenditure remained one of the determinants of stable growth, and that rental incomes, precisely because of the passive manner in which they were acquired, constituted an essential ingredient sustaining effective demand. The income of the landowner, like that of those living on 'fixed monied revenues obtained by inheritance, or with little or no trouble', required no special effort to satisfy the taste for luxuries. But where income was largely derived from 'the exertion of labour, activity and attention, there must be something in the

³⁶ For Smith's view of declining profits and their connection with accumulation, see pp. 111-12 above.

³⁷ *WN*, II.iii.18.

commodities to be obtained sufficiently desirable to balance this exertion'.³⁸ Malthus was perhaps harking back to his original theodicy in which 'indolence or love of ease' was a constant element in human nature that needed special incentives or the goad of necessity to overcome. Hence his criticism of Ricardo for overlooking this aspect of human nature, and his formulation of the central question at issue between them as one of whether, without the unproductive expenditure of landowners and others with surplus incomes, indolence might not be preferred to luxury, thereby bringing growth to a standstill. Would those whose incomes entailed the sacrifice of leisure always be willing to make the effort necessary to acquire 'goods or personal services which have no other merit than the quantity of labour which has been employed upon them'?

Malthus's answer to this rhetorical question is an extension of the one he had given to Godwin. He could not envisage a stable egalitarian society in which everyone would be content to satisfy minimum wants. Nor was it likely to be one in which the possibilities opened up by 'the bountiful gift of providence' were maximised. At the other end of the spectrum, however, Malthus found it difficult to envisage a society in which everyone was placed in a position that enabled them to indulge in luxury consumption without sacrifice of labour. Somewhere between these utopian extremes lay existing societies, requiring an appropriate balance to be struck between expenditure on productive and unproductive labour, between luxury and indolence. The optimum point could not be one in which 'vicious' inequality ruled, where the incomes of the masses were too low and too precarious to sustain effective demand for necessities and comforts.³⁹ Nor could it be one in which the incomes of the rich were insufficient to sustain effective demand:

We should constantly keep in mind that the tendency to expenditure in individuals has most formidable antagonists in the love of indolence, and in the desire of saving, in order to better their condition and provide for a family; and that all theories founded upon the assumption that mankind always produce and consume as much as they have the power to produce and consume, are founded upon a want of knowledge of the human character and of the motives by which it is usually influenced.⁴⁰

Ricardo had no difficulty in accepting that poor countries that were content with 'limited wants', and therefore lacking a motive for

³⁸ *PPE*, I, p. 355.

³⁹ *PPE*, I, pp. 432-3.

⁴⁰ *PPE*, I, p. 503.

accumulation, would remain poor. But once the power to consume existed, the will to do so would follow. This was another case of Malthus changing horses in mid-stream: an argument about the *effects* of accumulation was being replaced by the prior and separate question of the *motives* for accumulation. While he could agree with Malthus's examples of stagnation and slow growth in the feudal past, in China, Spanish America, and even Ireland, he was impatient with Malthus's change of question. How could any of this be relevant to a civilised country like Britain, or slightly more generally, 'to countries with a dense population abounding in capital, skill, commerce, and manufacturing industry, and with tastes for every enjoyment that nature, art or science will procure'?⁴¹ As we have seen when dealing with his views on the post-war depression, from Ricardo's perspective any concession on this front led to the unacceptable conclusion that stagnation or even retrogression were no longer 'unnatural' states of society.

Stationary states could be posited as a way of illustrating 'strong cases' and dominant trends. They were further underlined by Ricardo's tendency, part theoretical simplification, part polemic against the Corn Laws, to argue on the basis of what *might* happen to profits in a closed economy – one that was forced to rely on its own high-cost producers of food and raw materials. The chapter on foreign trade in Ricardo's *Principles*, though now treated as remarkable for its paragraphs on the doctrine of comparative advantage, largely serves to underline Ricardo's mono-causal reasoning on profit decline. It is certainly not the basis for the kind of expansive discussion of the effect of new foreign markets that one finds in Smith or Malthus. Indeed, it required a special effort on John Stuart Mill's part to reintroduce that insight into Ricardian economics later.⁴² Precisely because the stationary state was a theoretical construct, one that had to be distinguished from a condition of stagnation or decline, it cannot be taken as a guide to Ricardo's opinions on what was most likely to happen to Britain. On such matters Ricardo was remarkably sanguine: 'Man from youth grows to manhood, then decays and dies; but this is not the progress of nations. When arrived to a state of the greatest vigour, their further advance may indeed be arrested, but their natural tendency is to

⁴¹ See *Works*, II, p. 340.

⁴² For the price paid for Ricardo's emphasis on the static gains from trade, see H. Myint, 'Adam Smith's Theory of International Trade in the Perspective of Economic Development', *Economica*, 44 (1977), 231–48. For the way in which Mill may have been influenced to return to Smithian perspectives on foreign trade, see D. Winch, 'Classical Economics and the Case for Colonization', *Economica*, 30 (1963), 387–99.

continue for ages, to sustain undiminished their wealth, and their population.⁴³ As Britain grew older it would increasingly become 'a great manufacturing country', which should not be a cause for lamentation so much as 'proof of prosperity' and a subject of congratulation.⁴⁴

By comparison with such confidence, Malthus does appear to occupy the position of anxious observer, even perhaps to be reviving the literature of jeremiad against which Smith had sought to provide an antidote. His early writings could be used to document a 'seeds of decay' mentality, and the later ones fears connected with deficiencies in effectual demand. Together, they appear to confirm the 'reactionary' or backward-looking agrarian reputation discerned by later commentators, and they could also be taken as evidence of those ways of thought attributed to 'evangelical economics' that were mentioned in the Prologue to this book.⁴⁵ Without wishing to substitute one caricature by another, however, a few concluding qualifications to this portrait need to be registered here.

Although much of what Malthus had to say about the growth prospects of manufacturing societies was meant as commentary on what was occurring in Britain, the speculations about long-term development in the *Principles* were of a less parochial variety; they involved use of a comparative-historical canvas of much the same breadth as the one he had employed when constructing his account of the universality of the population principle. Moreover, unlike most economic jeremiads, Malthus was not concerned with a time-scale that could be measured in months, years, or even decades. Natural theology plays a part in this as well: since the design of a beneficent deity was not being worked out exclusively in an island off the North-West coast of the European continent, any view taken of the future could not be confined to that island. In calling upon the evidence provided by Humboldt, Malthus was following Sumner's use of the same source in his *Records of Creation* to add substance to the anthropological contrast between civilised and savage societies, growing and stagnant ones.

Malthus's interpretation of rent and his attitude to the unproductive expenditures it supported should also be seen in a wider context than is suggested by an atavistic form of agrarianism. He did not regard wealthy landowners as the *only* class capable of performing the role of

⁴³ *Principles* in Ricardo, *Works*, I, p. 265 and p. 109.

⁴⁴ *Speeches* in Ricardo, *Works*, v, p. 180; see also iv, pp. 178-9.

⁴⁵ See p. 24 above.

sustaining luxury expenditure, merely as the actual class that currently did so. They were also more acceptable in this role than an all-powerful government acting through public works expenditure – roughly speaking, Southey's solution to the problem. What was obviously the case in agrarian societies had not as yet been altered by the growth of other forms of income earned in commerce and manufacturing. Land-owners had not been replaced by their profit- and salary-receiving equivalents – those classes that were still more likely to turn their surplus incomes into productive expenditure. Nevertheless, Malthus

- ✓ recognised that the growth of the middle classes, fed by younger sons of the aristocracy forced to make their way in the world by primogeniture,
- ✓ had created 'a very large class of effective demanders, who derive their power of purchasing from the various professions, from commerce, from manufactures, from wholesale and retail trade, from salaries of different kinds, and from the interest of public and private debts'.⁴⁶

That non-heroic outcome known as *embourgeoisement*, in other words, like the goad of necessity, might effect a beneficial transformation in

- ✓ the behaviour of both rich and poor.

Ricardo had fewer doubts about Britain's ability to capitalise on its advantages as a commercial and manufacturing nation. Premature old age was not likely to be a problem once free trade in foodstuffs had been established. However much he might drag his feet on the Corn Laws, Malthus was not guilty of nostalgia on such matters. In one of his last statements on the subject, a contribution to a debate at the Political Economy Club in 1834, his opinion, as recorded by J. L. Mallet, was as follows: 'Malthus thought well, on the whole, of our manufacturing prospects. He thought that our success depended in the main on circumstances, not subject to great fluctuations, such as our abundance of fuel or mechanical ingenuity, our great capital, our rapid and cheap communications, the efficiency of our labour.'⁴⁷ Moreover, it seems entirely characteristic of Malthus that when he entertained doubts on this score he could call on Hume, rather than some contemporary, to assuage his worries. Hume too had contemplated a similar problem in the middle of the eighteenth century: would nations that had established an early start in the race for wealth be overtaken, even impoverished, by the competition from newcomers possessing the advantages of cheap labour and imported skills? Hume's answer – the one appropriated by Malthus – was that the skills and capital generated

⁴⁶ *PPE*, 1, pp. 436–7.

⁴⁷ *Political Economy Club: Centenary Volume*, London, 1921, p. 256.

by a wealthy nation could readily be turned to domestic refinement when its commercial dominance was challenged.⁴⁸ Malthus may not have been the last of his generation of political economists to cite Hume's essays, written nearly a century before, but he was the last to do so as though they had been written yesterday. It may also be significant that Malthus chose to cite Hume rather than Smith on this question. It could be a sign that, like so many of Smith's contemporaries and followers, he had never entirely reconciled himself to the open-endedness of Smith's account of economic growth. How far his speculations on future prospects had come since he had abandoned the 'melancholy hue' of his earliest writings on population will be underlined in the succeeding essay.

Nevertheless, the above remarks may still appear to confirm that there was something quaint about Malthus's outlook. With hindsight too, Ricardo's more robust confidence in Britain's future under a regime of free trade appears to have been justified – though whether he fully appreciated the expansive forces connected with new markets is more open to doubt. Whether both Ricardo or Malthus should be faulted in hindsight for their inability to appreciate the consequences of a shift from animate to inanimate sources of energy, such as coal, is something on which the guidance of economic historians is required, and where a verdict of oversight is likely to be registered. Malthus's optimism, based on Britain's 'abundance of fuel' – as expressed at the Political Economy Club – comes closest to recognising this factor than anything else to be found in his writings.⁴⁹

IV

While it is true that Ricardo acquired supporters, some of whose tendencies to *plus royalisme* he found it necessary to curb, none of this adds up to a picture of an isolated and backward-looking Malthus, particularly when his clerical adherents are taken into account. By the late 1820s and early 30s, a number of Christian political economists were more than willing to take up Malthus's combination of political economy and natural theology, with some of them lending vigorous

⁴⁸ *PPE*, I, pp. 406–7.

⁴⁹ For E. A. Wrigley's verdict on this subject see the literature cited in n. 15 on p. 8 above; see also his later articles on 'Malthus and the Prospects for the Labouring Poor', *Historical Journal*, 31 (1988), 813–29; and 'Reflections on the History of Energy Supply, Living Standards, and Economic Growth', *Australian Economic History Review*, 33 (1993), 3–21.

support to his criticisms of the Ricardians. Prominent among these, though not, as we shall see, entirely typical, was Thomas Chalmers, who was once described by Malthus himself as 'my ablest and best ally'.⁵⁰ In addition to Chalmers there was that group of clerical political economists based on Oriel College, the Noetics, who have been mentioned earlier, chiefly in relation to Poor Law reform. The group included Edward Coplestone, Provost of Oriel from 1814 to 1826, and two Fellows, John Davison and Richard Whately. By the late 20s, Davison and Coplestone were increasingly absorbed by clerical duties, but Whately, before becoming Archbishop of Dublin, was to occupy the Drummond Chair of Political Economy at Oxford in succession to his friend and ex-pupil, Nassau Senior – a lawyer by training who was closely associated with, if not, strictly speaking, a member of, the group.

The Drummond Chair had been created in 1825 with the explicit object of furthering the aims of Christian political economy.⁵¹ There was no Cambridge equivalent of this Chair, though George Pryme, another lawyer by training, lectured on the subject for twelve years before being awarded the title of Professor in 1828, with the comforting yet curious proviso that 'no duties were annexed to the Professorship'.⁵² Nevertheless, Cambridge was the base from which two serious Christian political economists – William Whewell and Richard Jones – began their campaign to rescue political economy from Ricardo's deductive 'metaphysics' by recreating the science along Baconian lines. This entailed some serious methodological skirmishing with their Noetic competitors at Oxford, but there was also a more substantive outcome in the form of Jones's *Essay on the Distribution of Wealth* (1831), the first instalment of what was intended to be a much larger enterprise covering wages and profits as well as rent, the focus of the first volume.⁵³ Though never completed as planned, the work earned Jones employment first at King's College, London, the Anglican alternative to University College, the 'godless' Benthamite creation, and later as

⁵⁰ Letter to Chalmers, 21 July 1822, CHA.4.21.51 (Chalmers Papers, New College, Edinburgh).

⁵¹ On the creation of the Chair by Henry Drummond and its early incumbents, see Hilton, *Age of Atonement*, pp. 41–8.

⁵² University ordinance cited in S. Checkland, 'The Advent of Academic Economics in England', *Manchester School*, 19 (1951), 46.

⁵³ The methodological differences of opinion between the Noetics and Whewell and Jones are carefully examined in P. Corsi, 'The Heritage of Dugald Stewart: Oxford Philosophy and the Method of Political Economy', *Annali di Storia della Scienza*, 2 (1987), 89–146; and in his chapter on Whately in *Science and Religion; Baden Powell and the Anglican Debate, 1800–1860*, Cambridge, 1987.

Malthus's successor at the East India College. It was entirely natural for Whewell and Jones to call upon and hope for Malthus's personal endorsement of their endeavours. Indeed, what all these representatives of the rising generation of political economists had in common was a qualified admiration for Malthus, accompanied by a desire to revise his work in ways that would either improve the underlying natural theology or develop his theories in ways that better fitted their own interpretation of emerging economic tendencies. Malthus had direct dealings with most of them, and while none of these dealings approached the intimacy he achieved with Ricardo, they provide insight into how Malthus himself viewed the intellectual trends that were emerging after his own original labours had been completed. But the first insight, if that is not too grand a term for such a basic observation, could be expressed as follows: the new generation regarded Ricardo and his disciples as followers of Smith *and* Malthus; these were the joint founders of the science whose work supplied the laws of wealth generation, supplemented by what Malthus had established as the laws of happiness from a natural theologian's perspective that had been refined by Sumner. Any dissatisfaction with the current state of the science and related art, therefore, could either be attributed to distortion or exaggeration of the founders' message by Ricardians, or to changing circumstances that made aspects of the original message less relevant.

