

EUGENICS AND THE POOR LAW

THE MINORITY REPORT¹

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THE existing Poor Law operates almost exclusively as an anti-eugenic influence; notably in the laxity of its provision for feeble-minded maternity, in the opportunities for undesirable acquaintanceship afforded by the General Mixed Workhouse, in its inability to search out defectives and wastrels who do not apply for relief, and in its failure to provide any practical alternative to the Outdoor Relief now afforded to tens of thousands of feeble-minded or physically defective parents. To deal with one aspect only of the present system—as things stand at present the Poor Law Authorities cannot even try to check the continued procreation of uncertified mentally defective persons. Indeed, such influence as they exercise in the granting of relief to such persons is all the other way. It is not generally known that some fifteen thousand babies are born in the workhouse every year. To the feeble-minded woman, or to the woman who is mentally and morally degenerate without being actually imbecile, the Poor Law offers free and unconditional medical assistance at the time of her confinement. Thousands of these “unfit” mothers treat the local workhouse or Poor Law infirmary simply as a free maternity hospital. They come in year after year throughout their child-bearing period; and having received, at the expense of the rates, the most skilful care that modern medical science can provide, they go out again, taking their infants with them, only to return as a matter of course and of right when their next confinement draws near.

This abuse of the system of public provision for the destitute not only is not but cannot be prevented by the Poor Law Authorities. They are bound by law to provide the necessities

¹ An extended *précis* of a lecture delivered to the Eugenics Society at Denison House, Vauxhall Bridge Road, S.W., on December 15th, 1909.

of life for all who are destitute, and they are equally bound to discharge their patients as soon as they wish to leave. Their one weapon is "deterrence"; that is to say, they may try to deter people from applying for relief by making the conditions as disgraceful and unpleasant as possible. The treatment of a woman during her confinement cannot in the nature of the case be made actively distasteful to her, so that the disgrace of pauperism is the only deterrent influence available. Needless to say, the class of women of whom I am speaking are quite impervious to any such immaterial influence, and so the abuse goes on. Such indeed are our present arrangements that the only necessitous persons who are effectively deterred from accepting public assistance at these crises are the very persons whom as eugenisists we should like to encourage to increase and multiply. Public subsidy without selection is bad enough, but here we have the Poor Law actually selecting, in practice, the inferior stocks for its subsidies. To quote the Minority Report of the Poor Law Commission: "If the State had desired to maximise both feeble-minded procreation and birth out of wedlock there could not have been suggested a more apt device than the provision, throughout the country, of General Mixed Workhouses, organised as they now are, to serve as unconditional Maternity Hospitals."

But the inference from these facts is not, as some persons seem to imagine, that we had better make no public provision at all. The policy of "*Laissez faire*" is, necessarily, to a eugenisist the worst of all policies, because it implies the definite abandonment of intelligently purposeful selection. Even if we were agreed that the rigorous selection of the "state of nature" were the sort of selection best suited to the needs of a modern highly-civilised community, it would not be practicable or possible to let that "natural" selection take its course. If for a moment we, as a nation, forswore our humanitarian principles, and decided to abolish collective provision for the weak and the unfit, there would inevitably follow an outburst of the most sentimental private charity. It is characteristic of such charity that it not only neglects all eugenic principles, but that in so far as it has any discrimination it often discriminates the wrong way. That

is to say, it tends to maintain, without any possibility of segregation, exactly the worst, *i.e.*, the weakest, the most afflicted, and therefore the most appealing, cases.

But suppose it were possible to suppress private charity altogether, as well as collective provision, even then the eugenicist could not, without abandoning his whole argument, leave things to the anarchy of unrestricted competition. For his object is not merely to produce fine babies but to ensure the ultimate production of fine adults. No matter how perfect the stock from which an infant is born, if it be exposed to sufficiently adverse conditions it will grow up a stunted weakling. To quote a scientific expert on the diseases of children, writing about excessive infant mortality: "By far the more serious matter affecting the commonwealth in every possible way at the present time is the condition of babies *who do not die*, but who are reared in a condition of hopeless malnutrition. Let us consider, for instance, one disease—rickets. Its effects on the nervous system are of the most far-reaching character. Of the 'convulsions' which cause the death of babies at about twelve months of age, rickets is practically the sole cause. At a later stage of life the manifestations of the injuries caused by this disease are seen in epilepsy and in insanity. The Lunatic Asylums are largely occupied at the present time by cases of insanity arising from injuries of the nervous system by rickets. Adenoid growths one of the common troubles of childhood, are practically caused entirely by deformed structure due to rickets. If you go to the chest hospitals and select the patients who are under treatment for pulmonary tuberculosis, you will find the majority of them are suffering from deformities of the chest due to rickets. The pulmonary disease is simply a secondary result of the injuries to the chest and of the injuries to the tissues arising from rickets. All sorts of deformities which go to make up the number of cripples that we are acquainted with are caused by the same disease, and in addition to specific disease and deformities, rickets is responsible for a general and permanent enfeeblement of mind and body." And rickets is a disease which, though widespread enough, is practically confined to the children of the slums and is caused by malnutrition. It is the outcome not of

bad stock but of bad environment, and if we aim at the production of a fine adult race we cannot afford to leave that bad environment alone.

