The Historical Idea of a Better Race

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Abstract

This paper explores the historical idea of improving humanity. Developments in genetics and political thought have during the last century contributed to eugenic policies which have sometimes had adverse effects on people's lives. But European philosophy has seen attempts to make better human beings long before the current scientific advances. The paper explores these attempts by an examination of the doctrines of Plato, Aristotle, Condorcet, Herder, and Mill, as well as the technological Romanticism of Mary Shelley, before moving on to the more recent eugenic policies inspired by Darwin and Galton.

KEYWORDS: abortion, Aristotle, Condorcet, enhancement, Darwin, Enlightenment, ethics, eugenics, Europe, Frankenstein, Galton, genetic, Germany, healthcare, Herder, history, infanticide, Mill, moral, morality, Nazi, philosophy, Plato, politics, Prometheus, Romanticism, Shelley, social democracy, Sweden, Tattare, United States

*My thanks are due to Mark Cutter and to two anonymous referees of the journal for insightful comments which have enabled me to clarify the arguments of the paper.
INTRODUCTION

During the first years of the new millennium, an array of books has been published on ‘making better people’ by the use of genetic selection, reproductive technologies, and gene therapy. Some of these contributions criticise attempts to improve the human race,¹ but many authors are clearly attracted by the notion of choosing children to eliminate undesired conditions like disease and disability and to boost desired qualities like strength and intelligence.²

The name for trying to make better people by reproductive selection is ‘eugenics’; and in the past eugenic policies have sometimes been accompanied by genocidal practices.³ Those who oppose all forms of eugenics usually cite science, or science gone mad, as its source. Those who oppose only state-controlled forms of selection tend to blame totalitarian politics for atrocities committed in the name of making better people. But should we dig deeper than that? What about cultural and philosophical influences? And do only totalitarian ideologies cause the emergence of discriminative policies in birth control? What if eugenics, good or bad, is not just something accidental, but rather an inevitable strand of our way of thinking? Answers to these questions take us back to the dawn of ethical thought as we now know it.

A closer look reveals that the idea of biologically improving humanity has been a part of Western intellectual and political tradition for as long as there has been European moral philosophy. Already in Greek Antiquity, Plato designed an ideal state where the best leaders are produced by selective breeding, and Aristotle echoed his thoughts by outlining a eugenic programme of his own. In more modern times, the ideal of a better race was important to many thinkers of the Enlightenment and Romanticism. And the eugenic movements of the last centuries carried the torch forward with conviction and commitment.

In this paper, I will provide a historical overview of some eugenic and genocidal elements in the core doctrines of Western moral and political thought.⁴ This will serve two purposes. It will show that scientific advances in genetics did

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⁴ The basic research for the sections dealing with historical philosophies and philosophies of history was conducted in my project European Moral Philosophy and the Possibility of Consensus, funded at the turn of the millennium by the Academy of Finland. The results were, at the time, primarily published in Finnish, and they have been reported in more detail, as far as the philosophers portrayed here are concerned, in my books Häyry and Häyry 1997 (chapter 17), Häyry 2000 (chapters 2-3, 7, and 13), Häyry 2001c (chapters 12-13); and Häyry 2002 (chapters 4-5).
not start the discussion on the biological improvement of the human race. And it will expose the ideological, and in many cases purely speculative and mythological, underpinnings of the ethical theories that are often cited in contemporary debates. Especially Plato’s idea of human perfection, unscientific and unbelievable as it may be, is quite illuminating. In all its poetic absurdity, it contains elements which still feature in some bioethical notions of personhood and humanity.

**IMMORTAL SOULS IN SEARCH OF PERFECTION**

Plato launched his project of eugenics to rescue *immortal human souls*, which he considered more important than mere mortal bodies. The predominance of the soul over the body was not his own idea, but he presented it in a way that has become a natural part of European thinking and folklore. The following condensed account is derived from his dialogues *Phaedo*, *Symposium*, *Republic*, and *Timaeus*.

Plato’s starting point was that when we stop to think about the human condition, we immediately realise that experiences related to our bodies are transitory, and that the only permanence we can expect is linked with our immaterial thoughts and aspirations. Plato also believed that through the functions of our intellect – through our immaterial thoughts and aspirations – we can grasp a reality higher than the one we can reach by our senses. This higher reality is the world of eternal and immutable ideas. And this, in Plato’s view, is where we belong as immortal beings and it is what we should aim at in our worldly affairs.\(^5\)

Plato’s belief in the world of ideas was based on two philosophical notions – the notions of *perpetuity* and *perfection*.\(^6\)

As for perpetuity, like many theorists of his own time, Plato thought that entities can be real only if they are everlasting in some genuine way. Things that come and go or change over time, temporary things, do not actually exist; they just appear and then disappear again. This rules out the reality of the perceptible, fluctuating world around us – our everyday world – and the logical inference from this is that actual beings must reside somewhere else.