As the first Drummond Professor, Senior had delivered two lectures on population in 1828 which were published in the following year together with his correspondence with Malthus.⁵⁴ The lectures are usually taken as one of the earliest signs that the population principle, as originally expounded by Malthus and endorsed by Ricardo, no longer commanded the support of a new generation more impressed by the evidence of rising living standards and the prospects opened up by technological improvements in agriculture as well as manufacturing.⁵⁵ More was at stake here than Malthus's reputation, bearing in mind what was said earlier, namely that Ricardo's model of growth and distribution was equally dependent on certain propositions concerning wages, profits, and diminishing returns, the origins of which could be traced back to the Malthusian population principle and his discovery or re-discovery of the theory of rent.

⁵⁴ *Two Lectures on Population, Delivered before the University of Oxford, to which is Added a Correspondence between the Author and the Rev. T. R. Malthus*, London, 1829.

⁵⁵ For an account of 'the eclipse of the Malthusian doctrine' in this period see Blaug, *Ricardian Economics*, pp. 111–17.

In his first lecture on population Senior had given a straightforward exposition of the population principle and the related checks (*not* including the ‘unnatural’ preventive ones frowned on by Malthus himself). In the second lecture, however, Senior spoke of the advantages enjoyed by civilised societies in which luxuries and comforts were so widely available that apprehension of their loss now constituted the most powerful incentive for marital prudence, making it possible for preventive checks to replace positive checks completely. Senior’s acquaintance with the *development* of Malthus’s thinking does not seem to have been a particularly close one, a remark that also applies to Jones: those who survive into their sixties ought not to expect the new generation to have a scholarly knowledge of what they have written over the previous thirty years. When Senior argued that ‘habits of considerable superfluous expenditure afford the only permanent protection against a population pressing so closely on the means of subsistence’, he was merely advancing a more confident version of the case for luxury first recognised by Malthus when criticising Paley.⁵⁶ It also treated as fact what Ricardo had expressed as hope when he said that: ‘The friends of humanity cannot but wish that in all countries the labouring classes should have a taste for comforts and enjoyments, and that they should be stimulated by all legal means in their exertions to procure them. There cannot be a better security against a superabundant population.’⁵⁷ Senior believed, however, that the tendency he had observed opened up the prospect of subsistence and improved standards of comfort consistently preceding and exceeding any increase in numbers, a doctrine which he believed to be in conflict with the ‘received opinion’ that population not only has the power to increase faster than the means of subsistence, but has actually done so. Statements by Malthus, James Mill, and McCulloch were cited as evidence of the received view, namely that population invariably fulfilled its capacity to increase faster than subsistence. Such opinions, Senior maintained, were no longer tenable: there was not a single case of a civilised country – Ireland included – failing to experience a permanent rise in living standards. The lecture closed by ranking Malthus ‘as a benefactor to mankind, on a level with Adam Smith’, merely adding that despite ‘the exaggeration which is natural to a discoverer’, the practical implications of the principle remained unchanged.

The ensuing exchanges with Malthus succeeded in uncovering some

⁵⁶ See *Two Lectures*, p. 34; and p. 273 above for Malthus’s criticism of Paley on luxury.

⁵⁷ *Principles in Works*, 1, p. 100.

underlying mutual misconceptions, one of which turned on the meaning of 'tendency', where Whately lent support to Senior's interpretation.⁵⁸ Senior also conceded that on rereading Malthus's work he could 'see how inconsistent [the received view] is with your uniform statement, that the pressure of population upon subsistence is almost always the most severe in the rudest states of society, where the population is the least dense'.⁵⁹ Although Malthus did not deny that living standards had risen in most civilised countries, he clearly wished to stand by his original insight: population pressure was constantly in operation even in civilised countries that were no longer subject to the more obvious positive checks. Partial relief from population pressure was no guarantee that it had been permanently overcome: wages were not high enough to support many families, and 'premature mortality' was still a fact of death for most people living at the base of the social pyramid. Variability in the relationship of population to food was more common than Senior's optimistic projection of unilinear advance. Although improvements in food supply clearly should be sought, Malthus still regarded it as necessary to preach the importance of moral restraint – as indeed did Senior himself. Having invested sticks with so much importance, not least for theological reasons, Malthus found it less easy to attribute *exclusive* power to carrots.

Senior boasted privately that he had succeeded in getting Malthus to disavow the idea that population has a uniform tendency to exceed subsistence.⁶⁰ A less self-interested reading suggests unwillingness on Malthus's part to grant the possibilities of indefinite escape from the problem he had diagnosed. Although he had confessed to an over-compensatory bending of the rod in his own writings, he was not prepared to accept – as Senior himself realised later – condescending gestures referring to the understandable exaggerations of a pioneer when made by others.⁶¹ The correspondence also revealed that

⁵⁸ See Whately, *Introductory Lectures on Political Economy*, London, 2nd edition, 1832, Lecture ix.

⁵⁹ *Two Lectures*, p. 57.

⁶⁰ See letter to Mallet in *Political Economy Club: Centenary Volume*, p. 305; and *An Outline of the Science of Political Economy*, London, 1836, p. 46: 'he appears to have disavowed, we will not say his former expressions, but the inferences to which they lead'. This was vigorously denied by Empson on the basis of personal acquaintance: 'We know of our own knowledge that Mr Malthus did not mean to retract, nor did he consider that he was understood to have retracted in this correspondence a single syllable of the opinions which he had previously published'; see 'Life, Writings, and Character of Mr. Malthus', *Edinburgh Review*, 64 (1837), 494.

⁶¹ In his later lectures Senior recognised that: 'In fact Mr. Malthus's views were to the end somewhat exaggerated and somewhat distorted by the train of thought which originally suggested them'; as cited from MS sources in M. Bowley, *Nassau Senior and Classical Economics*, London, 1967, p. 121.

Senior's ulterior motive in wishing to overturn the received view was the popular inference that 'every partial amelioration [was] a mere Sisyphean labour'. In his final response to Malthus, he used stronger language: 'I found . . . [the population] principle made the stalking horse of negligence and injustice, the favourite objection to every project for rendering the resources of the country more productive.'⁶² The last point could hardly apply to someone with Malthus's pronounced agrarian sympathies, and it was not the kind of fatalistic inference that James Mill and McCulloch, Senior's other exemplars of the view he sought to correct, would have wished to draw. Ricardo's chief disciples had their own reasons for wishing to stress the limits posed by diminishing returns and the possible slowing down of capital accumulation in the face of population increase. These were integral features of the Ricardian model of long-term profit decline and had considerable polemical value in underlining the means of escape being proposed – chiefly birth control in Mill's case and repeal of the Corn Laws in McCulloch's.⁶³ Senior's most immediate success, in fact, seems to have been the conversion of McCulloch to a more sanguine view of British prospects that entailed abandonment of the 'received view' and his earlier support for the Malthus–Ricardo position on the Poor Laws.⁶⁴ That Senior had accurately captured the mood of the rising generation was confirmed by the conclusions of the Political Economy Club when they debated 'the merits of Ricardo' in 1831:

One of the errors of Ricardo seems to have been to have followed up Malthus's principles of population to unwarrantable conclusions. For, in the first place it is clear from the progress of social improvement and the bettering of the condition of the people in the greater part of the civilized world, that Capital, or the means of Employment – the fund for labour – increases in a greater ratio than population.⁶⁵

Although Malthus later accepted Richard Jones's judgement that he had been 'singularly unfortunate in his successors', and was probably referring to Ricardo's neo-Malthusian disciples when saying so, it does

⁶² *Two Lectures*, p. 89.

⁶³ On James Mill's extremist strategy see Blaug, *Ricardian Economics*, p. 107; and *SEW*, p. 196.

⁶⁴ For McCulloch's change of view on population and the Poor Law see D. P. O'Brien, *J. R. McCulloch; A Study in Classical Economics*, London, 1970, pp. 316–19.

⁶⁵ See *Political Economy Club: Centenary Volume*, p. 225. The substitution of capital for subsistence is based on James Mill's Ricardian formulation of Malthus's principle. See also J. L. Mallet's remark in 1835 (*ibid.*, p. 265) on 'the value and truth of the Principles of the Essay on Population', namely that 'the whole artillery of the Club was, strange to say, directed against it'.

not seem likely that he meant to include Ricardo in this category – as far as the population principle was concerned at least. On that subject there was almost perfect harmony, with Ricardo evincing a reluctance to endorse the neo-Malthusian solutions proposed by Place and James Mill. Ricardo was included, however, among those who were guilty of lending a ‘gloomy aspect’ to Malthus’s theory of rent – as Malthus’s own criticisms of the conflictual aspects of Ricardo’s version of this theory in his *Principles* had shown. This would have predisposed Malthus towards Jones’s inductivist attack on Ricardo’s conclusions, for whom it was especially important to refute the ‘repulsive doctrine’ that the interests of landowners were permanently in conflict with those of other classes.⁶⁶ Unlike Senior and Whately, Jones was motivated by a desire to mount a wholesale attack on Ricardo’s methods and theories, as well as the practical or political inferences that his supporters had drawn from them. The hostility of Whewell and Jones towards Ricardo was compounded by conservatism in constitutional matters as well as opposition to utilitarianism in both its Benthamite and Paleyite forms; they regarded this approach to morals as an impoverished one.⁶⁷ This was another issue that placed Jones and Whewell at odds with Whately and Senior, as well as Malthus himself, despite the fact that the religious affiliations of these authors, unlike those of Ricardo and the Mills, were beyond reproach. It is not surprising then that differences of opinion over utilitarian accounts of morals were kept in the background: maintaining a united front against secular political economy was more important.

Much of the Whewell–Jones assault took place under the guise of methodological reconstruction – an attempt to build the science on a more adequate empirical foundation, abandoning the aprioristic features of Ricardo’s version by showing that what purported to be universal propositions were actually speculative generalisations based on the peculiarities of English institutions and experience. Although the attack covered a wide front, it was most sharply focussed on the Ricardian interpretation of rent. This accounts for Jones’s decision to begin his inquiry with this subject, and it is a possible explanation, apart from the dilatoriness about which Whewell constantly com-

⁶⁶ *An Essay on the Distribution of Wealth, and on the Sources of Taxation*, London, 1831, 2nd edition, 1844, p. 269.

⁶⁷ For further detail on the nature of the Whewell–Jones attack see Hilton, *Age of Atonement*, pp. 51–5; and R. Yeo, *Defining Science; William Whewell, Natural Knowledge, and Public Debate in Early Victorian Britain*, Cambridge, 1993, pp. 102–6, 195–7.

plained, for Jones's failure to publish the planned sequels on wages and profits.

Malthus's reaction to Jones's work was partly one of gratitude for the support it lent to what had been an isolated position when he had single-handedly faced the Ricardian school ten or more years previously. He recalled another unkind remark made by Torrens in 1821, likening him to Priestley, the discoverer of phlogiston who had failed to grasp what Lavoisier had seen on the basis of the same experimental evidence. Torrens had forecast that the era of fundamental disagreement between political economists was coming to a close, where the emerging consensus was conceived as forming around the ideas of Ricardo and himself. In comparing Malthus with Priestley, then, Torrens was portraying him as 'a pertinacious champion of the theories which the facts established by himself had so largely contributed to overthrow'.⁶⁸ It was this remark that Malthus recalled after reading Jones's book: 'I confess that when I almost stood alone in my differences with Mr. Ricardo and was compared to Dr. Priestly [sic], it would not finally be so.'⁶⁹

Nevertheless, Malthus was not prepared to endorse Jones's alternative to what he held in common with Ricardo. Jones had 'gone beyond the truth in his unwillingness to admit the *tendency* of continued accumulation, and of the progress of population and cultivation to lower the rates of profits and corn wages on the land'. Although Jones had attempted to be exhaustive in his survey of different land tenure systems, he had not dealt with the case that Malthus still thought crucial for political economy – what was happening in North America, 'particularly in this age of emigration'. Hence his conclusion that Jones, in common with the members of the Political Economy Club, was guilty of carrying anti-Ricardianism too far:

In his zeal to shew that Mr. Ricardo is quite wrong, which he certainly is, in dwelling upon the diminished returns of agricultural capital as the sole cause of increasing rents, he seems inclined to deny the undoubted truth of the natural tendency to such diminished returns in a limited space, unless prevented by improvements in agriculture or manufactures. Were there no such tendency, and had not such a tendency frequently operated, no adequate reason can be given why the accumulating capitals of a new colony should not continue to be applied to the lands first occupied, or why the inhabitants of

⁶⁸ *Essay on the Production of Wealth*, p. xiii.

⁶⁹ See N. B. de Marchi and R. P. Sturges, 'Malthus and Ricardo's Inductivist, Cambridge, Critics: Four Letters to William Whewell', *Economica*, 40 (1973), 391.

the Eastern states of America are now emigrating in such numbers to the Western. The *tendency* to diminished returns must be the general principle . . .

Although his own work on the operation of population checks throughout the world was an obvious model for what Jones considered himself to be doing in his inductive and historical inquiries into rent, Malthus was not willing to abandon the basic theory founded on diminishing returns which he and Ricardo had worked out – partly together, partly in opposition to one another. Baconians could be guilty of failing to observe the doctrine of proportions just as much as Cartesians and those who thought the science was a strict one like mathematics.

Jones was at one with Malthus in stressing the ‘moral bearings’ of political economy, which effectively meant stressing its beneficent theological implications. But he was more critical of Malthus’s exposition of the population principle than Sumner, Coplestone, or Senior had been. Some of Malthus’s arguments and phraseology had ‘cast a gloom over the subject’, where most of the difficulty could be attributed to the fact that the check of moral restraint was introduced as an ‘afterthought’, thereby leading Malthus to adopt a ‘logically defective division of the checks to population’.⁷⁰ Instead of setting up an impossibly high standard of behaviour as the alternative to vice and misery, one that was capable of being followed by only a few, it would have been better if Malthus had spoken of ‘voluntary restraint’ based on foresight and the desire to achieve the comforts and luxuries that make up man’s indefinitely expanding ‘secondary’ or ‘artificial’ wants. This would have allowed greater latitude for minor failings and wider scope for considering checks that were neutral as between vice and misery. In essence, Jones’s criticism amounts to an implicit charge of Mandevillism: by setting up a rigoristic standard of sexual morals and an over-inclusive definition of vice and misery, Malthus had weakened the defence of attainable virtue and failed to direct attention to the nature of all the checks at work in society. Despite Malthus’s disclaimer on Mandevillism, repeated on his behalf by Empson, the ghost of Mandeville had not been exorcised. Sumner’s references to ‘nosology’, mentioned earlier, show that Malthus’s broad categories of vice and misery were thought to be capable of such a misinterpretation. In 1835

⁷⁰ See *Essay on Distribution*, p. x. Jones expanded on his criticisms of Malthus in the lectures he gave at the East India College over the years; see *Literary Remains, consisting of Lectures and Tracts on Political Economy of the late Rev. Richard Jones*, London, 1859, pp. 93–113, 150–67, 175–6, 238–47, 251–62.

