SOCIOLOGICAL ASPECTS: INTRODUCTION

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I was thinking as we went through the first three sessions of this symposium of a difficulty faced by human geneticists which is not faced by those who are concerned with the genetics of plants and animals, and which I do not think has been mentioned—though, certainly, it was implied in Dr Harrison’s Galton Lecture.

The geneticist of plants and animals, if he is concerned with wild plants and wild animals, is considering their viability in a particular environment. The geneticist who is concerned with domestic strains is concerned with something which he knows much more precisely. He knows what he wants; he knows that he wants a cow that will give more milk, or a hen that will give more eggs.

But in neither of these respects has the human geneticist anything like so fixed an area to deal with. He not only has to face the difficulty of not being able to get a controlled experiment—to which everybody has referred—but he also has the fact that if he is considering human beings as a wild species their environment is continually changing, and the very differences we are considering (which were produced by nature for special environments) are not of much relevance in a modern city.

On the other hand, if he is thinking of human beings as directed towards any kind of purpose, he is very much at a loss, and there is a wide discrepancy in the ideas of what constitutes a good human being.

Most of us would probably agree not only on the kind of excellence which was shown in the film of the Olympic Games, we would also consider teachability, to which a good deal of reference has been made. But even that does not by any means exhaust the wide variety of opinions as to what we are looking for in the human being when we compare different groups.

So wide is the divergence of opinion that we are not even agreed—thinking of the statistics given in Session III—on what we regard as an optimistic, or a pessimistic, look forward.

Some of us—if I may borrow a phraseology from another context—feel that with regard to the population of the human race we are prepared to welcome those who are already in, but that we would exercise a strict control over future entrants. Not everybody is agreed even on that point, so wide is the variety of opinion.
All this leads me to welcome such a symposium as this, in which people meet from different disciplines, because it seems to me that the future of research in this subject lies more and more in interdisciplinary combinations of students who will be looking from a number of different angles at the way that human beings develop.

I hope that in the course of Session IV, one or two thoughts on possibilities of this kind of combination may emerge.