Eugenics

Eugenics is the attempt to improve human traits through intervention in genetic lines, generally for the stated purpose of increasing the proportion of so-called positive human traits and decreasing the proportion of (or eliminating) so-called negative traits. The term “eugenic” was originally coined by Francis Galton (half-cousin to Charles Darwin) in his book *Inquiries into Human Faculty and its Development* (1883). Galton also laid out the approaches to eugenic manipulation that would become common, focusing on them especially in the last chapter (“Race Improvement”) of his autobiography. In particular, he advocated that those “afflicted by lunacy, feeble-mindedness, habitual criminality, and pauperism” should not be allowed to freely propagate. Eugenicists generally embraced Galton’s belief that humans have a “duty” to improve the human race by genetically promoting the “higher” human qualities such as beauty, intelligence, and morality, although how to do so has always been a matter of debate, even among advocates—as has the perhaps more consequential debate over who has the right to determine which are “higher” and “lower” qualities, or “desirable” and “undesirable” traits.

The basis of eugenics is the belief that a human’s right to live and to propagate is based on his or her genetic fitness. The idea drew its intellectual grounding from the breeding of farm animals by selection of desirable traits. However, eugenicists (especially in the early twentieth century) argued that in humans, genetic fitness applied not only to animal traits such as physical strength and health but also to morality. Many argued that morality was directly related to genetic fitness and, therefore, the rights of citizenship should be preferentially allotted to the fit.

Eugenics is often associated with the authoritarian social policies of Nazi Germany. But it is important to recall that while the Nazis’ elimination (or, as they sometimes referred to it, “euthanization”) of “undesirable” groups clearly represents the most extreme implementation of the idea, many governments pursued similar policies in the decades before World War II. In particular, the United States and Britain performed enforced sterilizations on thousands of people considered insane, “feeble-minded,” or unfit. Blacks, American Indians, and those demonstrating “pauperism” (endemic poverty, which was considered a hereditary defect that would be passed on to children) were forcibly sterilized. Often, the children and teenagers who underwent the procedure were not told what was being done. Doctors claimed to be performing appendectomies or other surgeries necessary to their patients’ health. Indeed, a number of respected scientific institutions studied and promoted eugenics in the early twentieth century.

At present, eugenics has an almost universally negative connotation. But the increasing ability to test and manipulate genetics (especially prenatally) has led to new debates about the rights of parents to select for positive traits, or against probable defects, in their unborn children. Genetic testing and manipulation of this type has been called eugenic by some ethicists, although debate on this application of the term continues.

References

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M. Isabel Gardett

University of Utah