

Evolving Attitudes Regarding Eugenics and Disability in 20th Century American Society

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In the United States people have some notion of what the term "*eugenics*" refers to in world history, but they seldom know how this idea evolved in their own country. The expression means "*good birth*," and this paper examines how the concept of birth as good or bad has been demonstrated in the treatment of the disabled, especially in terms of legislation affecting their lives. It may not be commonly known that eugenics has had an influence on U.S. society, especially since this is nominally a democracy, respecting all rights. However, it can be argued that eugenics has affected a number of social, environmental, and cultural areas of our lives, which overtly and/or unknowingly influence individual thinking. Some evidence for this influence can be found in public forums like newspapers, novels, magazines, film, and religious organizations, which sometimes reflect bias or "hidden" discriminatory agendas. What people believe in the privacy of their own lives may well be based on input from such sources, and these beliefs in turn shape how we understand the world, and even more so how the world eventually comes to judge us as a people.

The assumption underlying this thesis is that current and future U.S. law- and policy-makers in a position to influence the lives of the disabled should take into account the origin and legal influence of belief systems which have favored eugenics in the past: they should also be aware of how some people in the U.S. have been directly affected by legislation drawing on these belief systems. Such historical perspective will help empower them to control the environment into which disabled children are born in ways that serve to protect these children as U.S. citizens with rights like all others. The research proposed here has two essential goals. First, it explores

past attitudes that have led to eugenics-related beliefs in religious and scientific communities in the U.S. Second, it exemplifies how eugenics-related beliefs have affected the disabled population.

If an examination of the past shows that as a society we have not served well those with disabilities, perhaps an honest engagement with the issues will protect us against the recurrence of similar misconceptions. With the growth of public interest in physical and mental enhancement and improvement of the self in recent decades, the idea of "good birth" remains almost as important a topic today as when the concept was incorporated into 19th century social-Darwinian thought. The ideal of perfection is still widespread: Americans often spend much time, energy and money trying to change or reinvent the person they were born into. Darwin's theory of evolution created an intellectual climate that facilitated the misinterpretation of his ideas in ways that devalued human life. Darwin's theory holds that conflict over resources permits the fittest to survive, not that the less fit are less worthy to live as humans. However, his theory did represent a new challenge for society, in that it posed a watershed issue for philosophers and thinkers, and continues to do so in the present day: some of his new beliefs about evolution appeared to directly contradict the religious teachings of the time.

Consequently, during the 19th century religion and science began to move down paths that at times were at extreme odds with each other. However, since some of the religious leaders of the early 20th century were fearful of losing their congregations to new scientific ideas, they chose to embrace them. The Rev. P. Osgood was one of the religious leaders who embraced science, and

more specifically preached in favor of the survival of the fittest. He told his congregation that it was their duty to "improv[e] the human race" because "'the less fit members of society seem to breed faster and the right types are less prolific.'"¹ He was not alone in his views. At the same time a majority of Christian preachers began to express support for what they considered to be the positive aspects of eugenics, for example, the Rev. S. J. Barrows and the Rev. M. Dana, who believed that the Bible actually recommended eugenics. Another well-known community leader in England, Sir Francis Galton, championed the idea that King Solomon and King David, both of whom had many wives, chose their consorts for their high quality on the understanding that only the best wives were allowed to procreate.

However, many other religious leaders took issue with such biblical versions of eugenics because they saw them as destructive, misleading and amoral examples for humanity. They believed that blind endorsement of Darwin's view of the origin of mankind, or unthinking adherence to Galton's interpretation of eugenics, represented an abandonment of Christian morality as presented in the humanistic New Testament. To them, this view of society was dangerous - as indeed it proved to be later when used to justify Nazi atrocities during World War II and to make other heinous acts against humanity acceptable.

