

17 Being for (and aware of) others [28 Feb 2020]

About the time I began public school, one of my pleasures was follow-the-dots drawing books. Simple designs were obvious from the positions of the numbered dots. In more complex drawings the numbering sequence called for running lines through the figures to add surprises; the objects became gradually recognizable. We were a frugal household, and each drawing book had to last about a month. I rationed the pleasure. So it didn't help when I had a guest who was gung-ho on doing follow-the-dots. He was polite; he asked permission before starting a new drawing. But I couldn't say no, so the outcome depended on his modesty, not my restraint.

Can you think of situations in the adult world where consumption by one person reduces the consumption by another person? The question might be much more serious than just *pleasure*. Overharvesting has made some plant and animal species "commercially extinct." On a larger scale, there is only one blanket of air covering our planet. Climate patterns are extremely complex, and it is not possible for a single country or community to protect and preserve its clean air supply. Greed (including pollution) anywhere hurts everyone everywhere, and ultimately human survival is at stake.

Between individuals or on a global scale, differential consumption may result in unfair depletion of shared resources. There are examples of naked power: emperors who relied on floods to "take care of" excess human population; modern armies that have starved local populations by confiscating their crops.

Human intelligence can do better than following the bad examples. We learn to balance distribution of production and consumption. In England this has meant concentrating on industrial exports in exchange for large-scale agricultural imports. Fairness and sustainability require balance so that both trading partners have enough equipment and enough food. Colonialism has been marked by imbalance: enriching dominant powers at the expense of the weak, exploiting instead of trading.

At a social dinner, people in line take portions based on how many people remain to be served. Like the drawing book story above, the dinner setting can be compared to a serious global issue: future generations await in the line. Some economists might advise countries with aging populations to increase their birth rates so that younger people are produced to care for the elderly. That only shifts the sustainability problem from parents to offspring. One cannot increase the food per person by increasing the

number of persons. In fact, unchecked human fertility is the biggest single threat to survival of the species, because feeding the population is not addressed by increasing the population. The principle applies to *all* shared resources.

Let us learn from today's stories the value of sharing across group sizes and across time periods. Being aware of others, producing and consuming accordingly, is the effective road to happiness.