To put the case more generally, we cannot afford to leave unchecked the influences that produce, not death alone, but even more widely, slums and disease, physical starvation, mental perversion, demoralisation of character and actual crime, however convinced we may be that the evil characters acquired in such an environment are not and will not be inherited. After all, it would not be of much use to have all babies born from good stocks, if generation after generation they were made to grow up into bad men and women. A world of well-born, but physically and morally perverted adults is not attractive! The irreparable damage done, generation after generation, to individual survivors would be too high a price to pay for the hypothetical improvement of the stock at birth.

For it must be remembered that the improvement in the stocks is quite hypothetical in any case; nay, it is, under the supposed conditions of absolutely unrestricted individual struggle for existence and "natural" selection, actually improbable. "Nature" is not intelligently purposeful, and knows nothing of the standards of civilised man. If let alone, "Nature" neither breeds from the best stock—as we estimate it—nor selects the best individuals for survival. There is no reason why those who are eliminated in the struggle of unrestricted competition should coincide with those whom we deem the unfit, nor the "survivingest" with those whom we, as civilised men, would most wish to survive. The question, who is to survive, is determined by the conditions of the struggle, the rules of the ring. Where the rules of the ring favour a low type, the low type will survive, and *vice versa*. The survivors of an unregulated epidemic of scarlet fever or typhus may owe their escape to constitutional peculiarities which are otherwise perfectly valueless, and which may even perhaps only be found amongst persons whom, from every other point of view, we should call unfit. If, for example, it were possible for an epidemic of malarial fever to spread unchecked all over the United States of America it is highly probable that the whites would be eliminated and the blacks would survive. There

is, indeed, always a general presumption that the unregulated, unpurposeful struggle will distinctly favour the less individually developed and more prolific organisms as against the more highly developed and less fertile. In short, the "survival of the fittest" in an environment unfavourable to progress may—as every biologist knows—mean the survival of the lowest parasite.

It is accordingly our business, as eugenists, *deliberately to manipulate the environment* so that the survivors may be of the type which we regard as the highest. Our judgment may conceivably be wrong, but if we are to do anything we can only follow it. Now, the deliberate manipulation of the environment of the individual amidst the complex conditions of a modern industrial community involves collective regulation and a highly developed social machinery. No consistent eugenist can be a "Laissez Faire" individualist unless he throws up the game in despair. He must interfere, interfere, interfere!

With regard to the public provision for birth, infancy and childhood here is the dilemma which the eugenist has to face to-day. On the one hand there is the policy of making no public provision at all. That, as I have pointed out, is an impracticable policy, and would in any case afford no sort of guarantee against the rapid degeneration of the race. On the other hand there is the policy of offering public provision on disgraceful or "deterrent" terms. But that, as again I have shown, results in the subsidising of unfitness. The way out of the dilemma is pointed by the Minority Report. We must make proper and adequate provision for all mothers, infants and children who stand in need of it, (because we cannot afford to let anyone go without it), and such provision must carry with it no more disgrace or unpleasantness of any kind than does the public provision of education to day (because otherwise we may make the provision anti-eugenic by "detering" the best). Moreover it must not only be offered on honourable terms, but must, in order to reach all who need it, be actively pressed upon all those who require it from whatever cause, subject only to the subsequent recovery of the cost from those who can afford to pay, on a definite, uniform and well-understood scale, graduated according to the family income and the number of persons who have

to be supported on it. At the same time we must take steps to prevent the continued procreation of feeble-minded and degenerate stocks at the public expense; by handing the care of the whole of this class, certified and uncertified, to a separate authority for the Mentally Defective, whose method of provision will be mainly, if not exclusively "indoor" and to whom may be given powers of compulsory segregation which could never safely be granted to a body, like the present Board of Guardians, having charge of all classes of necessitous persons. In these ways we shall be doing something to redress the balance between the fit and the unfit stocks, which, under the present Poor Law system, so clearly favours the latter.

The problem we have to face is becoming all the more important and urgent by reason of the volitional restriction of births, which is now rapidly spreading over the civilised world. This restriction is clearly differential, it certainly is not taking place equally amongst all classes, and there is great reason to suppose that it is resulting in fewer births from our best stocks. That is to say, the unfit are surviving. What seems indispensable and urgent is to alter the economic incidence of child-bearing. Under present social conditions the birth of children in households maintained on less than three pounds a week (and these form four-fifths of the nation) is attended by almost penal consequences. The central problem of all practical eugenics is, as Prof. Karl Pearson has suggested, to make the well-born child a valuable economic asset. This is the ideal which we should all like to see carried out. At present we have no practical scheme to bring it about; and in the meantime the best we can do is to make the well-born child less of a burden to its parents.