Unfortunately, despite the concerns of the opponents of eugenics, the U.S. government passed laws in the early 20th century that affected many innocent people. Supporters of eugenics were able to convince political leaders that laws needed to be passed in order to limit the number of defective births and allow "good births" to increase. The first law, Eugenics Legislation: Act of 1907, was passed in Indiana. Many other states adopted

¹ Christine Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics: Religious leaders and the American Eugenics Movement*, p. 3.

eugenic laws at about the same time, based on the assumption that heredity was a major contributor to "defective" births. Such laws stated, for example, that prison institutions had to have doctors evaluate all the inmates on their "mental and physical condition" and in the event that they, the doctors, felt that "procreation is inadvisable", they could sterilize the inmate (at a cost not to exceed three dollars).²

During this era, personal or individual rights were not at issue. The government at that time appeared to make decisions based on establishing the maximum amount of benefits for the greatest number of people, despite the fact that these laws seemed to be in direct conflict with the conceptual framework of the constitution established by the founding fathers, asserting what they wanted America to stand for. The Bill of Rights was created so that individuals could enjoy freedoms, rather than society as a whole. However, the new eugenics laws were designed to limit the very personal freedom that so many Americans had fought so hard for.

The intellectual superiority of the nation as a whole was clearly a goal in the Indiana Act of 1907, which states in its preamble, "Heredity plays a most important part in the transmission of crime, idiocy and imbecility."³ Similar laws continued to be passed and observed throughout the country, even into the late 1970s. Children were sterilized without their consent, because their parents thought they were unfit to become parents. As late as 1971, the parent of a rebellious teenager filed a petition in county court to have her teenage daughter sterilized. In the McFarlin case, a mother claimed that her daughter was mentally retarded, that she was spending too much time with young men and boys, and that she stayed overnight with

² Indiana Eugenics Legislation, Eugenics Legislation: Act of 1907.

³ Indiana Eugenics Legislation, Eugenics Legislation: Act of 1907.

them. The judge approved the daughter's sterilization immediately. He did not investigate the allegations or request a hearing with the daughter. Within a week, the sterilization was performed under the pretext of having the young woman's appendix removed. The daughter found out what had occurred several years later, when she was married and having problems conceiving a child. She and her husband filed a lawsuit against the judge, the mother, the hospital and the doctors who were involved. However, the case was thrown out because under the law a judge was protected from prosecution. The plaintiffs appealed the ruling and won, but then the judge's lawyer appealed to the Supreme Court, which ruled in favor of the judge, stating that he was protected against lawsuits concerning his rulings no matter how malicious or wrong they were.⁴

Thankfully, today all such eugenics-based laws have been long repealed, and an acknowledgement that it was wrong to deny disabled people their rights was made publicly throughout the country by every state government. Troy Duster articulates the ethical question very clearly: "The knotty problem [eugenics] poses is determining 'who speaks for the group?'"⁵ It appears that we have to learn that with any new science there will be a period of moral adjustment. Our society is impatient and generally expects to find solutions right away. To this day there remains the idea that we are all striving for a perfect baby or family, and if we can alter the genetic preconditions for birth somehow to achieve that goal, we will do it. But the question remains: how will we treat those members of society whose parents decided to let nature take its course? When a child is born with a defect, what will our response be?

More specifically, if you already know before the child is born that he or she will be defective, what would you do? Such heart-wrenching decisions are played out every day in doctors' offices and hospitals. Parents still feel it is a stigma if their child is born with a defect - it means that something is wrong with them as parents. It is the responsibility of all Americans to make sure that this stigma is removed and that respect is given to all people without preconceived notions about which characteristics are more preferable in a child. The only way for real change to occur is for us all to unconditionally love and accept all children who are by birth different. If we can all do this on an individual basis, lives will change, even if it is one at a time. As Americans have always done, individuals fighting for what is right can lead the way for the nation as a whole.

In the current election year, healthcare and health concerns have taken center stage. Some questions that still need to be answered are: might knowingly giving birth to a defective child make families non-eligible for healthcare coverage, or will coverage be reduced? Might there be initiatives to mandate prenatal genetic testing to identify unborn children with serious diseases? While most right-thinking Americans do not believe that these kinds of exclusionary measures or genetic assessment would ever occur today, it might be well to remember that there have been times in our history when we have gone to extreme measures in the effort to eliminate "undesirable" members of our citizenry. Can we trust that modern advances in science will not present us with newer, subtler, ever-more dangerous and tempting forms of eugenics?

⁴ "Judge Stump 'Relieved' By Decision," *Indianapolis News*, March 29, 1978, p. 47.

⁵ Duster, "Sociological Stranger in the Land of the Human Genome Project," *Contexts*, Fall 2002, 69.

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