Plato also believed that real things must be perfect, unlike the defective entities that we can see and touch. This insistence can be explained by Plato’s fondness of geometry as a solid, exact discipline.\(^7\) Although every straight line, circle, or square we can draw is flawed, the validity of geometry as a science is not compromised by this. It examines the ideas of perfectly straight lines, perfectly

\(^5\) Plato 1993, 78b-84b.
\(^6\) Plato 2003, 210a-212 a.
\(^7\) Plato 2007, VII 526c-527c.
round circles, and perfectly square squares. In a similar fashion, philosophers should, according to Plato, seek knowledge concerning perfect ideas.

Plato’s higher level of reality consists of the eternal and immutable ideas – or, as he also called them, forms – of everything that we can perceive in the material world. Just as the crooked lines we draw imitate geometric abstractions, all beings that we are directly acquainted with imitate their corresponding forms in the higher world. Every chair is a reflection of the idea of a perfect chair, every horse is an image of the idea of a perfect horse, all good deeds imitate the idea of perfect goodness, and so on.⁸

Now, supposing that this is the structure of the world, the important practical question is, how can we grasp ideas, and use them to guide our decision making? According to Plato, initially we cannot, but a properly organised society will eventually make this possible. Plato clarifies and supports his claim by presenting, in the dialogue *Timaeus*, a mythical picture of the creation of the world and of the role of human beings in it.⁹

We are told in *Timaeus* that when the visible world was created, its maker¹⁰ started by producing the stars and the planets. All the good, pure stuff in the universe was used in this process of shaping perfect celestial bodies in the image of their forms in the world of ideas. When it came to creating human souls, therefore, slightly defective left-over materials had to be used, and the souls remained, consequently, imperfect. This imperfection prevents us from being in direct touch with the world of ideas, which means that certain further manoeuvres are needed.

Fortunately the creator of the world came up with a cosmic plan to help us to achieve perfection. Immortal souls in their impure shape originally inhabit the stars, but they are sent down to the planets, where they are assigned material bodies. As the souls are unaccustomed to the weight of matter and to sensory experiences, they are at first overwhelmed and confused and cannot think or speak. This is why it takes some time before children develop intellectual and communication skills. But once the souls survive their infancy and childhood, their intellect is revived, and they can begin their journey toward human perfection, which is a state that Plato also calls *justice*. If a soul reaches this state during its earthly life, it can return to its home star, and spend the rest of eternity contemplating the world of ideas. If it does not, then it will have to live again on Earth, or on one of the other planets.

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⁸ Plato 2007, VI 509d-VII 521c.
⁹ Plato 1972, 32c-44c.
¹⁰ This being, the *demiurge*, does not in Plato’s model create the world out of nothing, but builds it by using existing materials.
A GLIMPSE TO THE CHASE

Why is any of this important in the context of eugenics and the improvement of humanity? Surely we do not believe that eternal souls live in stars and make a short trip to the Earth to achieve roundness and perfection? And in this case, what is the point of relating a myth that even in Plato’s time failed to qualify as scientific knowledge?11

Well, the point is that Western thinking, as we know it, has since Plato reflected the themes touched on and explicated in his dialogues. At least four topics stand out in even the most cursory inspection. First, the idea of human perfection, and its material hindrances, has been present in a variety of political and medical debates. The impurities and imbalances of blood and other body fluids, for instance, were a cause of concern for many generations before defective genes, in our current jargon, became the focus of attention. Secondly, the notion of eternal existence as the test of reality has not lost its grip. Some of us may not believe in immortal souls, but it is quite common to think that the undying blueprint of life is passed on from generation to generation in genes. Thirdly, it is not at all uncommon in bioethical discussions to hear arguments about the insignificance of our earthly lives in comparison with the lives we can live afterwards if we strive for the perfection of the soul instead of succumbing to the transient desires and needs of the flesh.12 And fourthly, many arguments regarding genetic selection seem to presuppose that souls, or at least some conceptual entities resembling them, pre-exist bodies. People do not always recognise this, but there is no other way to make sense of the ‘best interest’ of individuals who have not been conceived yet, and will probably never be conceived.

So the role of Plato, and other historical figures, is to provide background and perspective to contemporary discussions. Bioethical arguments sometimes contain lines like, ‘Already Plato said this in his dialogues’, as if such remarks should have some special weight. But we need to know what can and cannot be deduced from literary facts like this. They do show that the idea in question is not new, and that it is possibly a time-honoured part of our intellectual tradition. They do not, however, show that the idea is valid, sound, good, or true. Plato, for instance, did say that people should strive for justice, which is presumably good in some sense. But he also said that the souls of infants are confused, because they have been squashed by gravity and sense data. The silliness of the latter statement would not be intellectually fatal, if this particular view could be seen as an isolated passage in Plato’s writings. But it cannot – it is an integral part of the justification of his

11 Myths did have some degree of credibility, though, as the best approximations of how things could have come about. See, e.g., Morgan 2000.
12 E.g., Kass 2002.

http://www.bepress.com/selt/vol2/iss1/art11
political system – and of his eugenic programme. Some caution is, therefore, needed.

A SOUND MIND IN A SOUND BODY

The perfection of individuals is in Plato’s model possible only if they live in a just society. This is described in his dialogue *Republic*.