Whately was still sufficiently worried about the use of Malthus's ideas for 'noxious purposes' to regret that Malthus had used 'necessary' rather than 'unavoidable' when speaking of the checks on population increase.⁷¹ Jones was engaged in another attempt to remove this element – though the best way of exorcising Mandeville was perhaps that employed by Whately: Mandeville was not countenancing vice, he was merely making use of hypothetical imperatives.⁷²

Jones certainly seems to have believed that Malthus had some responsibility, however unwitting, for encouraging others to think of more immoral methods of bridging the gap between vice and virtue, where neo-Malthusianism was Jones's chief target. Malthus's error of logic, he claimed, with almost Coleridgean resentment,

was seized upon and pushed to its most repulsive consequences with a headlong and pernicious eagerness, and served to augment the fearful amount of those elements of discord and suffering, which it was believed had been demonstrated to exist in the very constitution of man, of the earth which he inhabits; and which, according to this school of writers, are necessarily called into a state of increasing action as the world becomes peopled and nations advance.

Apart from the corrupting effect on the morals of those attracted by such teachings, a more sinister form of secular hubris had been released upon the world:

It was darkly, but confidently and sedulously hinted at, that the most cherished moral feelings which guide the human heart were, after all, only a mass of superstition which it might be hoped would decay with the progress of philosophy; that means were in reserve, and ready to be circulated, of eluding the passions implanted by the Creator in the original constitution of the human race; and that thus at last human wisdom might be made to triumph over defects in the physical arrangements of Providence.⁷³

Jones was neither original in making such points, nor fair to Malthus in failing to notice where he had made use of similar ones, but his attack on what he assumed to be the conflict-ridden implications of the basic

⁷¹ *Life and Correspondence of Richard Whately*, edited by E. Jane Whately, 2 volumes, London, 1866, 1, p. 301.

⁷² 'Of [Mandeville's] intentions . . . we have no means of forming a decisive judgment; nor if we had, would that question be to the purpose. It is sufficient to remark that he is arguing all along on an *hypothesis*, and on one not framed gratuitously by himself, but furnished him by others; and on that hypothesis he is certainly triumphant'; see R. Whately, *Introductory Lectures on Political Economy*, p. 43; see also p. 159. For Malthus's disclaimer see p. 240 above. For Empson's defence against charges of Mandevillism see 'Life, Writings, and Character of Mr. Malthus', p. 487. On Sumner and 'nosology' see p. 238 above.

⁷³ *Essay on Distribution*, p. xiv.

Malthus–Ricardo view of economic progress conformed with Senior’s modifications to Malthus, with McCulloch’s later opinions, and with the prevailing mood of rejection of the entire Malthus–Ricardo inheritance in the 1830s. Hence, too, the added interest attached to Malthus’s brief, yet highly informative and ultimately defensive responses.

V

In the case of Chalmers, Malthus was faced with another kind of zeal, that of a convert who adopted in unqualified fashion almost all the ideas that differentiated Malthusian from Ricardian political economy, notably on the question of general gluts. Chalmers also differed from Senior, Whately, and Jones in wishing to retain the population principle in its starkest form, with moral restraint being seen as both more accessible as well as more desirable than any other remedy for poverty. Chalmers’s review of the alternatives in *On Political Economy, in Connexion with the Moral State and Moral Prospects of Society* (1832) amounted to an exercise in reducing every solution derived from political economy in its secular guise to being futile substitutes for a Christian education dedicated to inculcating moral restraint and teaching the benefits of allowing markets to take their natural course.⁷⁴ The result was in many respects a mirror image of the most dogmatic secular alternative. For example, what neo-Malthusians such as James and John Stuart Mill attributed to contraception, namely almost unlimited immediate control by wage-earners over their own standards of living, bringing declining costs of pauper relief in its train, Chalmers believed could only be secured (yet rapidly) through an established church with an active evangelising clergy. What was often laid at Ricardo’s door, namely positing an almost instantaneous adjustment to new states of equilibrium, was far more characteristic of Chalmers’s thinking. Whereas Ricardo puzzled over the effects of irrationality on the part of economic agents in slowing down the response to market signals, Chalmers was confident that adjustments would occur ‘with almost the

⁷⁴ Chalmers has received a good deal of attention in recent years, including a modern biography by J. Stewart Brown, *Thomas Chalmers and the Godly Commonwealth*, Oxford, 1982. Unfortunately, this biography is decidedly off-target when dealing with his economic ideas. See the essays by Owen Chadwick, Mary T. Furgol, and Boyd Hilton in A. C. Cheyne (ed.), *The Practical and the Pious: Essays on Thomas Chalmers*, Edinburgh, 1985; Hilton, *Age of Atonement*, pp. 55–67, 75–6, 81–92, 108–12, 116–24, 184–7; and Waterman, *Revolution, Economics and Religion*, pp. 217–52.

speed of an explosion'.⁷⁵ As one of the most astute critics of political economy in this period, George Poulett Scrope, was to express the charge, Chalmers had carried to unprecedented lengths the general fault of economists 'of assuming ultimate effects to be constantly present'.⁷⁶

Once more, Malthus's appreciation of the acquisition of such a vigorous expositor for his ideas was overlaid by misgivings and qualifications. While he could hardly have been closer to anyone else in emphasising the need to supply what he described as the 'right Christian apparatus', Malthus shied away from Chalmers's reductionist tendencies. In seeking to place those who were essential to the moral solution to economic problems on an equal footing with those who produced material goods, for example, Chalmers proposed to abolish the distinction between productive and unproductive labour. The pejorative implications of this 'hurtful definition of Smith', he claimed with some justification, had been responsible for the hostility of political economy towards ecclesiastical establishments. Moreover, as an economic argument in favour of this move, Chalmers had recourse to a version of Burke's defence of the French monks who merely sing in choirs: the income and expenditure of the Church, like that of landowners, not only contributed to the consumption which maintained productive labour, but was doing so in a manner that supported those who were obliged by vocation to carry out significant public and religious duties.⁷⁷ Malthus, like Chalmers himself, was in favour of closer collaboration between the established church and dissenters (those 'engaged mainly in the same great and glorious cause').⁷⁸ This was the furthest either of them was prepared to go towards accepting the logic of Smith's policy of 'no ecclesiastical government' and free competition between sects. Smith's distinction between productive and unproductive labour, though capable of being used, as it was by Ricardians, as an argument in favour of increased

⁷⁵ *The Christian and Civic Economy of Large Towns*, 3 volumes, Glasgow, 1821-6, III, p. 315.

⁷⁶ *Quarterly Review*, 48 (1832), 401.

⁷⁷ See *On Political Economy*, Glasgow, 1832, Chapter 11, leading to the conclusion that 'Without a church, the whole of our ecclesiastical wealth would have been in the hands of those who give no return for it. With a church, we have the returns of all its usefulness - its theological learning - the protection which it affords against a desolating infidelity - the service which it renders to the morality of the commonwealth - and, above all, to the eternal well-being of the individual members who compose it' (pp. 352-4). For comparison with Burke see pp. 186-7 above.

⁷⁸ See letter to Chalmers, 25 August 1821 congratulating Chalmers for his collaboration with dissenters: CHA.4.18.21 (Chalmers Papers, New College, Edinburgh).

capital accumulation, was one to which Malthus attached considerable importance for his own purposes. As we have seen, it lay at the heart of his proposals for offsetting excess capital accumulation. When he decided to substitute 'personal services' for 'unproductive expenditure', Chalmers could have been the first to hear of his intention to do so.⁷⁹ But this made it more rather than less important to retain a firm distinction between the different ways of benefiting society that Chalmers proposed to conflate:

I consider the services of Judges, Physicians, and moral and religious instruction as vastly more important than any but the labours of agriculture and that it is paying morals a very bad compliment to put them in the same category with cottons, and estimate their value by the money which has been given for them. We have always been told most properly to prefer virtue to wealth; but if morals be wealth what a confusion is at once introduced into all the language of moral and religious instruction. Besides I am strongly of opinion that the proper balance between production and consumption in regard to the progress of wealth (in its ordinary acceptation) depends greatly upon the proper proportion between productive labour, and personal services, and if so, different terms are absolutely necessary to express such a proposition.⁸⁰

That Malthus had made an identical criticism of Chalmers five years earlier, without effecting any change in Chalmers's position, confirms that Chalmers was an 'ally' rather than a disciple.⁸¹

There was also the question of Chalmers's neo-physiocratic emphases on agriculture, where Malthus could perhaps catch echoes of his own earlier flirtation with the categories of the French *économistes*. By the 1820s and 30s, however, Malthus's comments were all directed towards modifying Chalmers's denigration of commerce and manufacturing:

⁷⁹ Letter to Chalmers, 6 March 1832, CHA.4.185.32.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ See letter from Malthus written on 27 January 1827: 'I cannot help thinking that it is more correct in regard to common usage of language, and in accordance with all our common feelings to say that security, independence, moral and religious instruction, and moral and religious habits, are very superior in importance to what we usually mean by wealth, than to say that they ought to be considered as included in them. It surely cannot be necessary to call independence and morals by an inferior name in order to encourage the pursuit of them. And what will be the meaning of the language of our divines and moralists who dissuade men from the eager pursuit of riches, if riches are so defined, as to include every source of human happiness. Surely distinctions are wanted in order to enable us to explain ourselves; and I much doubt if we can find one more natural and obvious than that which distinguishes the gratifications derived from matter and those which are derived from other and different sources': CHA.4.80.19.

Have you not pushed too far the doctrine of the non-importance of foreign commerce . . . Without [Britain's exports] she would be less powerful, and I should certainly add less wealthy, though she might still be as strong in defensive war. It is owing to the abundance of her exports derived from her skill, machinery and capital, that money rents and the money prices of corn and labour are high, and that with a small quantity of English labour a large quantity of the products of foreign labour is purchased. The demand for useful and beneficial personal services is limited; and after all these had been fully paid, would it not be an impoverishing and very disadvantageous exchange, to substitute for the rich capitalists and comfortable and independent traders living upon the profits of stock, a body of dependents upon the landlords. In fact the capitals employed in the foreign and domestic trade of luxuries afford the only means of giving to your disposeable class an independent claim to a considerable portion of the wealth of the landlords.⁸²

Finally, there was another important difference arising from Chalmers's stress on rapid adjustment to the disturbances associated with shifts in demand and supply. Malthus could agree that population and capital had rapid powers of recovery, but like Scrope he was sometimes taken aback by the shortness of the period Chalmers estimated as sufficient for recovery to take place.⁸³ The processes of adjustment were also too smooth for Malthus's taste: 'Within your slowly receding limits great variations may take place in profits, even on the land, from over and under supply, from a too rapid or too scanty accumulation of capital. You have perhaps referred rather too exclusively to the slowly receding and unavoidable limit.'⁸⁴ This remark recalls what Malthus had said in controversy with Ricardo over post-war depression: economic life was characterised by irregular stimuli and checks, by the lagged responses and incomplete adjustments which created those 'serious spaces in human life' that were neither educative nor therapeutically purgative, in which the suffering was not exemplary but consisted merely of uncompensated misery.⁸⁵ What may be most

⁸² Letter to Chalmers, 6 March 1832, CHA.4.185.32. This too was a subject on which Malthus had to repeat his criticisms, without signs of change in Chalmers's position; see his letter to Chalmers, 18 January 1827: 'I agree with much of what you say about the wealth derived from manufactures, but I think . . . you have pushed your principle too far. I feel strongly persuaded that without our manufacturing propensity, we should not have had the same disposeable population, and certainly not the same power of commanding the labour, the provisions, and the armies of Europe. We might have driven Buonaparte from the country if he had invaded us, but we would not have driven him out of Spain': CHA.4.80.19.

⁸³ See letter to Chalmers, 16 February 1833: 'perhaps it might have been as well not to have insisted upon recovery in the *same* year': CHA.4.210.5.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ See p. 337 above on 'spaces'.

characteristic of Chalmers as the standard bearer of 'evangelical economics' in this period is least characteristic of Malthus's economic vision on such matters.

VI

The tentative conclusion on the relationship between the reputations of Malthus and Ricardo mentioned in the Prologue can now be restated. Ricardian ascendancy seems to have been at its greatest somewhere around the time of the master's death in 1823. Within a few years, however, his theories were under attack from several quarters. One of his disciples, McCulloch, had increasingly distanced himself, and James Mill, Ricardo's most dogmatic defender, had fallen silent on the main issues some years before his death in 1836. This leaves only De Quincey and John Stuart Mill as candidates for the role of disciple, neither of whom, in the 1830s, had fully revealed what services they were capable of rendering the Ricardian cause. On the other hand, Malthus's reputation in Anglican circles had acquired a solid foundation since Sumner's *Records of Creation* had confirmed the compatibility of the findings of the *Essay on Population* with Paleyite forms of natural theology. Moreover, as we have seen in an earlier essay, the refinements in the application of the population principle to the Poor Law question introduced by Davison, Coplestone, and Sumner were fully in line with the trend of Malthus's own thinking.

The attacks on the 'received view' of the population principle by Senior and others, taken in conjunction with Jones's attack on Ricardo, had dented the reputation of both Malthus and Ricardo, though it was the Ricardian emphasis on rent as a source of social conflict, and on falling profits as a threat to future accumulation, that was Jones's main target. Malthus's failings were considered more venial, merely those of a pioneer whose original point of entry into political economy as an opponent of perfectibilism continued to lend an unduly sombre cast to his vision of the future. From Malthus's point of view, however, while he was no longer placed in the position of the Priestley of political economy, the reaction against what both he and Ricardo had regarded as the main tasks of the science had gone too far. Neither Jones's rejection of diminishing returns and the differential rent doctrine, nor Chalmers's heavily moralised neo-physiocracy could be taken as gospel. A middle position closer to Ricardo was required. The tendency to 'premature generalisation' remained at work in a science

that was still not ripe for complete resystematisation; there were still many topics which were *sub judice*. Malthus's response to his late admirers and critics was partly the understandable one of wishing to defend his own original formulations of the basic problems of political economy. His desire to defend Ricardo as well would have been a puzzling inconsistency only to those who were unfamiliar with the manner in which Malthus and Ricardo conducted their disagreements. Since their correspondence was not fully available until much later, Jones and Whewell can perhaps be forgiven for failing to appreciate the intimacy of the Malthus–Ricardo relationship – though it was emphasised by Empson in his memoir published in 1837.

It took the retrospective efforts of later generations of economists, each employing their own special viewpoints, to generate the kinds of distinctions between the economic visions of Malthus and Ricardo that continue to occupy so much space in doctrinal histories of economics today. John Stuart Mill might be said to have started the business by treating Malthus, along with Chalmers and Sismondi, as victims of a 'fatal misconception' on general gluts, one that he attributed, as Ricardo had done earlier, to 'the practice of not beginning with the examination of simple cases, but rushing at once into the complexity of concrete phenomena'.⁸⁶ Say's Law was one of those doctrines which, along with other leading elements in the Ricardian approach, Mill did not abandon with age, despite his recognition of those assumptions which, if *not* fulfilled, would turn it into a matter of mere definition.⁸⁷ Defensiveness of the Ricardian tradition on this matter, however, was entirely compatible with abandonment of the kinds of concern that made the assumption of acute capital scarcity, the decline of profits, and the prospect, however hypothetical, of a stationary state so central to what had preoccupied both Ricardo and Malthus.

