Man as a Parasite Must Look to the Care of His Host

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WE STILL DEPEND upon the green plants both for our energy and for the growth and maintenance of our tissues. We may have to depend on them for years or centuries to come. Only the plants can work up carbon and the simple nitrogen compounds into the carbohydrates and proteins we need. We may prefer to have some of our starch and protein transformed for us through the bodies of animals into milk and meat, but this is a somewhat wasteful process; and except possibly in the case of milk for young children it does not seem to be strictly necessary. The fact remains that, whether immediately or at one remove, we are still parasitic upon the vegetation.

This parasitic kind of existence may have been well enough in primitive times when there were only 20 or 30 million people on the face of the earth. Man lived then by foraging and hunting, or at the best by a method of shifting cultivation. No doubt there were occasional droughts and hungry seasons; but his main job was often less that of finding something to eat than of saving himself from being eaten. Now that there are more than 2000 million inhabitants, we begin to take thought for the morrow. Will there soon be too many of us?

We have become conscious of our dependence upon the green plant and upon the soil. It seems that our only chance of a comfortable survival is to contribute more effectively towards the healthy growth of vegetation. In other words, our relation with the plants must cease to be as parasitic as it is and progressively take on the form of a symbiosis. This does not mean that we have entirely neglected our duty to the plants and the soil from which we draw our sustenance. We have improved them in many ways. But we must more consciously exert ourselves to provide them with the water and the nutrients they require and to protect them from disease. We have no other safe course, for even if we are able in time to synthesize carbohydrates and fats such a possibility must, at the moment, remain a matter for speculation.

The growing plant must always have sufficient space, warmth, water, and food. The time will come, if it is not here already in some countries, when we have to reckon less in man-power or the yield per man-unit than in the yield-per-acre; and the acres on which we base our reckoning will have to be adequately watered and warmed. It used to be said that every new baby born brought a pair of hands into the world as well as a stomach to be fed. That is still true; but unfortunately it does not bring also a fresh acre of cultivatable soil.

It cannot matter much whether we consider the population of a small Pacific island or the population of the whole earth. After all, our planet is only an island floating in space. Its population must ultimately be limited, however remote that time may be, by the vegetation which can be grown upon it. We may double or treble the acreage under crops and pasture, but some time the limit will be reached.

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