The just society is a republic where people are divided into three classes, namely the rulers, the defenders, and those who provide for the economic and material needs of the citizens. The class division is based on psychological differences between people. Some are driven by their desires, others by their courage, and yet others by their wisdom. Justice as the overarching virtue consists of a harmonious balance between the three modes of motivation, and it appears in different forms, depending on one’s place in the republic. Everybody needs *temperance* as regards the fulfilment of desires, defenders need *courage*, and rulers are expected to manifest both courage and *wisdom* in their decisions.\(^{13}\)

Plato believed that one of the worst evils of political life is the greed of politicians for material benefits. This is why the two upper classes of his republic are not allowed to have private possessions. Instead, they live in conditions which resemble a military camp. They reside together in humble dwellings, and share the burdens of daily life. To avoid nepotism and jealousy, rulers do not practice monogamy, and their children are educated by the republic. When an infant is born, it is taken away from its mother and raised by the community’s designated officials. The members of the upper classes do not know who their parents or siblings are.\(^{14}\)

This is where Plato introduced his eugenic programme. In order to produce the best possible offspring for the republic, the reproduction of the upper classes is controlled. Members of the economically productive groups – farmers, workers, and merchants – are allowed to have children with their peers as they choose. But the situation is different with rulers and defenders. It is the duty of the leaders of the state to select the best character matches among the women and men of these upper classes and to provide rituals to ensure that the chosen individuals mate and propagate. As a general rule, Plato suggested that the best rulers and defenders should be encouraged to unite as often as possible, and the inferior as seldom as possible. The idea is based on his observations on the breeding of domestic animals, where the best female and male hunting dogs or ornamental birds are matched. When in Plato’s republic good children are born of good upper-class matches, state authorities will make sure that they are properly reared. The

\(^{13}\) Plato 2007, IV 427d-445e. For an interesting account of the three-partition of the soul and the requirement of harmony, see Loizou 1999.

\(^{14}\) Plato 2007, V 457d-466d.
children of inferior rulers and defenders, and the deformed offspring of the superior, will be put away in a mysterious, unknown place.\textsuperscript{15}

Plato realised that eugenic programmes like this can provoke opposition. He recommended, therefore, that only the highest state officials should know about the specifics of the arrangement. For the general public, they would remain a secret. They would know, of course, that the children of the upper classes are raised by the state, but not that the couplings are manipulated or that only suitable infants will survive.\textsuperscript{16}

Given the cosmic framework that Plato worked within, his eugenic programme was theoretically sensible. He wanted to produce sound bodies to house the sound souls of the ruling classes. The rulers of his republic were responsible for the provision of social and political justice, which in its turn was necessary for the mental and spiritual well-being of every citizen. Timid soldiers and foolish leaders would have jeopardised the mission of the state, which was to ensure the eternal happiness of the people.\textsuperscript{17} And deformed individuals could not have been expected to develop the virtues of temperance, courage, and wisdom needed for the harmonious functioning of the soul. It would have been impossible for them to reach perfection during this lifetime, and in Plato’s model their lives would not have been worth living.

It would probably be an exaggeration to say that Plato’s doctrine has, later on, served as the model of all European eugenic and genocidal endeavours. The core elements of the ensuing efforts are, however, well in evidence. The system is multifunctional in that it aims at physical, mental, social, and spiritual perfection at the same time. This has been the ideological basis of more modern eugenic movements, as well. The system is clandestine and paternalistic in that it entitles the elite to manipulate the lives of other people, behind their backs but allegedly in their own best interest. Similar attitudes have been prevalent among many later eugenic movements – they have not always been known for their openness and democratic appeal. And the system evokes the notion of unworthwhile lives. This notion is not a part of all attempts to genetically enhance humanity, but it lurks in the background of certain discriminative abortion policies and it has been used as a rationale for genocidal activities.

But on with the story – Plato was by no means the only thinker to hold eugenic views during the last millennia in Europe. Let me briefly describe Aristotle’s observations on the matter, just to show that Plato was not alone in his own time, and then go on to discuss more modern lines of thought.

\textsuperscript{15} Plato 2007, V 457d-466d.
\textsuperscript{16} Plato 2007, V 457d-466d.
\textsuperscript{17} Plato 2007, V 457d-466d.
ARISTOTLE’S PRACTICAL CRITIQUE

Aristotle, Plato’s eminent pupil, saw many flaws in the proposed arrangement of his tutor’s republic. He did not believe in the pre-existence of individual souls, and he did not see the state as a mental institution that aspires to cure people’s minds for their eternal salvation. For Aristotle, the state was an organisation that aims to secure the good and virtuous life of its members in this life. He did not think that Plato’s republic could accomplish this.18

Plato had argued that when people do not know about their family ties, they are less hostile to each other. Individuals of my own age could be my brothers or sisters, and this prevents me from resorting to violence with them. Similarly, members of the older generation could be my parents, which excludes brutality and disrespect in my dealings with them. And the young could be my own children, whom I could not deliberately hurt.