Marx and Keynes, from their very different perspectives, also helped to confirm the view that Malthus belonged to a discursive sphere that was fundamentally different from that of Ricardo. Marx did so as part of his desire to promote some ideas of Ricardo that he found congenial, particularly on the labour theory of value as the clue to surplus value and exploitation. Working in the opposite direction, Keynes did much the same for Malthus, by finding similarities between his own views on

⁸⁶ *Principles of Political Economy* in *CW*, III, p. 576 and II, p. 67.

⁸⁷ For the peculiarities of Mill's balancing act on this subject see T. W. Hutchison, *Review of Economic Doctrines*, Oxford, 1953, pp. 348–56; and my *Classical Political Economy and Colonies*, pp. 135–43.

effective demand and unemployment and those that Malthus was 'intuitively' yet vainly upholding against Ricardo. Subsequent generations of post-Marxians and post-Keynesians have continued the process, doing so as part of an attempt to employ history as a means of advancing their interpretations of what the modern version of the science should or should not encompass, and the means by which it should do so.⁸⁸ In so far as the issues separating Malthus and Ricardo have remained the subject of controversy in modern economics, such debates are perhaps unavoidable. Whether they should also be allowed to exert a coercive influence on our understanding of the past, however, remains a permanent challenge to the intellectual historian.

One of the underlying themes of the essays in this part of the book has been the indivisibility, for Malthus, of questions of political economy from those of natural theology. It was also an essential part of his attraction to the community of Christian political economists considered above, and one of the reasons why they felt it essential to challenge the discordant or insufficiently harmonious aspects of the Malthus–Ricardo inheritance, especially its Ricardian dimension. The work of Chalmers represents a high point in the alliance between political economy and theology, and it could well have been the exaggerations of that enthusiastic mind which brought the alliance into disrepute. Evangelised viewpoints on practical economic questions continued well beyond Chalmers, but they were never to be united as firmly again with claims to be advancing the science.⁸⁹ After Smith and Hume, they had never been as dominant within secular versions of political economy as they were within biology in the period before Darwin delivered his devastating blow to such conceptions. Persistent attempts to reintroduce an 'ethical' as well as a political dimension to economics were fought over during the second half of the century between economic historians and economic theorists, with Christianity vying with naturalistic forms of ethical doctrine, of the kind to be found in the work of Auguste Comte or Herbert Spencer, to fill the gap between purer conceptions of the science and its claims to guide legislation. Why this should have been so carries the story beyond the

⁸⁸ For a recent successful attempt to find a way back to Ricardo through the competing interpretations of his work that have been created in recent decades see Terry Peach, *Interpreting Ricardo*, Cambridge, 1993.

⁸⁹ See Waterman's chapter on 'The End of Christian Political Economy' in *Revolution, Economics and Religion*. The cast of Hilton's evangelical economists (in *The Age of Atonement*) continued to perform long after the mid-point of the century.

scope of these essays, though some reference to it will be made in the Epilogue. It is also possible that hostile critics of economic theorising might still wish to add that the separation from natural theology has never been fully achieved: it is only the Christian versions that have been discarded.

Last things and other legacies

I

Following a longstanding *Edinburgh Review* tradition, the task of responding to the last major assault on the population principle to appear before Malthus's death, Michael Sadler's *Law of Population* (1830), was undertaken by Macaulay, the leading light of the younger generation of reviewers.¹ In the previous year Macaulay had taken on the assignment of scourging the 'jacobinical' Benthamite science of government expounded by James Mill. The result was an exposition of the Whig interpretation of 'that noble science of politics' which was to be instrumental in securing Macaulay his first seat in parliament.² By taking on Sadler he was showing that he could deal with the opposite wing of the contemporary political spectrum, that he possessed the qualities required of the modern Whig by fighting on two fronts simultaneously. Since Malthus had been similarly engaged in defining the middle position for much of the previous three decades, Macaulay provides a benchmark against which the mature opinions of a more old-fashioned Whig, such as Malthus had inevitably become towards the end of his life, can be judged.

In his attack on Malthus, Sadler, a leading light in the Ten Hours movement, pursued a fundamentalist evangelical line of a kind that had often, to Malthus's regret, been marshalled against him by Christian critics. Sadler attempted to invert the principle of population by maintaining that 'the fecundity of human beings is,

¹ Malthus, following the policy he had pursued on other occasions, preferred to respond minimally and indirectly to Sadler's 'strange work' himself by reissuing his article on 'Population' for the *Supplement to the Encyclopaedia Britannica* as a separate publication, the *Summary View of Population*; see his letter to Macvey Napier, 10 January 1830, British Library, Add.MSS 34614, f. 276.

² The entire Mill-Macaulay controversy can be read in J. Lively and J. Rees (eds.), *Utilitarian Logic and Politics*.

caeteris paribus, in the inverse ratio of the condensation of their numbers'. It followed that instead of vice and misery, and the equally 'degrading and disgusting' proposal of moral restraint, being the regulators of population, a benevolent deity had designed a universe in which human increase was self-regulating in accordance with 'the prosperity and happiness of the species'.³ The sheer size and extent of Sadler's work can be taken as an indication of how far refutation of Malthus had come to represent a point of union between those with Tory humanitarian sympathies, representing what Sadler's first biographer, Robert Seeley, called the 'Paternal' as opposed to the 'Selfish' school of thought. As he also pointed out: '[Sadler] had unhesitatingly and fearlessly declared war with the "economists", but none knew better than himself, that to maintain the ground he had taken, it was necessary to destroy, utterly and for ever, the central post and main reliance of the opposing party – the Malthusian theory.'⁴ Predictably, Southey welcomed Sadler as someone who would finish the demolition job that he and Rickman had been engaged upon for nearly thirty years.⁵ Hence too, perhaps, the satisfaction Macaulay derived from mounting the Whig response.

Sharing with Sadler an evangelical background, while by no means being an orthodox representative of the breed, Macaulay was well equipped to answer Sadler's by-now familiar charges against Malthus on grounds of the irreconcilability of the population principle with any conception of the goodness of God, biblical doctrines, or revelation. Macaulay was equally prepared to take on Sadler's invocation of a law of inverse variation as an alternative to Malthus's geometric progression by showing that the reduced fecundity to be found in crowded cities was merely one of Malthus's checks rather than a counter-instance to them. He also recalculated, in order to ridicule, the elaborate arithmetic that lay behind Sadler's 104 tables of figures. Empson reported Malthus as being 'well pleased' by Macaulay's performance – a performance that was to be repeated two years later

³ The citations come from the introduction to the work on *Ireland; Its Evils and Their Remedies*, 1828, which Sadler wrote as a prologue to his *Law of Population*.

⁴ See [R. B. Seeley], *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Michael Thomas Sadler*, p. 150.

⁵ 'Have you seen Sadler's book? It ought to make Malthus do justice upon himself with a rope. You always said that Malthus was wrong throughout his detail, and I knew him to be so in his foundation of his system. Sadler has now shown to demonstration that his facts are as false and his deductions consequently as fallacious, as the practical results to which he would lead us are abominable'; see letter to Rickman, 1 May 1830 in *Selections from the Letters of Robert Southey*, IV, p. 180.

on the hustings.⁶ After a particularly tense campaign, Macaulay defeated Sadler in the first election at Leeds to be fought under the franchise arrangements introduced by the Reform Act.⁷

It was to Macaulay too that Jeffrey entrusted the task of reviewing Southey's *Colloquies*, another commission Macaulay undertook with relish, speaking with the brash confidence of a young Whig faced with what he treated as the doom-laden nostalgia of an ageing ultra-Tory. Memorably, if somewhat inaccurately, he damned Southey's vision as one constructed on the basis of 'rose bushes and poor rates' rather than 'steam engines and independence'. Macaulay was wrong about Poor Law rates (on that matter Southey had been cured by Rickman), but nearer the truth in speaking about the nostalgic paternalism behind rose bushes. Hazlitt – never one to lose an opportunity to pursue Southey and Coleridge for reneging on the radicalism he had shared with them in youth – had wanted the reviewing job himself, but fully endorsed Macaulay's criticism of Southey when it appeared.⁸ What Hazlitt could not have managed, however, was Macaulay's attack on Southey's misunderstandings in matters of political economy: they were just 'what we might expect from a man who regards politics, not as a matter of science, but as a matter of taste and feeling'. Southey was unable to appreciate the positive achievements of the manufacturing system in reducing the numbers requiring assistance under the Poor Laws and in bringing down mortality rates – exactly the points made by Rickman in his private attempts to moderate Southey's hostility to manufacturing. Nor was Southey capable of appreciating the benefits of paper currency and the fallacy that lay behind his belief that the wealth of the nation could be increased by undertaking public works through the painless expedient of increasing the national debt. Macaulay concluded by giving one of his most self-assured celebrations of Britain's material advances and prospects. He also provided a definition of 'independence' that translated Smith's system of natural liberty into the far less sceptical, but perhaps more recognisable

⁶ See letter from Macaulay to Macvey Napier, 12 February 1831 in *Selections from the Correspondence of Macvey Napier*, p. 100.

⁷ See Macaulay's two articles on Sadler in the *Edinburgh Review* as reprinted in his *Miscellaneous Writings and Speeches*, London, 1900, pp. 226–66. On the background to Macaulay's articles and subsequent relations with Sadler see J. Clive, *Macaulay: The Shaping of the Historian*, New York, 1973, pp. 221–9.

⁸ See letter to Macvey Napier, 19 March 1830 in *The Letters of William Hazlitt*, edited by H. M. Sikes, p. 372. As David Bromwich points out, Macaulay's attack on Southey resembles Hazlitt's dislike of Wordsworth's nostalgia in Book 1 of *The Prelude*, see his *Hazlitt, The Mind of a Critic*, Oxford, 1983, p. 180.

language that later characterised Gladstonian finance and mid-Victorian notions of *laissez-faire*.

It is not by the intermeddling of Mr. Southey's idol, the omniscient and omniscient State, but by the prudence and energy of the people, that England has hitherto been carried forward in civilisation . . . Our rulers will best promote the improvement of the nation by strictly confining themselves to their own legitimate duties, by leaving capital to find its most lucrative course, commodities their fair price, industry and intelligence their natural reward, idleness and folly their natural punishment, by maintaining peace, by defending property, by diminishing the price of law, and by observing strict economy in every department of the state. Let the Government do this: the People will assuredly do the rest.⁹

Malthus's early anxieties about the growth of manufacturing had been considerably modified by 1830, while still falling short (by a century or two?) of Macaulay's confidence in what was likely to be available to the British people by the end of the coming century as a result of technological progress.¹⁰ Contrary to those who attacked him as an advocate of stationary or declining population, rather than as someone who was concerned with its optimal growth, Malthus believed that if the rate of increase could be slowed and brought into alignment with the increase of subsistence, he could 'easily conceive, that this country with a proper direction of national industry, might, in the course of some centuries, contain two or three times its present population, and yet, every man in the kingdom be much better fed and clothed than he is at present'.¹¹ He could manage a cheer in favour of steam engines: he certainly believed that the war against France had ultimately been won by Mr Watt's invention.¹² Malthus was also more unqualifiedly optimistic about the short- as well as long-term benefits of machinery than Ricardo: there was 'little reason to apprehend any permanent evil from the increase of machinery. The presumption always is, that it will lead to a great extension both of wealth and

⁹ See review of 'Southey's Colloquies on Society' as reprinted in *Lord Macaulay's Essays*, p. 121.

¹⁰ 'If we were to prophesy that in the year 1930 a population of fifty millions, better fed, clad, and lodged than the English of our time, will cover these islands, that Sussex and Huntingdonshire will be wealthier than the wealthiest parts of the West Riding of Yorkshire now are, that cultivation, rich as that of a flower-garden, will be carried up to the very tops of Ben Nevis and Helvellyn, that machines constructed on principles yet undiscovered will be in every house, that there will be no highways but railroads, no travelling but by steam, that our debt, vast as it seems to us, will appear to our great-grandchildren a trifling encumbrance, which might easily be paid off in a year or two, many people would think us insane' (*ibid.*, p. 120)

¹¹ *EPP*, II, p. 111, repeated on p. 210.

¹² See *PPE*, I, p. 409.

value.' In the second edition of the *Principles* this statement was modified to remove even the hint of *temporary* evil.¹³ Manchester's success in producing cotton goods for a market in 'comforts' that had proved responsive to lower prices was certainly welcomed by him.

During the debates that led up to the passage of the Reform Bill, Macaulay became the standard bearer for the middle classes. Again, remembering his lingering attachment to an independent landowning class as the bulwark of British liberties, Malthus would probably not have gone *quite* so far in this direction as Macaulay. Nevertheless, he had given a retrospective welcome to the Bill; he had said that the middle classes constituted 'that body on which the liberty, public spirit and good government of every country must mainly depend'; and he had come to appreciate the variety and extent of those incomes and forms of property associated with the professional middle classes which allowed them to become one of the main sources of 'effectual demand'. He had coupled them with landowners in his earliest unpublished pamphlet on the constitution as the defenders of British liberties, and they were, of course, the embodiment of all those prudential and respectable qualities he hoped to encourage among the 'labouring' or 'working' classes – the terms he increasingly used in his writings in place of 'lower classes'.

Malthus would have had no difficulty in endorsing Macaulay's general theme of independence as the clue to improvement. It underlay his original admiration for Godwin's stress on 'private judgement'. Indeed, the whole of his work could be cited in support of the idea of individual moral responsibility and the absence of relations of dependence. Yet, as will be clear from what has been said in previous essays, there are subtle problems of emphasis involved in any attempt to describe Malthus as an enthusiastic supporter of *laissez-faire* in Macaulay's manner – or, indeed, that of Ricardo. Malthus's belief in the virtues of Smith's system of natural liberty was far too deeply ingrained, of course, for him to entertain the kinds of vision of an all-powerful state sketched by Southey, but he wished to maintain a counterbalancing role for government over the Corn Laws; he was in favour of factory legislation in the case of children; and he advised against an over-precipitate return to orthodox fiscal policies during the post-war depression. The disruptions created by trade cycles and major economic changes might require public initiatives of a palliative nature;

¹³ *PPE*, I, p. 412 and the surrounding discussion on pp. 402–13; see also II, p. 263, and p. 261, where Malthus protests against being 'classed with Mr. Sismondi as an enemy to machinery'.

they certainly dictated a policy of caution in legislative matters of a kind that Smith himself had supported when advising on the detailed implementation of the system of natural liberty.