Consider the position of a thrifty, temperate, and capable working-man earning say 30s. to 35s. a week, a man of the type which we should choose for survival if the choice were in our hands. That man, as all statisticians tell us, is yielding to the State in taxes a larger proportion of his income than the men with incomes, of one, ten or a hundred thousand a year. Consider what he has to face when he undertakes the responsibility of parentage. In the first place he has to bear the cost of having his children brought into the world under favourable conditions.

Then he has to bear the cost of rearing them. He is now relieved of the cost of their elementary schooling, but to pay for their food and clothes and the inevitable medical attendance will mean the careful expenditure of every penny of his income for many years to come, if not an actual lowering of his standard of life. And all through those years he will have to face the possibility of his own break-down or death, which would mean that his children would become paupers and would never have a good chance or even a fair start in life. For it may be taken as an axiom, beyond dispute, that practically no manual worker, and very few in the class just above them, can, however thrifty, possibly afford to make sufficient provision for his children in case of his premature death. They are bound in such a case to come on to the rates or else to be reared in an underfed and underclothed condition upon the miserably small pittance which is all a widow can generally earn. Can it be doubted that the frequently inadequate and always disgraceful provision which the community makes through the present Poor Law for such unfortunate children is an important factor in keeping down the birth-rate amongst the most thrifty, self-respecting and far-sighted of the working classes?

Under the Minority Report scheme some at least of these obstacles to fit parentage will be removed. Every man who does his duty by the community in bringing into the world and rearing healthy children in decent surroundings will have no difficulty in obtaining from the Public Health Authority proper medical care for his wife and children whenever and of whatever kind needed. If he has anything at all above the family subsistence level, he will have to pay according to his ability, but the cost will not be allowed to cripple him, and the whole transaction will be without any sort of disgrace. Only if he fails in his duty as a parent will he find himself in difficulties with the authorities. If he should die his children will not go to the General Workhouse but will be adequately maintained, reared and started in life by the Education Authority without any stigma of pauperism or other artificial handicap. If he has created a good home it will not be broken up; and his widow will be rewarded for her services to the community in bearing

healthy children by being retained and paid by the community to devote herself exclusively to the care of the family and home. Everything in short will be done to encourage the production of well-born children from good stocks. The reforms proposed in the Minority Report in the direction of lightening some of the burdens of parentage will no doubt be deprecated by the ignorant and unthinking as calculated to encourage the idle and the thriftless, the drunken and the profligate to increase and multiply. But you cannot increase what is already at a maximum. *The grave fact that we have to face is that under our existing social arrangements it is exactly these people, and practically these only, who at present make full use of their reproductive powers.* For such degenerates the responsibility of parentage has no terrors to-day, its burdens are already lifted from their shoulders by the demoralising unconditional doles of the Poor Law or of Charity. Their standard of life cannot be lowered and it is sufficient for them to know—if indeed they care at all—that their children are not likely to be allowed actually to die of starvation.

To sum up. There is considerable evidence that as a nation we are breeding largely from our inferior stocks. The action of the present Poor Law in subsidising the reproduction of mental, moral and physical defectives and in discouraging the thrifty from undertaking the responsibilities of parentage, is one of the most important factors in this process, and one of the most easily dealt with. Our first duty, therefore, as eugenists is to bring about a drastic revolution in the prevailing methods of the Poor Law system.

The Minority Report is drawn on strictly eugenic lines. Its authors claim (and their claim has so far evolved no serious denial from eugenists) that it contains absolutely no recommendation contrary to true eugenic principles. It was, indeed, drafted in constant consideration of the eugenic argument, and it may therefore be considered actually as an outcome of the educational work of this Society. It puts forward a policy of :

- (1) Deliberately altering the social environment so as to render impossible (or at least more difficult) the present prolific life below the National Minimum, or the continuance

at large of persons of either sex who are unable or unwilling to come up to the Minimum Standard of Life ;

(2) " Searching out " every person in default irrespective of his destitution or his application for relief ;

(3) Medical and other inspection of all infants, school children, sick or mentally defective persons, and all who are " unemployed," or who otherwise need public help, so as to discover the unfit, as well as to remedy their defects ;

(4) Segregation, permanent or temporary, of many defective persons now at large ;

(5) Enforcement of the responsibilities of parenthood at a high standard, and hence discouragement of marriage among those unable or unwilling to fulfil them ; and

(6) Taking care that no one sincerely desirous of fulfilling his social responsibilities shall, by lack of opportunity, be prevented from doing so.

What we as eugenicists have got to do is to " scrap " the old Poor Law, with its indiscriminate relief of the destitute as such ; and replace it by an intelligent policy of so altering the social environment as to discourage or prevent the multiplication of those irrevocably below the National Minimum of fitness ; whilst at the same time increasing the opportunities of those more prudent and thrifty classes, who alone are discouraged by our present system from undertaking the responsibilities of parenthood. Thus (and, as it seems to me, thus only), may we hope to make the " survivingest " individual and the " survivingest " stock increasingly coincide with the " more than average fit."