Aristotle disagreed with this idea, and claimed that the lack of recognised family ties would probably increase hostility instead of eliminating it. Although it is true that we are not inclined to hurt our own siblings, genitors or offspring, part of the reason is that we know who they are. Without this knowledge, our family feelings would be dispersed too widely to have an impact on our behaviour.

In Plato’s model, vertical incest – sexual relations between parents and their offspring – is precluded by making matches only between members of the same age group. Horizontal incest, on the other hand, would be more difficult to control. Planned reproduction by siblings could be prevented by keeping detailed records of suitable pairs, but sexual encounters between brothers, a prospect that worried Aristotle, would be virtually impossible to check. This did not seem to present a problem to Plato, but Aristotle was more concerned about the breach of traditional propriety.

Another set of difficulties for Aristotle was related to the assignment of children’s positions according to their qualities rather than their inherited class. He interpreted Plato as saying that the less talented infants of the ruling classes would be ‘sent down’ to be raised by members of the lower class, while the more talented offspring of the producers would be adopted by the rulers. Aristotle anticipated problems in the practical arrangement of moving children around like this, and noted that acts of violence could occur later in life between natural relatives separated in birth. Custom dictated that in such cases proper amends should be made in appropriate rituals. But since the transgressors would not even know about the particularly evil nature of their deeds, this would be impossible and the crimes would not be properly atoned for.

18 The following account of Aristotle’s (1981) views is derived from The Politics II 10 1272a and VII 16 1334b-1336a.
ARISTOTLE’S EUGENIC PROGRAMME

Aristotle did not accept Plato’s model for the improvement of the race, but his objections had little to do with his views on the ethics of reproduction as such. He agreed that the best possible children should be produced, and that legislative action should be taken to further this aim. Aristotle thought that men can best serve their communities by conceiving children between the ages of thirty-seven and fifty-five, and women by giving birth when they are between eighteen and thirty-six. When children are born to older or younger parents, they tend to be both physically and mentally underdeveloped. If the very young reproduce, the offspring are mostly small and only female progeny result, at least in all known animals. And when children are born to very old people, they are frail.

Pregnant women should, according to Aristotle, take good care of their physical and mental health to guarantee the well-being of their children. This rule is based on the doctrine that mothers influence their unborn brood like soil influences the plants that grow in it. Legislators can make sure that women exercise in a suitable manner, for instance, by ordering them to take daily walks to temples where they can worship the gods of childbearing.

Aristotle did not wish deformed children to be kept alive; on the contrary, he wanted the law to sanctify their rejection. He also wanted legislators to determine the number of children each family is allowed to have. In case of superfluous pregnancies, he recommended early terminations as a solution. Sentience and animation, forty days after conception for boys and ninety days for girls, marked in his model the boundary between permissible and impermissible abortions. The detection of unlawful pregnancies at an early stage was important, since custom condemned infanticide as a means to control the number of children.

The justification of Aristotle’s eugenic programme is not entirely clear. Plato tried to produce the best possible bodies to serve pre-existing souls in their search for perfection. If a body was flawed, and could not be expected to serve its purpose, abortion and infanticide could be seen as an act of mercy. Why burden a soul with a life that cannot lead to salvation, anyway? But Aristotle did not believe that individual souls can pre-exist or outlive their bodies. By taking the life of a foetus or an infant we cancel its only chance to develop into a happy, virtuous member of the human community. How can this be legitimised?

A possible rationale for an early abortion is that the individual as a body-mind continuum does not exist yet. Before quickening, the foetus has not become a fully-fledged, living human being, and nothing of value is destroyed in the

19 Aristotle’s (1981) ideas about the improvement of the human race can be found in The Politics VII 16 1335.
termination of the pregnancy. But what about the dismissal of deformed infants? Did Aristotle hold the view that handicapped children would be a burden to their families, and encumber life in their communities? This is a viable interpretation, given the philosopher’s practical approach to most matters. Or did he seek refuge in the thought that severely deformed children fall outside the scope of humanity? This could be in line with his notion of ‘natural slaves’ and women as inferior beings (based on the view that these groups of people lack certain rational capacities). Both ideas, the arguments from social encumbrance and subhumanity, have been used from time to time in later discussions on abortion and infanticide.

FROM INFANTICIDE TO GENOCIDE AND BEYOND

Infanticide as a means to improve the human race lost most of its appeal during the Christian era. The practice continued as a social phenomenon, but official attitudes to it changed drastically. Many ideological developments contributed to this end. Some theorists believed that suffering ennobles individuals and makes them more acceptable to God. Others saw congenital ailments as a form of divine punishment, which should not be dodged. Christian virtues, unlike Plato’s harmony of the soul, did not require people to be able-bodied or mentally alert. Meekness and religious devotion replaced courage and wisdom as some of the most desirable character traits, at least for common people, and this made strength and intelligence ethically obsolete. The ethos of justice was, at least partly, superseded by an ethos of care, and the moral basis of eugenic improvements evaporated.