On the basis of the accumulated revisions begun in the second *Essay*, Malthus could justifiably claim to have responded positively to the new and extraordinary lights associated with the French revolution by restating the basis on which gradual social improvement could take place:

though our future prospects respecting the mitigation of the evils arising from the principle of population may not be so bright as we could wish, yet they are far from being entirely disheartening, and by no means preclude that gradual and progressive improvement in human society, which, before the late wild speculations on the subject, was the object of rational expectation . . . It would indeed be a melancholy reflection that, while the views of physical science are daily enlarging, so as scarcely to be bounded by the most distant horizon, the science of moral and political philosophy should be confined within such narrow limits, or at best be so feeble in its influence, as to be unable to counteract the increasing obstacles to human happiness arising from the progress of population. But however formidable these obstacles may have appeared in some parts of this [*Essay*], it is hoped that the general results of the inquiry is such as not to make us give up the cause of the improvement in human society in despair. The partial good which seems to be attainable is worthy of all our exertions; is sufficient to direct our efforts and animate our prospects.¹⁴

Yet it must be recognised that the idea of Malthus as an advocate of human improvement continues to meet with resistance. The way in which what are thought to be Malthusian diagnoses and remedies continue to arouse strong feelings suggests that there are some propositions that are not merely inherently contestable, but do not allow reasoned judgement. It was only four years after Malthus's death that Charles Darwin was to alight on the *Essay on Population* as the clue to the pressures which lay behind the changes in species. The association of Malthus with the kind of struggle for survival that Darwin revealed in the animal and plant kingdom, while it gave Malthus's ideas a new lease of life, was to do further harm to his reputation among those who had always suspected him of being an advocate of what is known today as socio-biology in its most reductionist form. When Darwin first faced the public with his theory of natural selection, however, the association worked the other way: Darwin was tarred with the Malthusian brush.

¹⁴ *EPP*, II, pp. 202-3.

One of Darwin's early critics, Samuel Haughton, Professor of Geology at Dublin, said of the *Origin of Species* that 'this notable argument is borrowed from Malthus's doctrine of Population, and will, no doubt find acceptance with those Political Economists and Pseudo-Philosophers who reduce all the law of action and human thought habitually to the lowest and most sordid motives'. Neither Darwin nor Malthus can be accused of misunderstanding the essential differences between the natural and moral universes. But the joint attack on them by Haughton created a bond between the two men which Darwin recognised when musing on their common fate:

What has Haughton done that he feels so immeasurably superior to all us wretched naturalists and to all political economists, including the great philosopher Malthus? ... It consoles me that he sneers at Malthus, for that clearly shows, mathematician though he may be, he cannot understand common reasoning. By the way, what a discouraging example Malthus is to show, during what long years the plainest case may be misrepresented and misunderstood.¹⁵

II

After their deaths, what had been a one-sided quarrel between Malthus and Coleridge was continued by their friends and followers, becoming more even-sided in the process. When Coleridge's *Table Talk* appeared in 1835, several items revealed just how preoccupied Coleridge had been by his antipathy to Malthus. Indeed, the following paragraph had to be removed from the second edition after it had been described in the *Westminster Review* as 'a coarse, indecent attack':

Is it not lamentable – is it not even more wonderful that the monstrous sophism of Malthus should now have gotten possession of the leading men of the Kingdom? Such a lie in morals – and such a lie in fact as it is too! I declare solemnly that I do not believe all the heresies and sects and factions which the ignorance and the weakness and wickedness of man have ever given birth to, were altogether so disgraceful to man as a Christian, a philosopher, a statesman, or citizen as this abominable tenet. It should be exposed by reasoning in the form of Ridicule. Asgill or Swift would have done much – but like the Popish doctrines, it is so vicious a tenet, so flattering to the cruelty,

¹⁵ Two letters to J. D. Hooker and Charles Lyell have been conflated in the quotation; see letters from Darwin dated 5 and 6 June 1860 in *The Collected Correspondence of Charles Darwin*, edited by F. Burkhardt *et al.*, Cambridge, 1993, viii, pp. 238, 242. The quotation from Haughton's review can be found in the note to p. 239 of this volume.

and avarice and sordid selfishness of most men, that I hardly know what to think of the result.¹⁶

Henry Coleridge, rapporteur of his uncle's conversation, had anticipated that the remarks on 'the Reform Bill and Malthusian economists' would be declared 'illiberal by those who, in the present day, emphatically call themselves liberal – *the* liberal'.¹⁷ This defence was clearly on the point of becoming an attack. In common with similar remarks on the 'mock philanthropy' of 'sickly liberality' to be found in Rickman's letters, it could be a sign of the increasingly embattled frame of mind of members of Coleridge's circle, for which the word conservative, in one of its senses at least, is not inappropriate.¹⁸ Speaking for the 'liberal' position, William Empson, Malthus's colleague as Professor at the East India College, responded angrily to *Table Talk*: 'What do Mr. Coleridge's literary executors expect that they are earning for themselves or for their author, by circulating posthumous poisoned slaver against the name of Mr Malthus?'¹⁹ It is not surprising that Macaulay applauded Empson's response to Coleridge, adding some abuse of his own.²⁰ More surprising perhaps is the fact that some of Coleridge's admirers expressed similar misgivings in private. Henry Crabb Robinson found those parts of the work that dealt with Malthus, the Reform Bill and the Church 'the very topics on which [Coleridge] was most bigoted and least ingenious'. This opinion was shared, as we have seen, by John Stuart Mill, as well as by another disciple, John Sterling, who came close to endorsing Malthus's own diagnosis of the misanthropic state of mind of some of his critics:

¹⁶ See *Table Talk* in *CW*, xiv (i), pp. 323–4. Thomas Perronet Thompson was the author of the adverse comment on this paragraph; see also the abuse Thompson directed at the ignorance of Coleridge (a 'Tory pensioner') when writing on national debt, machinery, and landed property along lines that parallel Macaulay's attack on Southey, *Westminster Review*, 22 (1835), 531–7.

¹⁷ See *Table Talk* in *CW*, xiv (ii), p. 13.

¹⁸ See, for example, Rickman's statement to Southey, apropos Catholic emancipation, in 1825: 'There is a kind of wearisomeness in being always on the defensive, modern liberality not permitting the use of such weapons as cut deep, unless on the liberal side of the argument'; O. Williams, *Rickman*, pp. 229–30.

¹⁹ See Empson's 'Life, Writings, and Character of Mr. Malthus', *Edinburgh Review*, 64 (1837), 472–3n.

²⁰ 'You are quite right in falling on Coleridge. It is quite intolerable that a man on whose grave stone flattery could not venture to write the hackneyed praise of being a good husband and a father – a lazy sot, stupefied by opium – should, in the intervals between "his drunken dozes" abuse the best men of his time, and that these Fescennine rants should be published as oracles' (Macaulay, letter to Empson, 19 June 1837 in *Selected Letters of Thomas Babington Macaulay*, edited by T. Pinney, Cambridge, 1982, p. 169).

I never could understand Coleridge's ignorance or on the other alternative my own about this matter. The *rationale* of Malthusianism seems to be that unless [the poor] restrain themselves from begetting children whom they cannot support the population will perpetually be brought down to the only possible level by misery and disease and the mass of the survivors will be debased and stunted. Now surely this is at least not absurd or immoral. On this point it has long seemed to me that perhaps from soreness at the prevalent views of an age so cruel to him, S. T. C. was unlike himself, was an enemy to calm and comprehensive enquiry into one whole set of phenomena.²¹

Thomas De Quincey delivered a more sweepingly damning verdict. As an admirer of Ricardo's political economy in its most severely deductive form, he first entered the debate in 1823, returning in the 1830s 'to protest against the probable imputation, that I, because generally so intense an admirer of [the Lake poets], adopted their blind and hasty reveries in political economy'.²² Speaking on the basis of personal acquaintance, he also felt able to offer an unflattering reason for these reveries:

all 'the Lake Poets', as they are called, were not only in error, but most presumptuously in error, upon these subjects. They were ignorant of every principle belonging to every question alike in political economy, and they were obstinately bent upon learning nothing; they were all alike too proud to acknowledge that any man knew better than they, unless it were upon some purely professional subject, or some art remote from all intellectual bearing, such as conferred no honour in its possession.²³

De Quincey's admiration for Ricardo, and consequent opinion that Malthus was a shallow thinker by comparison, adds weight to his answer to the charges of Coleridge that Malthus had done nothing to advance understanding beyond those eighteenth-century sources on which he drew. Whatever his other deficiencies, De Quincey said, Malthus 'took an obvious and familiar truth, which until his time had been a barren truism, and showed that it teemed with consequences'.

Is it nothing for our theoretic knowledge that Mr. Malthus has taught us to judge more wisely of the pretended depopulations from battle, pestilence, and famine, with which all history has hitherto teemed? Is it nothing for our practical knowledge that Mr. Malthus has taught the lawgivers and the

²¹ See *Table Talk* in *CW*, xiv (i), p. 324n. and xiv (ii), p. 312. For Mill's opinion in 1837, see Mill, *CW*, I, p. 424n.: 'It is pitiable to find a man of Mr. Coleridge's genius uttering on population, taxes and many other topics, stuff which was barely pardonable in any thinking person forty years ago, and which it is now below the average knowledge and intellect of the commonest hacks of the press.'

²² See *Recollections of the Lake Poets*, edited by D. Wright, London, 1970, p. 246.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 241-2.

governors of the world to treat with contempt the pernicious counsels of political economists from Athenian days down to our own – clamouring for direct encouragements to population? Is it nothing for England that he first has exposed the fundamental vice of our Poor Laws . . . and placed a lighthouse upon the rocks to which our course was rapidly carrying us in darkness? Is it nothing for science and the whole world that, by unfolding the laws which govern population, he has given to political economy its complement and sole desideratum; which wanting, all its movements were insecure and liable to error; which added, political economy (however imperfect as to its development) has now become, as to the *idea* of its parts, perfect and orbicular? Is this, and more that might be alleged, nothing?²⁴

This defence of Malthus and of the entire idea of a science of political economy, coming from an ultra-Tory, was an unexpected bonus – one that was to be augmented when De Quincey brought out his *Logic of Political Economy* in 1844. It revealed – albeit from a maverick source – that support for the science need not be confined to liberal Tories, Whigs, and Benthamite radicals. It also underlined the way in which the position adopted by Coleridge and Southey on political economy was beginning to seem gratuitous, merely personal, and frequently petulant. In choosing to concentrate their enmity on Malthus, the early romantics had made an emotive commitment that proved singularly inappropriate; they had chosen the one contemporary exponent of the science who least fitted their rage and might have provided them with a more effective way of voicing their concerns, albeit in the language of a science they professed to despise yet could not avoid when discussing the same questions. Ricardo's disciples, especially those who combined their Ricardianism with Benthamism in politics, represented a more comprehensive threat to the political, economic, and religious ideals that Southey and Coleridge were articulating.²⁵

One of Coleridge's more interesting accusations against political economy was its tendency to 'denationalise mankind, and to make the love of country a foolish superstition'.²⁶ This had been pounced on by De Quincey as evidence that Coleridge had completely failed to

²⁴ 'Notes from the Pocket-Book of a Late Opium Eater', *London Magazine*, 8 (1823), 586–7.

²⁵ There was an aside in *Table Talk* that attacked the utilitarians as philistines, as those who would 'dig up the charcoal foundations of the temple of Ephesus to burn as fuel for a steam-engine' (*CW*, xiv (1), p. 490), but Malthus was always the central target; he also fitted Coleridge's broad definition of a utilitarian. Southey also attacked Bentham's plan for a prison constructed according to Panopticon principles as 'a monument at once of Jeremy's philosophico-philofelon-philanthropy, of national folly, and of the futility of all such schemes of reformation', but the link with political economy was little more than one of juxtaposition; see *Quarterly Review*, 87 (1831), 277.

²⁶ *Table Talk* in *CW*, xiv (1), p. 487.

understand that the science had nothing to do with ‘invaluable estimates of social grandeur’ because it is

a science openly professing to insulate and to treat apart from all other constituents of national well-being, those which concern the production and circulation of wealth. So far from gaining anything by enlarging its field political economy would be as idly travelling out of the limits indicated and held forth in its very name, as if logic were to teach ethics, or ethics to teach diplomacy.²⁷

He may have been right in thinking that Coleridge had confused attempted explanation with normative recommendation, but his defence of the purity and methodological limits of deductive theory would have been more acceptable to Ricardo, Whately, Senior, and John Stuart Mill than to Malthus – or, of course, to Smith. In their different ways, all of these figures adopted a more restricted – or perhaps it was simply a safer and tidier – view of the scope of the ‘pure’ science of political economy, one that made a firmer distinction between ethically neutral questions of the hypothetical science and its far from ethically neutral applications to final goals or policy.

Nevertheless, Coleridge’s charge of ‘denationalisation’ does capture one of the enduring features imparted to the science by Smith, which ‘cosmopolitan’ is still perhaps the best positive description. It was displayed in idealistic form in that side of the *Wealth of Nations* about which Paine was most enthusiastic and Richard Cobden was later to uphold almost as religion: commerce between nations treated as a pacific and unifying influence on the peoples and counsels of the world. For those who made the chief running in advocating free trade in corn, Ricardians especially, this policy was the most obvious way of escaping the restriction on rising living standards posed by diminishing returns and the agrarian bottleneck. It was also the last major step towards fulfilling the cosmopolitan promise contained within Smith’s system of natural liberty. They saw it as an exemplary step towards reciprocity and multilateralism in matters of trade by the nation that could both afford and expect to gain most from the opening of markets and the extension to the world at large of gains from the division of labour.

As we have seen in an earlier essay (number 6), Smith’s vision looked different when seen by some representatives of new nations, best illustrated by Alexander Hamilton in his *Report on Manufactures*, and by his follower, Friedrich List, when treating free trade as little more than

²⁷ *Recollections of the Lake Poets*, pp. 244–5.

- ✓ the self-serving conclusion of English 'cosmopolitical economy', the
- ✓ foundation for what was later to be known as 'free trade
- ✓ imperialism'.²⁸ Domestically, however, Ricardian logic pointed to the benefits an island with a rapidly rising population could derive from embracing a policy of paying for its food and raw materials by exporting the products of its new workshops and factories rather than by having recourse to increasingly inferior land at home. For philosophic radicals like James and John Stuart Mill, free trade in corn could also form part of an attack on the aristocratic order in England.
- ✓ For various reasons that will now be obvious, Malthus could not
- ✓ become a crusader in this particular cause. It seems worth stressing, however, that he suffered pangs of conscience over his inability to do so.²⁹
- ✓ Given the enthusiasm with which both Hamilton and List embraced
- ✓ manufacturing capacity as an essential component in any idea of
- ✓ modern nationhood, Coleridge's charge against political economy can
- ✓ no more be seen in the light of their criticisms of 'cosmopolitical
- ✓ economy' than it can be treated, say, as a serious contribution to the British Corn Law debate on the optimal balance between agrarian and
- ✓ manufacturing activities. Rather it should be regarded as a reflection of
- ✓ the Lake poets' patriotism – of the loyalism they associated with national self-sufficiency, military preparedness, Christian paternalism,
- ✓ and the Protestant ascendancy, for which conservatism had become the
- ✓ most convenient collective synonym. Southey could speak with nostalgia about 'the wild cosmopolite character' of the radicalism of his generation of supporters of the French revolution, of those 'young men of ardent mind and generous inexperience' who had become the innocent dupes of universalist doctrines of the rights of man, believing themselves to be the bearers of 'the hopes and destinies of the human race, of rapid improvement and indefinite progression'. But Southey's purpose in so doing was to contrast this with a current state of affairs in which the 'spirit of jacobinism' had 'evaporated from the top of the vessel' and was settling as dregs at the bottom of society.³⁰ The historic

²⁸ See pp. 161–2 above for primary and secondary literature on this subject.

