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Every Friday

Price Fourpence

FEBRUARY 5, 1954

Editorial and Business Offices: 115 Lambton Quay, Wellington, C.1.

G.P.O. Box 2292.

Telegraphic Address: "Listener," Wellington.

Telephone 70-999.

Five Million Years Away

WHEN scientists amuse themselves by speculating about the future, the fancies they put before us are usually horrid and depressing. A recent example came from an American professor of "physical anthropology," who was reported to have said that in five million years human beings would probably have "tiny stomachs, flat and circular feet, and a brain that would be unable to keep a single secret." If a species which so far has a recorded history of about five thousand years can survive another 50,000 centuries, it will undoubtedly undergo some interesting changes. Many people are already making little use of their legs, and others would probably be better off with shrunk stomachs. But the further we advance in thought from our own time, the more obvious it becomes that we are thinking of creatures which are not likely to be human.

If people ever live—as the professor predicts—on "chemical concentrate pellets," and "have little use for their stomachs," they will be free to give most of their time to an intense and continuous cerebration. But what on earth would they think about? It is true that intellectual activity is much weakened and retarded by digestion. Men are already superior to animals because a larger brain has allowed them to control their environment. They can eat in half an hour—or ten minutes, if they live in Wellington—instead of grazing for most of the day. Yet food has to be bought or grown before it can be eaten, so that if men are not thinking of their next meal they are using their energies to ensure that meals are available to themselves and their families. This limits the range of thought. Even if a man has private means, and can give all his attention to the universe, his preoccupations will generally be earth-bound. Human energy seems to be spent for two main reasons—to get food,

shelter and clothing, and to escape from boredom. If the first necessity disappeared, the second would become more pressing—unless, of course, with the atrophy of the alimentary tract, a human being became little more than a succession of noble and beautiful thoughts. And since—the professor tells us—everybody would know what everybody else was thinking, that prospect is one from which we draw back as if from a precipice, shuddering.

It may well be that people with "little use for their mouths" would cheerfully dispense with the more tender functions of the lips. The pleasures of eating and drinking, and the social life which has grown up around them, would be lost without regret by brains only tenuously connected with bodies. But to have no secrets! That indeed would mean the suffocation of the individual. The trouble with prophetic scientists is that they look abroad when the pendulum is at the top of its swing. They are inclined to forget, or think it is not their business to remember, the rhythms of history which have done their work in the rise and fall of civilisations. No one can say what five million years will do to bodies and minds. And does anyone really care? Oddly enough, people *do* care—not because their interest in posterity can reach very far, but because all such theories touch their own fundamental beliefs. If man were moving towards an increasing emancipation from the body, the tragic view of human destiny which supports all religion and most philosophy would be merely a dream in a mind still in its infancy; and men would be asked to believe that the sufferings of countless generations are a necessary price to be paid for the felicity of a future race. It is better to look backwards. The shape of things to come is more credibly outlined in past experience than in guesses from a laboratory.



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