Genocide, however, continued to be a viable practical policy. Although brotherly love required Europeans to treat each other in terms of equality, this rule was not always extended to the native inhabitants of colonised regions. They were seen either as children in need of education, or as wild animals to be domesticated and, in case of non-compliance, extinguished at will. The conceptually interesting move here is that discrimination can coexist with the imperative to treat all human beings with equal respect, provided that the individuals we treat differently are defined as nonhuman, or at least less human than we ourselves are.

The two main intellectual movements of modernity, namely Enlightenment and Romanticism, inherited the peculiarities and contradictions of the preceding age, including its schizophrenic faith in the equality of all people and the inferiority of people from other countries. Racism manifested itself in many ways, ranging from benevolent paternalism to belligerent nationalism. Underlying these attitudes was usually a firm belief in the superiority of one’s own nation and race,


Published by The Berkeley Electronic Press, 2008
reflected in philosophical stories about the development of the human race, which became important in this era.

PROGRESS AND PERFECTION

The central theme of the Enlightenment was universal human progress. It was believed that the destiny of humankind is to proceed from primordial barbarism to civilised perfection. The details of the story varied from one author to another, as some advocated an idealist reading of world history, while others preferred an economic interpretation. But the main plot and protagonists remained the same.

The resulting doctrines, or ‘philosophies of history’, standardly consisted of three elements. The first was a speculative description of how the world, the humankind, and one’s own nation had come to be what they were. The second was a theory of the reasons of historical change, as it had been described. And the third was an outline of future developments in the light of the detected logic of change.

The French philosopher Marie-Jean-Antoine-Nicholas de Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet, was one of the main representatives of the idealistic school. According to his view, the history of humankind can be divided into ten epochs. During the first three, people matured from animal-like creatures to social beings with agricultural, political, and elementary cultural skills. The development of alphabetic writing during the fourth step was succeeded by the cultures of Greece and Rome during the fifth, and then by the sixth stage of dogmatic Christianity, which ended in the crusades. After the early scientific advances of the Greeks and the Romans, knowledge declined in Europe, but it was revived in the seventh epoch, and it triumphed during the next two stages, the eight ranging from the invention of printing to the works of René Descartes, who finally crushed dogmatism, and the ninth from Descartes to the French Revolution. The last, tenth, epoch is the future, the time following the revolution.

Condorcet admitted that the knowledge concerning the first three periods in European history is mostly conjectural, since no written record exists. But he argued that the timetable for the development of humanity is constant across cultures, both past and present. This means that we can see our own prehistory by anthropologically observing the primitive tribes of other continents. What they are doing today, we have done in the past. Put the other way around, primitive people could learn about their future development by studying our historical accomplishments and mistakes.

As for the force behind human progress, Condorcet thought that the key concept is universal reason. He contended that in the history of Western

22 The following account is derived from Condorcet 1955.
civilisation, the advance of reason has been severely hindered, partly by the prejudices of philosophers and the general public, but mainly by religious superstition. Good secular education could, however, according to him, rectify the situation. When all forms of ignorance, prejudice, and superstition have been abolished, Europe can lead the way to human perfection, which in the end both requires and guarantees the freedom of all people and equality among and between nations.

Condorcet’s sketch is not explicitly racist, but it states quite clearly that indigenous cultures without written records are on a lower level of development than their European counterparts. The explanation for this, in the theories of Condorcet and his cronies, could be found in climate or geography,23 but the possibility also remains that the people of these cultures were, according to some Enlightenment thinkers, intrinsically inferior to the populations of the civilised world. If this is the case, education does not necessarily help, and the fate of primitive nations remains in these models more obscure.

A notable champion of the economic – as opposed to the idealistic – reading of human progress was Adam Smith, who represented the Scottish Enlightenment.24 Smith outlined the development of the Western culture in terms of property and the means of production. According to him, the communities of hunters and gatherers, in which private ownership was virtually unknown, had to give way to more advanced forms of society, first to herders and then to agriculture and commerce. Smith saw the emerging market economy of his own time as an inevitable step forward, and defended the freedom of trade as the only way to meet its demands.

Smith believed, however, that not all nations had progressed to plan. Some African and Siberian tribes, for instance, had failed to develop beyond the nomadic stage, and seemed to have little hope of doing so on their own in the future. The reasons could be geographic or genetic, but the future of such nations in a free global market was as unclear in Smith’s model as in Condorcet’s. Education could be a possibility, but what should be done, if these underdeveloped tribes do not want to embrace the accomplishments of European civilisation? If the nomads of Africa and Siberia are not prepared to recognise the benefits of unlimited trade, will their views be overridden in the name of universal human perfection?

Here again, it should be noted that the spirit of the Enlightenment philosophers is alive and well in today’s moral and political discussions, including bioethical debates. Multinational corporations, ideologically supported by many philosophical ethicists, insist on global economic freedom as a prerequisite of progress, and international organisations issue universal guidelines based on

23 This was what, for instance, Montesquieu (1989) argued.
24 Smith 1982.
essentially European ideas of what is dignified and reasonable. These practices, and their underlying justifications, can be usefully studied in the light of their background assumptions, as laid out by thinkers like Condorcet and Smith. Was their view of history right? Does human development follow a preset pattern? If it does, is there any way in which we can morally evaluate it? If there is, and if the pattern is found to be unacceptable, how can we halt or redirect the course of events? If we cannot, what should we do?