²⁹ '... his general principles in favour of freedom of trade were so absolute, that, at times, doubts came over him whether any exception ought to be admitted. It follows, that he was far from continuing always equally satisfied that the necessity of the particular exception which he had argued, in behalf of restriction upon the importation of corn, was sufficiently made out.' (See Empson, 'Life, Writings, and Character of Mr. Malthus, p. 497.)

³⁰ *Essays, Moral and Political*, 1, pp. 126–8. On the subject at large see D. Eastwood, 'Robert Southey and the Meanings of Patriotism', *Journal of British Studies*, 31 (1992), 265–87.

moment when misguided cosmopolitan sympathies could be tolerated by romantic Burkeans had passed.

From there it is perhaps a small step towards what became known in its most reified form as *the conservative* revolt against the eighteenth century. It could also have been a revolt against the entire project of Enlightenment with which political economy retained firm links. John Stuart Mill certainly depicted the conflict in this manner after his encounter with Wordsworth and Coleridge. He even found much to admire in Southey, 'a man of gentle feelings and bitter opinions', though he felt that Southey's 'attachment to old institutions and his condemnation of the practices of those who administer them, cut him off from sympathy and communion with both halves of mankind'.³¹ When blended with ideas derived from Auguste Comte and the St Simonians, the contrast Mill erected between Coleridge and Bentham as the seminal yet diametrically opposed intellects of the age was characterised in his *Autobiography* as 'a reaction of the nineteenth century against the eighteenth'.³² Mill's statement of what divided the camps perhaps reflects as much the therapeutic benefits of his encounter with the Lake poets to himself as the reality of the division posited; and since he described his father as 'the last of the eighteenth century', an Oedipal element can also be suspected.

James Mill certainly displayed the links between political economy and Enlightenment aspirations in their most dogmatic Scottish and Benthamite form.³³ By contrast, Malthus did so in the more troubled tones of a liberal and cautiously progressive Anglicanism. What Malthus referred to as 'rational expectations', however, clearly involves an extension of that process for which the eighteenth-century term civilisation was coined and Enlightenment was understood. John Stuart Mill's efforts to achieve a compromise between his 'eighteenth-century' education and his 'nineteenth-century' discoveries are sufficiently impressive to warrant the attention they have received over the years. He was, after all, one of the few persons to attempt a bridge-building exercise based on his knowledge of both sides. What is equally apparent, however, is that his efforts did not result in any permanent

³¹ Letter to Sterling, 20 October 1831 in Mill, *CW*, xii, p. 83. See also E. Dowden (ed.), *The Correspondence of Henry Taylor*, London, 1885, pp. 39–40 on Mill's encounter with Southey at Taylor's house: 'There were Southey and John Mill, far as the poles asunder in politics, but somewhat akin in morals and in habits of literary industry.'

³² See *Autobiography* in Mill, *CW*, i, pp. 113–14, 143.

³³ For the applicability of both of these adjectives see Collini *et al.*, *That Noble Science of Politics*, pp. 111–26.

bridge being built that was capable of bearing traffic across the divide. One of the enduring fault lines in British cultural debate had now been created, and where Coleridge and Southey had led, Carlyle, Ruskin, and their nineteenth- and twentieth-century admirers followed, often doing so with the same wilful disregard for what their chosen antagonists were actually saying.

III

Malthus never obtained the preferment within the Church from a Whig ministry that his friends claimed was his due. Brougham, now Lord Chancellor, had broken off in the middle of a speech on the Poor Law Amendment Bill in 1834 to record the following extravagant tribute:

may I step aside for one moment, and do justice to a most learned, a most able, a most virtuous individual, whose name has been mixed up with more unwitting deceptions, and also with more wilful misrepresentation than that of any man of science in this Protestant country, and in these liberal and enlightened times. When I mention talent, learning, humanity – the strongest sense of public duty, the most amiable feelings in private life, the tenderest and most humane disposition which ever man was adorned with – when I speak of one of the ornaments of the society in which he moves, the delight of his own family, and not less the admiration of those men of letters and of science amongst whom he shines the first and brightest – when I speak of one of the most enlightened, learned, and pious ministers whom the Church of England ever numbered amongst her sons – I am sure every one will apprehend that I cannot but refer to Mr Malthus. The character of this estimable man has been foully slandered by some who had the excuse of ignorance, and by others, I fear, without any such palliative, and simply for having made one of the greatest additions to political philosophy which has been effected since that branch of learning has been worthy of the name of a science.³⁴

Coming from such a controversial figure, this ‘flaming eulogy’ was to draw down more foul slanders on Malthus’s head.³⁵ Yet Brougham had done the Malthus family some service in offering Malthus one of the livings he controlled – an offer that Malthus refused in favour of his son. Empson complained bitterly in 1837 that: ‘To the discouragement of great abilities, virtuously employed, and to the discredit of his country, Mr. Malthus, at the age of seventy, died, having never held

³⁴ *House of Lords Debates*, 21 July 1834, cc.224–5.

³⁵ See the account of this episode in James, *Population Malthus*, pp. 455–6.

any thing in the Church, except some small family preferment.³⁶ Otter rubbed the point in by adding 'neglect of the great' to 'misrepresentations of the ignorant' when writing the epitaph that was erected in Bath Abbey. Brougham and Empson continued to quarrel over whether Lord Lansdowne and Lord Holland, both or neither, had made adequate or, indeed, any efforts on Malthus's behalf.³⁷ But if Malthus was not given the preferment he deserved, the same cannot be said of some of his clerical followers: a Bishop of Chester who became Archbishop of Canterbury (Sumner), an Archbishop of Dublin (Whately), and the Bishops of Chichester and Llandaff (Otter and Coplestone). As preferments go, this was not a bad haul, without mentioning Chalmers, who became Moderator of the Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1832, and was perhaps the most charismatic and influential of preachers during the first half of the century. When Walter Bagehot later maintained that Malthus had 'connected his name with the foundation of a lasting science which he did not plan, and would by no means have agreed in', he was ignoring the Christian version of the science – another indication of the divorce between political economy and natural theology mentioned at the end of the previous essay.³⁸

The most conspicuous mark of public approbation awarded to Malthus (after his Fellowship of the Royal Society) came in the form of the title Royal Associate of the newly created Royal Society of Literature in 1824. The final irony in the Malthus–Coleridge relationship arises from the fact that in the same year Coleridge was also elected to this élite body consisting of only ten people. Unsurprisingly, Malthus pledged himself to communicate to the Society on the subject of 'Political Economy and Statistics', where the combination was particularly appropriate to a demographer who was to become, in company with Richard Jones and Charles Babbage, a founder-member of what was later the Royal Statistical Society. Equally unsurprisingly perhaps, Coleridge promised something on the following lines: 'The relations of opposition and conjunction, in which the Poetry, (the Homeric and Tragic), the Religion, and the Mysteries, of Ancient Greece, stood to each other; with the differences between the sacerdotal and popular Religion; and the influences of Theology and

³⁶ 'Life, Writings, and Character of Mr. Malthus', p. 501.

³⁷ See letters from Brougham in *Selections from the Correspondence of Macvey Napier*, pp. 187–8, 198, 226, 321.

³⁸ See *Economic Studies*, London, 1908, pp. 194–5.

Scholastic Logic, on the Language and Literature of Christendom, from the Eleventh Century'.³⁹ It seems unlikely that either man attended the other's lectures, though perhaps the smallness of the body made it an obligatory torture. Malthus's lectures 'On the Measure of the Conditions necessary to the Supply of Commodities' and 'On the meaning which is most usually and most correctly attached to the term "Value of a Commodity"' were not the kinds of offerings likely to excite a non-specialist audience. Coleridge's only contribution differed from his original proposal. It was a lecture 'On the Prometheus of Aeschylus; An Essay Preparatory to a series of Disquisitions respecting the Egyptian in connection with the Sacerdotal Theology, and in contrast with the Mysteries of ancient Greece', on which topic he discoursed 'with most remorseful Sympathy for the Audience' for an hour and twenty-five minutes.⁴⁰

Coleridge needed the one hundred guineas per annum that came with the title – far more than did Malthus with his professorial salary and family livings at Okewood in Surrey and Walesby in Lincolnshire. When William IV discontinued his predecessor's largesse in 1831, Coleridge was obliged to apply to Brougham for a Civil List pension that would make good the loss. When a provisional Treasury grant was arranged by Lord Grey as a result of Brougham's efforts, however, Coleridge refused it on the grounds that it looked more like a gift that recognised his poverty than an honour that reflected his chosen vocation:

tho' neither Whig nor Tory, I am enough of the latter, I trust, sincerely and habitually to fear God: and to honour the King, as ordained of God – i.e. as no Reflection or Derivative from the (pretended) Sovereignty of the *People*, but as the lawful Representative, the consecrated Symbol of the Unity and Majesty of the *Nation*: and therefore, with all the possible deference and respect that can be felt toward a Nobleman personally a stranger to me, I cannot but find a most essential difference between a private donation from Lord Grey, and a public honour and stipend conferred on me by my Sovereign in mark of approval of the objects and purposes to which I had devoted and was continuing to devote the powers and talents entrusted to me.⁴¹

The circumstances surrounding the withdrawal of royal financial support aroused considerable public discussion, much of it turning on

³⁹ This was the version recorded in the Society's minutes, as cited by James, *Population Malthus*, p. 360. A longer version of this project was given in Coleridge's letter of acceptance; see letter to Richard Cattermole, Secretary to the Society, 15 March 1824 in *CL*, v, pp. 343–4.

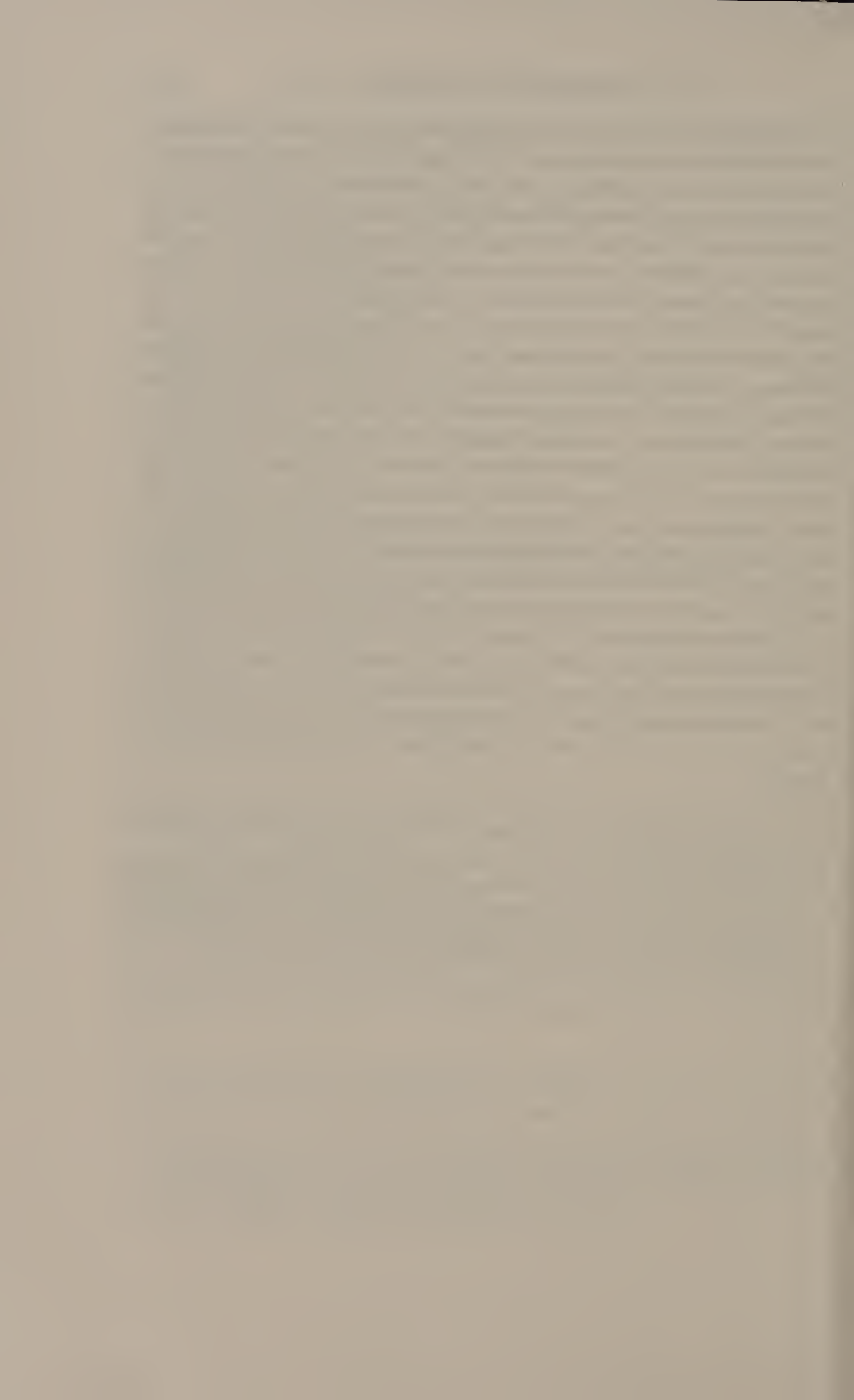
⁴⁰ See letter to John Taylor Coleridge, 19 May 1825 in *CL*, v, p. 461.

⁴¹ See letter to William Sotheby, 3 June 1831 in *CL*, vi, p. 863.

the particular case of Coleridge. Fully in sympathy with Coleridge's own ideas on the importance of endowments for the support of a clerisy, John Stuart Mill joined the controversy in defence of the principle behind Coleridge's lost stipend.⁴² Having to call on Brougham's assistance could not have been easy for someone with Coleridge's political sympathies. It is even less likely that Mill's defence of men of science and letters who had made a significant contribution to the progress of civilisation would have been comfortable reading. Mill cited Adam Smith, Jean-Baptiste Say, and David Ricardo alongside Beccaria, Voltaire, Bentham, and Newton. If the idea of free trade had not been the specific example chosen by Mill to illustrate the benefits of scientific discovery, he could equally well have cited the name of Malthus – as he did later when stating that the population principle was the origin of all sound thinking on wages and mass poverty.⁴³ The other 'great moral and social improvement' that figures prominently in Mill's defence was the Reform Bill; it would remove some obstacles in the path of civilisation, but could not be a substitute for pursuing that path by means that would have been – at this stage of his career at least – Coleridgean in spirit. As bridge-builder, Mill felt free to employ materials taken from either side of the divide that had emerged. Coleridge himself had given up that freedom at an early stage in his life, with important long-term consequences, it could be argued – though not here – for our understanding of the cultural history of Britain.

