

Eugenics

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# British Medical Journal.

SATURDAY, AUGUST 23RD, 1913.

## EUGENICS.

SYDNEY SMITH in one of his letters said his friend Francis Horner was so extremely serious about the future of the human race that he had to compose his face half a street off when they met. At the present time we are all discussing the same problem, though in a more concrete form than that which formed the subject of the philosophic Scotsman's concern. The subject of "eugenics" is in the air; it is dealt with in the newspapers, and it has found its way into light literature. In Ian Hay's last novel, *Happy-go-Lucky*, one of the characters asks another if he happens to have any sort of notion "what eugenics is—or are." The other replies hazily that he believes it is some sort of scheme for improving the physique of the race. It is characteristic of the all-pervading zeal for the regeneration of the race that the girl to whom the inquirer is engaged wishes him to become a local vice-president of the Eugenics Society. Even schoolgirls of 16 are familiar with the question, at least in theory, and freely discuss its practical application. There can be no doubt of the importance of human stock-breeding, and it was fitting, therefore, that a discussion on the subject should have been included in the programme of the Section of Medical Sociology at the recent Annual Meeting of the British Medical Association. A full report of the discussion appeared in the JOURNAL of August 2nd, and it is significant of the widespread interest now taken in eugenics that the debate was opened by a man of science not belonging to the medical profession, while among those who took part in it were an official of the Poor Law, a lady who is secretary of the National Association for the Feeble-Minded, a Russian anarchist of the philosophic kind, and a dignitary of the Roman Catholic Church. The debate, therefore, represented views of the most various kind, and it is this that forms its value as a contribution to a practical solution of the problem.

The discussion, if it had no other outcome, helped to place in a clear light the aim of eugenics. If any real reform is to be effected, it is vitally important that we should not be led astray into Utopian schemes by over-enthusiasm. Some put before them the ideal expressed long ago by Walt Whitman, whose prophetic vision saw a race of supermen among whom there should be no bodily defect or disease:

When America does what was promis'd,  
When through these States walk a hundred millions  
Of superb persons,  
When the rest part away for superb persons and  
Contribute to them,  
When breeds of the most perfect mothers denote  
America,  
Then to me and mine our due fruition.

This goes further than our most advanced eugenists, for although they look forward to a population of

"superb persons," as far as we are aware no one has advocated that the "rest" should "contribute to them." But some come pretty near to this aspiration of the poet. Only a short time ago a distinguished exponent of the new science thought it necessary to explain that eugenists did not deny to those who would not find a place among the poet's "superb persons" the right to live. This may come; the principle of making undesirable offspring "part away for superb persons" was recognized and acted upon in ancient Greece. In the meantime the saner reformers will doubtless be content to accept the more modest ideal of Dr. Harry Campbell, who defines the object of eugenics as the promotion of the welfare of the human race by encouraging biologically suitable and discouraging biologically unsuitable matings. It is, in fact, to use his own phrase, the "science of man breeding."

That this has been deplorably neglected is unquestionable. More than twenty years ago, when a famous racehorse was sold for a large sum for stud purposes, we dwelt on the striking illustration of the relative value placed on animals and on human stock afforded by the fact that, whilst a horse was judged unworthy to beget issue because he was a "roarer," many owners of such an animal would have had no objection to allow their own offspring to marry into families in which tubercle or other hereditary disease was handed down from one generation to another as an inalienable heirloom. We pointed out that a diseased inheritance was sometimes, as in the case of gout, actually boasted of as a mark of blue blood. It was added that, under existing social conditions, it was vain to hope for any great or general improvement in these respects, though a family doctor gifted with the necessary tact could often use his influence advantageously for the prevention of undesirable marriages. If a fraction of the care exercised in the breeding of horses were used in the propagation of the human species, there might be a hope that the race would be vastly improved.<sup>1</sup> Darwin, in his *Descent of Man*, wrote: "Man scans with scrupulous care the character and pedigree of his horses, cattle, and dogs before he matches them; but when he comes to his own marriage he rarely or never takes any such care. . . . Both sexes ought to refrain from marriage if they are in any marked degree inferior in body or mind; but such hopes are Utopian and will never be even partially realized until the laws of inheritance are thoroughly known." There is nothing new, therefore, in the eugenic doctrine except the disposition now shown to push it to extremes in its application.

Dr. Campbell contrasts man's interference with natural selection with the method of Nature. Man, he says, is seeking to obtain efficiency by bestowing infinite pains on the individual. Nature's method, which has been in operation since the first dawn of life, is not that of bolstering up the unfit but of wiping them out. Her chief concern is to produce the best and to secure the survival of the best. In regard to this, we may ask: When people talk of wiping out the unfit, and the survival of the fittest, what exactly do they mean? The fittest for survival in the struggle for existence are not necessarily by any means the best from an ethical point of view or the most likely to promote the welfare of the human race. This truth was set forth with his usual lucidity by Huxley in his *Romanes*

<sup>1</sup> BRITISH MEDICAL JOURNAL, November 28th, 1891.