**RACE AS THE BACKBONE OF NATIONS**

Advocates of the competing modern movement, Romanticism, did not accept the idea of universal reason as the force behind incessant historical progress; rather, they emphasised the role of passion and organic growth in human life. They argued that every nation has its own peculiar history, which is based on its own culture and people, and that nations, like organisms, are mortal. Their lives are comparable to the lives of individual human beings in that they, too, live through the stages of infancy, youth, adulthood, and old age.

The philosophical forerunner of the Romantic movement in Germany was Johann Gottfried von Herder, who started his career as an Enlightenment thinker, but who through his folkloristic studies grew weary of the reason-based rejection of primitive ways of thinking. Herder, like Condorcet and Smith, divided up history into periods, and admitted that some cultures have been more primitive than others. But he did not necessarily see the civilised nations of his own time as the zenith of progress, toward which all previous ages had struggled. The happiness of the people is not, according to him, dependent on the degree to which reason prevails in social and political affairs.

Herder’s criticism of Enlightenment rationalism did not prevent him from thinking that the future progress of humankind will take place in Europe, and more specifically in his native Germany. The indigenous cultures of Africa, America and Asia had lived through their natural life cycles, and their development had ground to a halt. The vital force of his own civilisation, or the German *Volkgeist*, on the other hand, was strong, and Herder believed that its free and uninterrupted growth could significantly advance humanity.

In general terms, Herder identified ethnic groupings, or race, as the most natural foundation of nation states, and this has earned him, from time to time, a reputation as a militant nationalist and potentially genocidal racist. Since his primary motivation was to defend his own culture against the pan-European universalism of the time, this accusation is probably unfair. But his observation

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26 His view is presented in Herder 1966.
that the vital forces of some civilisations were declining while other nations, especially his own, were in their prime may have contributed to the rise of more hostile attitudes. Herder confined his remarks to cultures instead of individuals, but the connection he made between race and nation is open to the interpretation that genetic decay goes hand in hand with cultural regress.\(^{27}\)

Contemporary discussions on ethics contain many elements of Romantic thinking as outlined by Herder’s philosophy of history. Universal solutions to bioethical issues are criticised because they ignore the particular circumstances in which people live in their nations and communities.\(^{28}\) Some conventions in Africa, America, and Asia are condemned as products of stagnant cultures that have no future. And many Germans still think that humanity could be greatly improved by allowing Germany to take a lead in bioethical matters, especially in those related to dignity and freedom.

**DESPOTISM IS LEGITIMATE WITH BARBARIANS**

The tenets of Romanticism and Enlightenment were fused in the writings of many nineteenth-century philosophers. Freedom and progress held their pride of place in various disguises, but the deeply rooted faith in the inferiority of non-European people and cultures also retained its grip.

An example is provided by the political philosophy of John Stuart Mill.\(^{29}\) According to Mill, the primary goal of government and legislation is to promote the happiness of individuals regardless of their class and gender. Subjective well-being, as defined by the individuals themselves, is the source of all value, and everybody’s contentment is equally important. Autocratic attempts to dictate what is good for other people will inevitably lead to increased misery, even if the motivation is benevolent. Based on these premises, Mill argued that liberty and democracy should prevail in civilised societies. People should be left free to make their own choices, including their own mistakes, without paternalistic control, and they should be given the opportunity to participate fully in democratic decision making. When the thoughts, feelings, and actions of individuals do not directly and immediately harm others, they should not be regulated. Instead, it is the government’s task to secure the liberty of conscience, thought, feeling, opinion, sentiment, expression, publication, tastes, pursuits, design of life plans, and joint actions of its citizens.

\(^{27}\) For discussions of these and related themes see, e.g., Ergang 1931; Barnard 1965; Beiser 1989; Barnard 2004.


\(^{29}\) Mill’s views on liberty and the treatment of barbarians are recorded in *On Liberty* – Mill 1996.
The situation is, however, different as regards less developed individuals and societies. Mill founded civil liberties on the assumption that citizens have the ability to engage in free and equal discussion. Where such discussion is possible, public disputes can be settled in the light of reason, and progress is unhindered. But if the condition is not met, the principle of liberty cannot be legitimately applied. Children and other underage persons, whose mental and social abilities are not yet fully developed, cannot therefore be granted the freedom that competent adults are naturally endowed with.

This remark is, by most standards, noncontroversial. But Mill then went on to say that similar observations can be extended to some non-European cultures, to ‘those backward states of society in which the race itself may be considered as in its nonage’. The principle of liberty has no application in these cases, because spontaneous social and political progress at the early stages of civilisation is extremely unlikely. Given that the intentions of the rulers are good and their politics successful, Mill thought that ‘despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians’.30

It is not clear how widely Mill wanted this maxim to be applied. He was a critic of British colonialism, and advocated passionately the liberty of individuals and oppressed groups in most areas of political life. But the mere idea that some races can be compared to children, and treated accordingly, tells something about the philosophical mentality of his time.