⁴² See 'Attack on Literature' from *The Examiner*, 12 June 1831 in *Newspaper Writings* in Mill, *CW*, xxii, pp. 318–27, 329–31.

⁴³ 'Though the assertion may be looked upon as a paradox, it is historically true, that only from that time [the publication of Malthus's *Essay*] has the economical condition of the labouring classes been regarded by thoughtful men as susceptible of permanent improvement'; see 'The Claims of Labour' in Mill, *CW*, iv, p. 366. This opinion was repeated later in the *Principles of Political Economy* (1848); see Mill, *CW*, ii and iii, pp. 154, 162, 345–6, 352–3, 370, 753.



PART IV

Epilogue

The appropriation of Smith's branch of the science of the legislator, and its development into something known later as 'classical political economy', was mentioned in the Prologue as one of the themes that would be pursued in these essays. The way in which it has been pursued, however, does not conform with the canons for charting the career of economics that were sketched by its earliest historians and have, to a large extent, been followed to this day. It has certainly not been told as a story of how a Smithian pre-history gave way to the real thing – the approach adopted modestly by Ricardo, and with more confidence, even dogmatism, by his disciples and later admirers, from Mill to Marx and beyond. Nor, in reverse, has it been recounted as story of loss of insight, even perhaps as one that involved betrayal of a broader, more soundly based vision.¹ Such stories may be acceptable as contributions to current controversies, but they tend in the telling to lose whatever interest they might have had as history – a history that connects economic speculation with, rather than disassociates it from, those other forms of thinking and feeling, moral and political, with which it was linked in the minds of the protagonists themselves, and by which it has undoubtedly been enriched.

I would also like to think that the approach adopted here does more justice to the heterogeneity of political economy, both as science and art. The homogeneity attributed to classical political economy by Marx and Keynes when coining their respective versions of this aggregation reflects *their* intellectual preoccupations more than it does those of their historical subjects. Moreover, none of the simpler notions of super-

¹ See for example the contributions by A. L. Macfie, Sheila C. Dow, and Terence Hutchison to D. Mair (ed.), *The Scottish Contribution to Modern Economic Thought*, Aberdeen, 1990. The losses associated with Ricardian perspectives, old and new, have been a running theme in the work of Terence Hutchison. For the latest version of his ideas on this subject see his *Uses and Abuses of Economics; Contentious Essays on History and Method*, London, 1994.

cession or retrogression seem capable of encompassing the variety, let alone complexity, of the different phases and moods through which political economy passed between 1750 and 1834. Some of the moves initiated by Smith, Malthus, and Ricardo entailed intellectual innovation, others, such as those connected with luxury and inequality, were more akin to variations on existing conversations. Still others, such as the use made of the language of political economy during the American and French revolutions, show how a relatively new way of thinking was beginning to modify established modes of political discourse.

There are, of course, points of intersection with the doctrinal histories. One could still say, for example, that Malthus and Ricardo were concerned with developing those parts of the *Wealth of Nations*, notably the first two books, which could be adapted to their purposes in seeking diagnoses of, and in proposing remedies for, some acute, possibly chronic, problems manifested by British society – several of which were not, and could not be, foreseen by Smith. Given the breadth of Smith's and Malthus's concerns, however, this would be a restrictive way of putting things. A more complete version of this story would also have to consider a further question: why was Smith's moral philosophy, and those parts of the projected theory and history of law and government which can be found in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and the *Wealth of Nations*, not appropriated in similar fashion?²

If the changes in Smith's science had been achieved by means of immanent development alone, the story could have been told more economically, in both senses of the term. It would be a matter of isolating those theories – of value, rent, profits, wages, and foreign trade – that Malthus and Ricardo, together or separately, and with or without the assistance of a wider cast, found to be in need of refinement. For reasons that will be obvious to anyone who has read the first seven chapters of Ricardo's *Principles*, let alone the massive secondary literature they have generated, a doctrinal approach captures more of Ricardo than it does of Malthus. Ricardo's innovations can legitimately be recounted as a process of tidying up Smith's many loose ends by a more determined pursuit of the belief that political economy was essentially 'a strict science like mathematics', in which 'strong cases' could be used to analyse the forces leading to, or

² For an earlier attempt to deal with this part of the question see the first three essays in Collini *et al.*, *That Noble Science of Politics*. It has also been a pervasive theme in the work of Knud Haakonssen; see *Natural Law and Moral Philosophy from Grotius to the Scottish Enlightenment*, especially Chapters 5–9.

disturbing, equilibrium states. Malthus can and has been subjected to similar treatment, though not without significant remainder.³ In the case of Ricardo, however, 'political economy' is no longer synecdoche: it is the whole, not a part – though a Benthamite annexe needs to be added to house his views on 'good government'.⁴

It remains true, however, that one can no more understand Ricardo without Malthus than one can understand either without Smith. That is one reason, apart from the attention that has already been paid to Ricardo, for choosing Malthus as the fulcrum of the essays in Part III. Another is that Malthus not merely preceded Ricardo in stating some important new propositions, but became the focus of the earliest attacks by those who began the process of coupling the science with what they most feared and disliked – socially, morally, and politically – about the emergence of a society based on the manufacturing system. Both Ricardo and Malthus had to encompass new empirical evidence, new policy crises, and those shifts in the political environment which are easier to characterise now than they were then. In Malthus's case too, political economy had to conform with his Christian beliefs and the requirements of his natural theology. All this meant that an intellectual history of the transformation of Smith's science could not be achieved by means of doctrinal history; and since development did not follow one route, theoretical, empirical, or ideological, the subject seemed more suited to episodic treatment, involving linked essays, each dealing with a particular confrontation or argument.

It will also be clear that the episodes considered here were unfinished in 1834. The 'principles' of political economy so confidently assembled in the 1820s, especially by Ricardo's followers, were being subject to heavy questioning in the 1830s and 40s. This also coincided with the period of John Stuart Mill's youthful revolt against his Benthamite and Ricardian upbringing. Although he wrote the independent-minded *Essays on Some Unsettled Questions of Political Economy* in 1830–1, one of which acquired significance later as the basis for what he wanted to say about the methodological distinctiveness of political economy, seen as

³ See for example the chapters on Malthus in Eltis, *The Classical Theory of Economic Growth*; A. M. C. Waterman, 'Hume, Malthus and the Stability of Equilibrium', *History of Political Economy*, 20 (1988), 85–94; and N. von Tunzelman, 'Malthus's "Total Population System": A Dynamic Reinterpretation' in Coleman and Schofield (eds.), *The State of Population Theory*, pp. 65–95.

⁴ In saying this, I stand by the treatment given to Ricardo's politics in Collini *et al.*, *That Noble Science of Politics*, pp. 106–10, 115–17. I am yet to be convinced by the portrait of Ricardo as a significant innovator in these matters given in M. Milgate and S. Stimson, *Ricardo's Politics*, Princeton, 1991.

part of a wider range of moral or social sciences in Book VI of his *System of Logic*, Mill had become highly critical of what he had been taught as a youth. Reflecting the influence of the St Simonians, the 'Germano-Coleridgean' school, and his future wife, Harriet Taylor, Mill complained in 1834 that his mentors had attempted

to construct a permanent fabric out of transitory materials; that they take for granted the immutability of arrangements of society, many of which are in their nature fluctuating or progressive, and enunciate with as little qualification as if they were universal and absolute truths, propositions which are perhaps applicable to no state of society except the particular one in which they happened to live.⁵

Mill's criticisms were more apposite when levelled at Ricardo than at Malthus's broader and more inductive version of the Smithian legacy. Believing such criticisms to be true, however, it could only be as a result of becoming far less enthusiastic about the alternatives on offer in the 1830s that Mill resolved to embark on his own restatement of the science in the mid-1840s. When he did so, he chose the more generous architecture of the *Wealth of Nations* as his model, while continuing to employ Ricardian foundations when erecting the main pillars of the pure or hypothetical aspects of the science. In 1845, when reviewing De Quincey's *Logic of Political Economy*, Mill had softened his diagnosis of the state of play. It was simply that, 'as with some other sciences in certain of their stages, the superstructure seems to be overgrowing the foundation. The science is growing at the extremities, without a proportional and suitable enlargement of the main trunk'.⁶ Although the trunk of his own *Principles of Political Economy* in 1848 was still recognisably Ricardian, it was also redesigned to bear the weight of whole branches that would have seemed bewilderingly luxuriant to Ricardo and Malthus. For example, it had to allow for a distinction between the laws of production and the laws regulating distribution which made the latter appear less as 'physical truths' than as open to human will and institutional experimentation. Employing the licence granted by this distinction, Mill was able to include consideration of various socialistic experiments along communitarian and co-operative lines, as well as give his blessing to reformed tenure arrangements as the basis for viable peasant holdings in Ireland and elsewhere.

Mill was also to lay the foundation for a methodological reinterpretation

⁵ Review of 'Miss Martineau's Summary of Political Economy' (1834) in Mill, *CW*, IV, p. 225.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 394.

tation of the science, turning it, protectively, into an abstract or hypothetical entity that could sit comfortably within a framework of other moral sciences – more advanced, and when suitably modified by what he was beginning to refer to, *à la française*, as other *social sciences*, more immediately practical. But it was not the branch of knowledge that would remain the most important in the new states of society which improvements in human capacities were making possible.⁷ Most surprisingly, to those brought up on Ricardo and Malthus, he outlined a positive conception of the stationary state as a kind of Utopia – one in which zero growth in capital formation and population increase became an end to be embraced rather than a situation to be feared and indefinitely postponed. It would be a state in which equity in the distribution of income need no longer be sacrificed to the imperatives of growth, in which the quality of life would take precedence over the materialistic quantities. The perfectibilism eschewed by Smith, attacked by Malthus, and bypassed by Ricardo had now become an evolutionary goal of Mill's political economy.

It is also significant that Mill, for all his concessions to Coleridge on such matters as the importance of a clerisy, or established class of intellectuals, firmly rejected the paternalism that was characteristic of the solutions proposed by Tory humanitarians and romantic sages. The reality of Chartism and the prospect of an extension of the suffrage, which to Mill, of course, included women as well as men, showed that self-dependence on the part of the working classes rather than patriarchy was the clue to the future.⁸ A national clerisy was one thing, but the idea of the state as the exclusive agency of improvement was quite another to someone who attached his name to a brand of liberalism in which individuality was so central. Similarly with socialism and an end to the antagonism between capital and labour: for Mill, the most extensive use of co-operation within enterprises could never entail abandonment of the economic benefits of competition between them.

Many of Mill's contemporaries and successors could see how far he had gone towards rehabilitating political economy by making it fit the realities and aspirations of a generation that had witnessed the 1848 revolutions; he had opened windows on wider worlds and been

⁷ See Stefan Collini's essay on Mill's methodological moves in *That Noble Science of Politics*, pp. 129–59.

⁸ Notably in the chapter on 'On the Probable Futurity of the Labouring Classes'; see *Principles* in *CW*, III, pp. 758–96.

generous towards other methods of studying society.⁹ It is equally clear, however, that he failed to convince others that he had gone far enough to remove those basic deficiencies he had noted at the height of his own youthful revolt against political economy. The Comteian 'positive science of society', an all-embracing sociology within which political economy would at best find a minor place, attracted many. But the most seductive option for those who wished to combine their social concerns with scholarly careers was, undoubtedly, some version of economic history based on perspectives which made the nation state a more central object of attention. It was certainly from a generation or two of historical economists and economic historians that English political economy faced its most serious challenge during the last quarter of the nineteenth century.¹⁰ Here was a genuine alternative to the universalism and abstract deductivism of Ricardo, as well as to the cosmopolitanism of Smith.

If the historical method was to be the clue to the future, it was to Germany, where these matters were best understood, and where political economy in its earlier Scottish and English forms had never put down firm roots, that the new generation looked for inspiration. Smith could be regarded with tolerance, even warmth, by some of those looking for native sources of good historical practice.¹¹ In ✓ Germany itself, however, *Smithianismus* and its mid-century partner, ✓ *Manchesterthum*, more often connoted a form of liberal rationalism that ✓ was part of the corrosive brew associated with the French revolution ✓ and that other French disease released by the Enlightenment and ✓ carried in the knapsacks of Napoleon's army: an interest in a cosmopo- ✓ lite form of *civilisation* rather than the more profound idea of *Kultur*. The German Historical School could generate *Kathedersozialismus*, forms of state intervention and protection, but during the last decades of the nineteenth century, particularly in Austria, liberal rationalism was also

⁹ For a fuller account of the state of opinion against which Mill's achievement should be assessed see N. B. de Marchi, 'The Success of Mill's *Principles*', *History of Political Economy*, 6 (1974), 119-57.

¹⁰ For an earlier attempt to deal with this episode by Stefan Collini, singly and together with myself, see the chapters on 'Particular Polities: Political Economy and the Historical Method' and 'A Separate Science: Polity and Society in Marshall's Economics' in *That Noble Science of Politics*, pp. 247-75, 309-37. See also D. C. Coleman, *History and the Economic Past*, Oxford, 1987, Chapters 4 and 5; and Gerard M. Koot, *English Historical Economics, 1870-1926*, Cambridge, 1987.

¹¹ For example, at the centenary celebrations of the *Wealth of Nations*, J. E. Thorold Rogers, along with Emil de Lavaley, claimed Smith as the founder of the historical and inductive approach to economic subjects; see *Political Economy Club, Revised Report of the Proceedings*, London, 1876, pp. 29-40.

thought to be connected with plans for a more fundamental socialistic reconstruction of society. Smith, or rather *Smithianism*, seemed likely to occupy the awkward dual role of being the herald of capitalism and its sworn enemy.¹²

That might seem to be an extreme fate – though Ricardo also came to occupy a similar role on his native heath, and by association with Marx, over a wider part of the globe as well. Two signs of what could happen are briefly indicated by reference back to the earlier essays on Smith's relationship with Burke. For an educated German audience, such an association would have seemed perplexing. A far more meaningful connection could be forged between Burke and the German exponent of historical jurisprudence, Friedrich von Savigny, where both could be cited as pioneers of a method that privileged the slow evolution of national legal customs and institutions. The second sign is Das Adam Smith Problem: a puzzle in intellectual history that was, at this time at least, quintessentially German in origin, part of the attempt to understand the most troublesome aspect of Smith's legacy. How could the worthy 'idealism' of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* based on sympathy have been overturned by the less worthy 'materialism' of the *Wealth of Nations* based on selfishness? One favoured answer was that it could be imputed to the malign influence of the *économistes* after Smith's visit to France in the 1760s. The fact that the actual dating of all this was wrong does not detract from the nature of the dilemma discerned.¹³

The Adam Smith problem did not feature at this time in the British literature. Indeed, Henry Buckle, in his examination of the Scottish intellect during the eighteenth century, had confidently asserted, not only that the *Wealth of Nations* was 'probably the most important book which has ever been written', but that it was simply the 'selfish' half of a unified deductive project that was complemented by the 'sympathetic' *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. In this manner, Buckle managed to be wrong about Smith's method as well as the relationship between his two main works, thereby provoking the German reaction while closing the door on any inquiry into what Smith might have had in mind when completing the separate parts of his ambitious plan.¹⁴

¹² For a brief account of this aspect of Smith's possible German (more strictly Austrian) reputation see Rothschild, 'Adam Smith and Conservative Economics', pp. 88–9.