lecture (1893). He there pointed out that we commonly use "fittest" in a good sense with an understood connotation of "best," and "best" we are apt to take in its ethical sense. But the fittest which survives in the struggle for existence may be and often is the worst. He adds that the ethical process is in opposition to the cosmic process to which the struggle for existence belongs. Some eugenists in their concentration on physical fitness lose sight of the moral qualities that have raised man to the place which he now occupies in Nature, and that most encourage the hope of his ascent to still higher planes. Dr. Campbell, indeed, holds that man is still evolving and will continue to evolve in the moral sphere. This is true to a certain extent, but it has nothing to do with natural selection. When Dr. Campbell declares that "the lazy, the intemperate, the dishonest, the aggressively antisocial, those who love not home life, those who shun the cares and self-sacrifice demanded of fatherhood and motherhood—these are one and all being eliminated, while their opposites are surviving and the attributes which secure their survival are being racially accentuated," we can only say that a man who believes this must be an optimist of the highest degree. It is one of the signs of the times that men and women alike shirk their duties as citizens, help in the perpetration of "racial suicide," and live solely for pleasure. Men avoid the service which they owe to their country, and the feeling of patriotism which has made our "rough island story" a large part of the history of the modern world, is scoffed at by an increasing number of our people as a superstition. Women think more and more of "expressing themselves," and, like Nora in *The Doll's House*, slam the door on the traditions in which the British race has been bred for so many centuries, and go forth to lead their own lives. So far from seeing the signs of moral evolution that are visible to Dr. Campbell, we see a gradual sapping of the moral character of the nation akin to that which finally brought the Roman Empire to ruin.

At first sight there may seem to be an antagonism between the aims of the physician and those of the eugenist. The object of medicine is to preserve life regardless of the good or bad qualities, moral or physical, of the individual; and, since hygiene has become more and more an active factor in the safeguarding of the health of the community, especially during the last fifty or sixty years, an incalculable number of lives have been saved which, from the eugenic point of view, might be described as undesirable. In the discussion on eugenics at Brighton great stress was laid on this point by Mr. Edgar Schuster, who, while stating that in this respect medicine might be accused with some justice of being dysgenic, thought it necessary to defend eugenists from the suspicion of antagonism to the art of healing. If doctors as a body are not very enthusiastic about what is called the science of eugenics, it is because as practical men who have to deal with the actual facts of life they are more than doubtful whether such a thing as the science of eugenics yet exists. Have we, in fact, got much beyond the knowledge embodied in the Horatian *Fortes creantur fortibus et bonis*? And the ancients understood that this was by no means invariably true, for they had a proverb, *Filii heroum noxæ*, which seems to show that they knew the progeny of great men are often degenerate. There is so much that is obscure in the whole matter of generation and the transmission of qualities or

constitutional characteristics, that the medical profession is fully justified in warning enthusiasts against radical measures for the prevention of procreation by the "unfit."

What is the practical outcome of eugenic doctrines? Is the marriage of human beings to be reduced to a system like that which Touchstone calls the "copulation of cattle"? This is vehemently denied by most eugenists; but their teaching carried to its logical conclusion certainly points that way. Some tentative experiments in that direction have been made; for instance, in the Oneida Community founded by J. H. Noyes, and by Friedrich Wilhelm, father of Frederick the Great, who tried to "propagate procerity" by marrying his gigantic Guards to such tall women as he could find. Neither of these experiments was very successful. The difference between medicine and eugenics lies in the fact that while medicine looks to the individual first and only indirectly to the race, eugenics cares nothing for the individual, but solely for the race. And though the whole subject of heredity is still wrapt in darkness, enough is known to show that if the ardent eugenist had his way the world would be the poorer both in genius and in many of the qualities which make for the goodness of men and the happiness of human life. Not only literature, art, and philosophy, but statecraft and the safety and greatness of the empire, would suffer to an extent beyond all conjecture.

The segregation of the mentally deficient is justifiable at once in their own interest and in that of the community. But surgical sterilization would not be accepted by the Legislature or by public opinion, and would lower those who practised it to the level of the hangman. This would inevitably bring discredit on the whole profession. It is the duty of the doctor to do his best by reasoning and moral suasion to prevent the marriage of persons whose offspring are likely to be diseased in body or mind. In Dr. Campbell's words, he should foster the development of a eugenistic conscience. Nowadays, however, the chief difficulty would seem to be to get people of the better classes to marry at all. As to legislation, we entirely agree with Mr. Bateson, who in his address on heredity published in the *JOURNAL* of August 16th, protests against the organization of "a wholesale tampering with the structure of the population such as will follow if any marriage not regarded by officials as eugenic is liable to prohibition. . . . This measure," he adds, "we are told is actually proposed in certain States [of the American Union]. Nothing yet ascertained by genetic science justifies such a course, and we may well wonder how genius and the arts will fare in a community constructed according to the ideals of State legislatures." The law can surround the marriage of those who are deemed "unfit" with difficulties. Human nature being what it is, the inevitable result of these difficulties would be that the ceremony of marriage would be dispensed with, and the unfit would propagate degenerates with the added stigma of illegitimacy. Hence those outcasts would be brought up in the unfavourable environment which illegitimacy brings in its train. Love which laughs at locksmiths will as readily laugh at law. Nature, even if it be expelled for a time by the parliamentary pitchfork, will inevitably come back and claim its rights. All that can prudently be attempted in the present state of knowledge is to regulate natural instincts, when this appears to be desirable in the interests of the community, without looking at human beings from the standpoint of the stock-breeder and treating them by his methods.