The instructive observation here is that Mill’s time is by no means over yet. It is still true that moral philosophers and public authorities have their ideological breaking point when it comes to practices that they do not understand. And one of the possible rhetorical moves then is to declare the people with the different practices inferior and incapable of understanding the tenets of freedom, as it emerges from unhindered liberal discussion.

MARY SHELLEY’S TECHNICALITY

In the story of improving humanity, technology has played a relatively minor role. Cautionary tales have, of course, been told, but their relevance is often questionable, as I hope the following account will show.

Mary Shelley, the renowned English novelist and Mill’s contemporary, has been hailed as a prophetic critic of technological advances in genetics. Her memorable character, Frankenstein’s monster, has been seen as a warning against scientific hubris in general, and attempts to create life in particular. But although both warnings in and by themselves can conceivably be addressed to genetics and

genetics-fuelled eugenics, Shelley’s story is not, in fact, readily applicable to this context.

Shelley’s romance *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus* (1818)\(^{31}\) tells the tale of Victor Frankenstein, an aspiring young scholar who becomes fascinated by the mystery of life. After extensive studies in natural philosophy and the natural sciences, he endeavours to create a perfect human being by stitching together body parts collected from cemeteries, anatomy theatres and slaughterhouses, and by animating the creature using a method he has discovered during his studies. The operation is a success, but although the new being is a collection of beautiful parts, the whole is so hideous to behold that Frankenstein flees and leaves his creation to its own devices.

The creature hides in forests and country dwellings, and learns to speak, but every time he tries to approach other people, they turn away in horror or meet his friendly advances with random violence. Depressed and angered by the rejection, the creature, too, eventually resorts to violence, and Frankenstein, in their subsequent encounters, finds in this a justification for his irrational hatred toward the being he has made.

It is difficult to see how Shelley’s story could give rise to any kind of critique of genetic selection or engineering. In some people’s minds, Frankenstein’s crime was that he created life out of inanimate matter. But this is not what geneticists do. Even in cloning, all the raw materials are already alive when they are put together. The objection should rather be aimed at those scientists who try to simulate in laboratory conditions the emergence of life from the elements at the dawn of time. On the other hand, of course, it is possible to argue that technology should be left out of human reproduction, and that Frankenstein transgressed this rule. But consistency would then also require us to condemn artificial insemination, in vitro fertilisation, and many other widely accepted advances in reproductive medicine.

Frankenstein’s true immorality, as I see it, is that he abandons his own creation, in many ways his own child, for completely trivial reasons. The creature is ugly and different, and Frankenstein is frightened by his appearance. These are the only tangible reasons he has for the rejection. When Frankenstein is reunited with his ‘monster’, he is consumed by the idea of its extermination. But note that none of this can be reasonably connected to genetics or reproductive technology. For all we know, Frankenstein was the kind of man who would have wanted the death of his natural children, had they been too ugly for his taste.

So what was Shelley’s contribution to ethical discussion? Was it a reminder that parents should always love and cherish their children, whatever their aesthetic

\(^{31}\) Two different versions of Shelley’s romance exist. In addition to the 1818 original, there is an 1831 revised edition, on which my remarks are based. This is reprinted, for instance, as Shelley 1995.
or moral flaws? Or was it, on the contrary, an approval of Frankenstein’s attitudes? Did she say that if individuals are not acceptable to their parents and to society, they should be isolated, ostracised, and slain? It would be oversimplistic to attribute any of these ideas directly to Shelley, but the immediate popularity of her romance seems to bear witness to the prevalence of at least some sort of xenophobia, or horror of what is different, in the European culture of her time. Further than that, it is difficult to see what Shelley’s contemporary message could be. Was Frankenstein ‘playing God’, as suggested by the novel’s subtitle, ‘the modern Prometheus’? But Prometheus, in Greek mythology, admirably brought fire to the people who were desolate and cold, and he was only punished for this by Zeus, the chief Olympian god, because the two deities disagreed on the proper treatment of the human race. So what could be wrong with this kind of philanthropic activity? Or was Shelley’s point that it is wrong to create something frightening? But even if that were the case, why would the results of genetic research or selection frighten the scientists involved?32

But enough of this detour to technological Romanticism. Let me now turn to some actual policies which were, during the last centuries, aimed at improving the human stock.

FROM IDEOLOGY TO SOCIAL REFORM

The systematic attempt to improve the human race, sometimes by giving preference to particular classes or ethnic groups and sometimes by aiming to produce only outstanding individuals, has a virtually uninterrupted history in the West since the latter half of the nineteenth century. Concerns about the growth of urban populations, and the ensuing social problems, gave rise to the worry that the biological basis of civilised nations was beginning to degenerate. At first, environmental factors were identified as the cause, but advances in evolutionary biology soon shifted the emphasis to alleged genetic inadequacies.33

Some believed that human genius can be promoted by reproductive selection. If the fate of nations depends on the greatness of their leaders, the classes which are thought to be the engine of progress must be intellectually enhanced by making sure that the line of the best individuals is continued. To avoid corrupting influences, this policy can be complemented by discouraging the reproductive activities of other groups.34