¹³ Those chiefly responsible for this German reading were Carl Knies and Witold von Skarzynski: see the editorial introduction to *TMS*, pp. 20–4.

¹⁴ See H. T. Buckle, *History of Civilization in England*, London, 1861, II, pp. 432–57.

Buckle thereby gave a blessing to a division of labour that has proved congenial to the economic scholarship of the Anglo-American world. Philosophers are allowed unimpeded access to the sympathetic half of the enterprise, as long as economists are given an exclusive licence to concentrate on the selfish half.

More can be learned about the changing nineteenth-century reputation of Smith's creation from another figure mentioned briefly in the Prologue to this book: Arnold Toynbee, whose *Lectures on the Industrial Revolution* were an inspiration to English economic historians, notably to W. J. Ashley, and to one highly significant student of the condition-of-England question in the last decades of the nineteenth century, Beatrice Webb. Toynbee had combined his history with commentary on political economy, using the four gospels provided by Smith, Malthus, Ricardo, and Mill as the pegs on which to hang the different phases of the industrial revolution. Smith represented the immediate pre-industrial, or anti-mercantile phase; Malthus's *Essay* was a product of the revolution at its height, focussing on poverty rather than wealth; Ricardo added the laws of distribution of wealth; and Mill announced the fourth stage by showing that the laws of production and distribution could be separated from one another. Moreover, there was no doubt in Toynbee's mind as to who was the captivating villain of the story. Not only had Ricardo 'revolutionised' parliamentary opinion on economic subjects, and achieved an influence over legislation that was greater than that of Smith, but he was responsible for 'two great text-books of Socialism', *Das Kapital* and Henry George's *Progress and Poverty*, while at the same time doing more than 'any other author to justify in the eyes of men the existing state of society'. Like Smith in the German-speaking world, Ricardo was being accused of fathering children on both sides of the blanket.¹⁵

Hence Toynbee's extraordinary lament: he regarded the failure to emancipate political economy from the influence of Ricardo's ruthless abstractions as a significant tragedy. If this could have been accomplished by such figures as Mill, he said, 'the history of Political Economy in England would have been a very different one. Endless misunderstanding and hatred would have been avoided, and some

¹⁵ H. S. Foxwell became the leading critic of Ricardo for having licensed modern socialism: 'it was Ricardo's crude generalisations which gave modern socialism its fancied scientific basis, and provoked, if they did not justify, its revolutionary form'. He also noted that 'socialistic yeast even lurks, where perhaps it might least be suspected, in that wonderfully catholic work, the *Wealth of Nations*'; see his introduction to Anton Menger, *The Right to the Whole Produce of Labour*, London, 1899, pp. xxviii, xl-xli.

great problems would be much nearer their solution.’¹⁶ Hatred seems an over-reaction in these circumstances, a demonisation of Ricardo to match that practised on Malthus by the early romantics. It can be understood, perhaps, only by recalling Toynbee’s impassioned plea for forgiveness on the part of the working classes for the indifference of the middle classes to their condition – a plea that Beatrice Webb chose to echo when speaking of the ‘class-consciousness of sin’ experienced by her generation of middle-class social reformers.¹⁷

As in the case of Keynes’s equivalent regrets that the rigidities of Ricardian orthodoxy had vanquished Malthusian insights, the underlying belief in the importance of economic theory, whether as source of hope or betrayal, now seems almost as remarkable as the criticism. How could the mild-mannered Ricardo’s theorems and parliamentary speeches be seen as so malevolent, let alone as so influential? Was it as much for the ammunition he had unwittingly supplied to socialist critics as for the support which his rigid abstractions had purportedly given to the existing state of society? Yet Toynbee’s horrified fascination with Ricardo and his own interest in political economy were not of the kind epitomised by George Eliot’s character, Tom Tulliver, who was said to be fond of birds – that is, of throwing stones at them. Toynbee was earnestly seeking an accommodation between history and political economy, though his early death prevented the union from coming to fruition. He left a body of admirers whose sense of having sinned may have been as great, but whose interest in political economy was, indeed, of the Tom Tulliver variety. This verdict is a little unfair on Beatrice Webb, who spent a miserable summer trying to come to terms with what, after all, was still the best-established branch of social science in England at the time. But her encounter with Ricardo and Marx left her convinced that something else was needed: a more comprehensive and institutionalist science of society within which economics, a body of thinking which she believed was confined to profit-making organisations, would take a subordinate place.¹⁸ In common with a whole generation of later social and economic historians who dedicated themselves to the study of the industrial revolution and its consequences – with Richard Tawney, or John and Barbara Hammond, for example – Beatrice Webb remained largely

¹⁶ *Lectures on the Industrial Revolution*, p. 146.

¹⁷ See *My Apprenticeship*, London, 1938, 2 volumes, 1, p. 208.

¹⁸ For the outcome of her struggle with Ricardo and Marx see Appendix D to *ibid.*, II, pp. 482–91.

innocent of, where not actively hostile to, classical political economy. The administrative appeal of its interventionist Benthamite partner was far greater. It followed, though not as a matter of simple logic, that neither she nor Tawney and the Hammonds were open to conversion by Alfred Marshall's revitalised, re-moralised, and re-christened version of the Science of Economics. It also followed, this time more logically, that they were not impressed by Marshall's related attempt to present the history of English economics as a seamless web stretching from Smith, Ricardo, and Mill to himself.

As the final remarks in the previous essay suggest, therefore, the schism, or fault line, separating economists from the self-appointed spokesmen for human beings remained in being later in the nineteenth century. ✓ Southey's impressionistic criticisms of the new manufacturing ✓ towns in 1807 acquired more statistical and descriptive detail in the ✓ parliamentary inquiries and blue books that were to become the staple diet of reformers and revolutionaries alike. The social costs of the industrial revolution (reality and idea were no longer separated from one another) became the focus of attention, as did the decidedly skewed nature of the distribution of its benefits. When Henry George used *Poverty and Progress* as the title of his work, it was to suggest the most un-Smithian, if not entirely un-Malthusian, of conclusions, namely that they went hand in hand. Whereas George maintained that they would continue to do so while the private monopoly of land remained in force, Malthus had argued that they *could* do so if his diagnosis of population pressure went unheeded. Marx, of course, had reached George's conclusion by a more profound analysis of the inexorable laws of capitalism that made considerable use of Ricardo. What Smith had said about the mal-distribution of efforts and rewards in his most tough-minded treatments of commercial society, minus what he had said about 'a gradual descent of fortunes' when comparing it with its feudal predecessor, was now translated into the more emotive language of exploitation and the drier language of statistical inquiry into the unequal distribution of wealth and income.

Malthus had recognised the perennial qualities of any debate about inequality in a world in which it would always be possible to point to trivial luxury at one end of the social scale and basic needs left unfulfilled at the other. At the end of the nineteenth century, however, the debate in Britain had acquired a coloration which differentiated it from eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century discussions about an indolent landed aristocracy engaged, for good or ill, in luxurious and

other forms of unproductive expenditure. Even Malthus, to whom such expenditure patterns were particularly significant, had glimpsed the possibilities opened up by the growth of the middle classes. The lives of those members of these classes who experienced a class-consciousness of sin, and even of those who did not, were often very comfortable. Their quality and standard of life depended to a large extent on their command over that most important category of 'personal services' at this time, domestic servants. The first generation of beneficiaries had acquired these comforts mostly by means of Smith's frugality and prudence, the second through inheritance and receipt of rentier incomes derived from accumulated capital rather than land. In the 1890s Marshall could worry about patterns of expenditure which showed that consumption habits were not being matched to professional duties and styles of life.¹⁹ But as his pupil, Keynes, pointed out in his sketch of the extraordinary qualities of the pre-1914 world, the middle classes had usually carried out their side of the Smithian bargain by reinvesting the results of their thrift productively. Indeed, Keynes's account of this phenomenon had an appropriately Mandevillian twist to its ending:

The new rich of the nineteenth century were not brought up to large expenditures, and preferred the power which investment gave them to the pleasures of immediate consumption. In fact it was precisely the *inequality* of the distribution of wealth which made possible those vast accumulations of fixed wealth and of capital improvement which distinguish that age from all others. Herein lay, in fact, the main justification of the capitalist system. If the rich had spent their new wealth on their own enjoyments, that world would long ago have found such a regime intolerable. But like bees they saved and accumulated, not less to the advantage of the whole community because they themselves held narrower views in prospect.²⁰

But it is not for their prophetic powers, or lack of them, that Smith, Malthus, Ricardo, and the rest have featured in this book. I would like to repeat my hope that each of the essays expresses conclusions that would not benefit from being repackaged together at the end. I must confess, however, to a sense of failure in not being able to put my finger more precisely on the underlying *cultural* reasons for the long history of misunderstanding which began with the romantic attack on Malthus. We might be able to grasp why Carlyle chose to foster onto the political

¹⁹ See *Principles of Economics* (1890), edited by C. W. Guillebaud, 2 volumes, London, 1961, 1, pp. 87-8, 136-7, 720.

²⁰ *Economic Consequences of the Peace* in Keynes, *CW*, II, p. 11.

economists all his dislike of modern Mammonism and a non-heroic world characterised by the cash nexus, but this does not explain his apparent success in so doing. The messenger being blamed for the message he brings is itself a familiar message, but it does not answer for all that was said, and why it continued to be said so repetitively. Another reason could be found in popular versions of political economy that began with the enormously successful works of Mrs Marcet and Harriet Martineau, and were continued in the various schoolbook versions of the science that were disseminated. Some responsibility for the public image also attaches to those mid-Victorian politicians who constantly invoked the laws of political economy in unqualified fashion in defence of the status quo. Robert Lowe, Gladstone's first Chancellor of the Exchequer, is the best example of such a doctrinaire; he was also responsible for Ricardianising Smith by following Buckle in maintaining that Smith had 'founded a deductive and demonstrative science of human actions and conduct'.²¹ But any number of such political die-hards of the Lowe variety cannot account for Ruskin's decision in *Unto this Last* to reward John Stuart Mill's efforts as attempted intermediary by making him serve the same purpose of whipping boy that Coleridge and Southey had earlier assigned to Malthus.²²

My conclusion is that the Nature/Culture borderline cynically opened up by Mandeville and explored with increasing sensitivity by Malthus is one that continues to arouse powerful feelings – as the brief remarks linking the fate of Malthus and Darwin mentioned earlier illustrate.²³ By a process of transference, the realm of the economic became assimilated to that of Nature as against Culture, more attractive to the tiny minority of those who enjoyed, as De Quincey did, the pleasures of pure logic, or to the larger minority of those who were at ease with the kind of naturalistic approach to human affairs exemplified by Hume and Smith. By contrast, it was hated (again, the word is not too

²¹ See his contribution to centenary celebrations, *Political Economy Club, Revised Report*, pp. 5–21. The crowning point of this performance was perhaps Lowe's announcement that: 'I might say, I think without much exaggeration, that Adam Smith has been the Plato of Political Economy, and that Ricardo also has been its Aristotle.'

²² Raymond Williams, for example, takes the accuracy of Ruskin's attack on political economy for granted by concluding that 'his approach to social and economical problems is very much nearer our own than is the normal approach of his contemporaries'; see *Culture and Society*, p. 140. For a couple of rare examples of studies of Ruskin that recognise the caricature of political economy on which he constructed his ideas see J. T. Fain, *Ruskin and the Economists*, Nashville, 1956; and James Clark Sherburne, *John Ruskin or the Ambiguities of Abundance: A Study in Social and Economic Criticism*, Cambridge, 1972; see especially Chapters 5, 6 and 7.

²³ See pp. 394–5 above.

strong) by all those, following William Blake's early example, who regarded any confusion of the world of man with that discovered by Newton, and later by Darwin, as anathema. Naturalism entailed for such critics an abandonment of moral judgement; it could never be what it was for Malthus, a basis for improving such judgements.

There is also, of course, the pervasive yet simple confusion of self-interest with selfishness, a confusion of which no educated eighteenth-century reader – at least, not those who could see through Mandeville's teasing sophistry – would be guilty. The Victorian moralists seem to have lacked the earlier confidence in believing that the distinction could be sustained: hence the fear of the stigma of egoism in moral questions which lies behind the enthusiasm with which they adopted Comte's coinage of 'altruism' as its virtuous opposite.²⁴ Language matters greatly here, as Malthus's warnings to Chalmers illustrate: it does not do to weaken the linguistic defences that moralists have constructed over the ages to guard against misuse or under-valuation.²⁵

But it would be an odd fate if the earlier political economists should suffer from being seen through the narrower vision of later, more professional forms of economic inquiry: a case of the sins of the children being visited on their great-grandparents. Yet it has to be admitted that this could have something to do with the perpetuation of misunderstandings: the professional habits of doctrinal historians writing solely for fellow-economists have not helped matters. The history of economics, written in this fashion, has become, at best, a *rite de passage* for economists – though, ironically, most of them can now, with some justification, avoid the rite altogether. The consequence is that the history of economics, though not immune from current fashion, has yet to experience fully the liberation enjoyed by historians of natural science once they realised that their subject matter was too interesting to be left to incompetent or retired scientists; that its province was not restricted to what still seemed most relevant, however temporarily, to modern practitioners. It is hard to imagine, for example, that any history of the biological sciences before and after Darwin's *Origin of Species* could be written without reference to Paleyite natural theology. Yet mention of this in histories of economic thought that deal with Malthus, where Paley's influence is at least as strong, is a

²⁴ For an account of 'The Culture of Altruism' see S. Collini, *Public Moralists*, Chapter 2.

²⁵ See p. 383 and n. 81 above.

rarity, possibly even an embarrassment.²⁶ This has left the field clear for do-it-yourself accounts of economic ideas written by those whose main sympathies lie with the opposition. It is hardly surprising, then, that one is frequently faced with a choice between two caricatures: a narrowly anachronistic one produced for professional consumption, and a more sinister ideological one that adopts the often mistaken impressions of one group of the historical protagonists. In bending the bow the other way when dealing with Malthus, I hope I have not replied in kind. Although historians are under no obligation to resolve past disputes, there does appear to be a need for a form of intellectual history that combines sympathy with enough distance to ensure that we do not simply perpetuate previous misrepresentations. That, at least, has been one of the articles of faith underlying this book.

²⁶ The response of one prominent historian of economics to an article on this subject was to say that he was now convinced that Malthus's theology was important to his economics, but to add: 'So much the worse for Malthus.'