

*The Twenty-Ninth Day*, by Lester R. Brown (W. W. Norton, New York, 1978), 404 pp., \$3.95, paperback.

Many thinkers are so enamored with the success of scientific production and the scientific outlook that they are inclined to believe that science can not only remedy most of the evils that afflict mankind but can also supply almost everyone with the

elemental necessities and comforts that are the indispensable condition for happiness. If any major problems remain, they more or less can be overcome by further knowledge (especially knowledge of the limits of the carrying capacity of biological systems), the application of science, and wisdom in economics and politics. To some extent Lester Brown shares this view. It is true that he warns us that the pond in which four billion of us live could fill up entirely and that, if we continue at our present rate to damage and destroy our biological systems, we are clearly inviting disaster. But he adds that there is hope and room for considerable optimism, provided we know the danger and learn to live more simply.

Brown devotes more than half the book to documentation of our present ecological plight. He describes the "tragedy of the commons": overfishing, deforestation, overgrazing, overplowing, and pollution. His chapters on energy, population, and food problems are probably the most persuasive. Several chapters are devoted to a skillful presentation of economic problems: inflation, capital scarcity, unemployment, and, most important, the gross inequities of wealth within and among societies. Most readers are likely to understand and correctly conclude, first, that the "carrying" problem should be viewed in a multiple-etiology, multiple-determinant framework, and, second, that the danger is great.

The final three chapters deal with what Brown calls the ethics of accommodation. This, in essence, means that we must stop plundering the planet. We must stabilize world population, initiate new and different kinds of energy programs, overcome our throw-away mentality and recycle materials, establish greater family autonomy and self-sufficiency, and more justly allocate resources and services. There must be international, national, and personal reform, with intelligent accommodation of our environment at each of these levels.

The descriptive aspects of the book are in the main so well done and the general advice of such excellence that there is a natural reluctance to raise critical points. Nonetheless, there are some worries. The first concerns Brown's apparent belief that, once provided with sufficient information, mankind will act rightly, that knowledge of the bad somehow inevitably leads to morally correct action. The sad truth, however, is that man may know about impaired biological systems and vast amounts of human suffering and yet remain indifferent. I do not wish to parade Nazi horrors or dwell on the relative indifference to recent famines. The point is that knowledge is not enough.

Nor is mere compassion. What is required is a combination of knowledge, beneficence, and power. Without the first our efforts are likely to be futile or self-defeating; without the second they tend to be self-serving; and without the third they are, at best, utopian.

The second worry concerns the ethics of accommodation and the question of means and ends. If, as Brown suggests, we are not talking about mere adjustment to whatever may happen but about a preferred accommodation, what general ends ought we to seek? Ought we to pursue the survival of all, or does our accommodation with nature require that some must perish so that others may be happy or so that certain levels of existence and beauty may be preserved? Moreover, if survival is our immediate and primary goal and the danger as pressing as it appears to be, then what urgent, perhaps revolutionary, action must we take? Finally, if approximately thirty-five thousand children under the age of five die each day, then, if we can enforce population control, are we not also morally justified in demanding that the rich forego their luxuries?

—Reviewed by Marvin Kohl