Rises in food prices and global population, especially among the middle classes in India and China, have brought renewed respect to the philosopher of demographic catastrophe, Thomas Robert Malthus.

In the 1990s, a number of writers, including me, were denounced as grim, deterministic Malthusians because of our emphasis on the role the natural world played in global affairs. It was an era without limits, it seemed, when any country could achieve prosperity and human rights. Contrarily, we argued that rising populations, depleted soils and water resources, and other natural phenomena might limit what could be achieved in specific places, and that there was therefore a need for tragic realism.

Now tragic realism is all the rage, and the media have started to look at Malthus positively. But journalists still misunderstand him. He was a more sympathetic figure than his philosophy may indicate, and his philosophy itself is far broader than the media's concentration on his ill-starred demographic theory indicates.

Malthus was born in 1766 with a harelip and a cleft palate. He studied mathematics, history, and philosophy at Cambridge. Partly because of his speech defect, he decided to go into the church and live a somewhat reclusive life in the country. One of the most tranquil and cheerful of men, Malthus never minded interruptions, especially by children, to whom he would give his full attention. But this thoroughly decent man was humiliated by the literary and intellectual grandees of the age. The poet Shelley called him "a eunuch and a tyrant" and the "apostle of the rich," simply because of his matter-of-fact empirical observation that society will always have rich people and poor people. Charles Dickens, Friedrich Engels, William Wordsworth, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge all heaped abuse on poor Malthus.

So what did Malthus say that was so terrible? He challenged the conventional view of human perfectibility that was in fashion during the aftermath of the French Revolution and the approach of a new century. He wrote in the realist spirit of Thucydides, Edmund Burke, and America's Founding Fathers. He worried that leisure time and prosperity would produce as much evil as good, and that mass happiness would always elude society. He was a profoundly moral philosopher sensitive to the travails of the human condition. His specific theory -- that population increases geometrically while food supplies increase only arithmetically -- was eventually proven wrong, because the settlement of the New World and the Industrial Revolution would add significantly to agricultural output. And our current interest in Malthus may, too, prove short-lived if a new green revolution, for example, sweeps Africa.

Nevertheless, if Malthus is wrong, then why is it necessary to prove him wrong again and again, every decade and every century? Perhaps because a fear exists that at some fundamental level, Malthus is right. For the great contribution of this estimable man was to bring nature itself into the argument over politics. Indeed, in an era of global warming, Malthus may prove among the most-relevant philosophers of the Enlightenment.

— Robert D. Kaplan