Others thought that social reforms are possible only if the gene pool is purified and the population is made fitter to implement them. They stressed the

32 For a very different view, although on the myth of Frankenstein rather than Shelley’s story, see, Rehmann-Sutter 1999.
33 Buchanan et al. 2000, p. 40.
significance of environmental factors, but also contended that the burden of congenital ailments, physical and mental, would place an unnecessary and incapacitating burden on political efforts to promote general welfare.\(^{35}\)

These lines of thought are by no means a thing of the past. Clinics advertise the sperm of accomplished artists, athletes, and scientists, whose special talents are supposed to be transmitted to their offspring. Many upper-crust parents are upset if their children marry beneath their supposed station. The generous breeding habits of non-European ethnic groups are frowned upon in many Western countries. And in case of suspected inborn disabilities, selective abortions are accepted more readily than in other circumstances.

DEGENERATION, HERITABILITY, AND IMPROVEMENT

The industrial revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had many ill effects. It led to the emergence of an urban proletariat, among whom social and health problems abounded. These problems had to be explained in some way, and addressed accordingly.

Many Romantic utopias of the time featured noble savages and robust peasants, whose strength and happiness rested on their freedom from the inevitable hardships of civilisation. Exposed to the new culture, they were believed to lose their original poise and to degenerate into beasts warring for their survival. These images contributed to the original theory of degeneration, which explained the phenomenon in terms of environmental change. The migration of young men to urban areas was seen as the cause of their weakened constitution and defective offspring.\(^{36}\)

The environmental explanation of decay was, however, replaced by genetic accounts soon after the publication of Charles Darwin’s work on the origin of the species and the descent of the human race.\(^{37}\) Francis Galton, Darwin’s cousin, coined in 1883 the term ‘eugenics’, by which he meant the ‘science of improving stock, which is by no means confined to questions of judicious mating, but which, especially in the case of man, takes cognisance of all influences that tend in however remote a degree to give to the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing speedily over the less suitable than they otherwise would have had’.\(^{38}\) Galton was impressed by the idea that genius manifested itself in some families more frequently than in others, and thought that by encouraging

\(^{35}\) Buchanan et al. 2000, p. 35.
\(^{36}\) Buchanan et al. 2000, p. 40.
\(^{37}\) Darwin 1968.
\(^{38}\) Galton 1907, p. 17 n. 1.
childbearing in selected groups and by discouraging it in others society could considerably increase its supply of talent and virtue.\(^{39}\)

Galton’s eugenics was based on the conviction that traits like intelligence and morality are inherited. The same line of thinking can be seen in operation in contemporary attempts to select a clever and well-behaved sperm donor for artificial insemination, and in efforts to find genes for, say, homosexuality or criminal tendencies. Galton’s programme was influential from the start, and it continues to have its supporters.\(^{40}\)

The goal of eugenics was to improve the human race by conscious changes in reproductive behaviour. The early proponents of the view believed that civilisation had, by nurturing the weak, brought about patterns of ‘unnatural selection’, which threatened to corrupt the gene pool beyond repair. Some regarded the threat as so imminent that they favoured the use of coercive methods like segregation and involuntary sterilisations.\(^{41}\) Others, including Galton, thought that voluntary means would be enough to secure the return to more natural selection and the survival of the fittest. Galton wanted eugenics to become a civil religion, through which everybody would understand their public responsibility in reproductive matters.\(^{42}\)

FROM GENIUS PRODUCTION TO GENOCIDE

Conservative advocates of eugenics believed that the social status of individuals reflects their inherent abilities and skills, and can be used as a basis of population control. Those who are successful in arts, science, politics or business must have natural inborn talents, which qualify them to pass on their genes to subsequent generations. People who have no particular accomplishments, in their turn, must be innately weak, and should therefore not continue their family line.\(^{43}\)

Many egoistic and ideological factors contributed, no doubt, to this restricted view of human achievement. Its proponents felt the threat of the masses, and wanted to defend their own privileged positions in life. Some versions of religious Puritanism held that the predestined grace of God is manifested in earthly success. It was relatively easy to adjust Darwin’s idea of the survival of the fittest to provide a biological justification for the status quo.\(^{44}\)

\(^{39}\) Galton 1869.  
\(^{40}\) Nobel Prize winner John Sulston seems to be among Galton’s scientist followers. See Bourne 2004.  
\(^{41}\) Buchanan et al. 2000, p. 32.  
\(^{42}\) Buchanan et al. 2000, p. 42.  
\(^{43}\) Buchanan et al. 2000, pp. 33-34.  
\(^{44}\) Buchanan et al. 2000, pp. 34-35.
Conservative eugenicists identified several social ills which were thought to have a biological basis. Poverty, prostitution, drunkenness, and crime were all seen as consequences of genetic decay. Reputable scientists collected information about the lineage of especially ‘unfit’ families to prove the dangers of unlimited reproduction in the lower social classes. ‘Fitter families’ were paraded in health exhibitions and country fairs to demonstrate the positive potential of eugenics. Studies in intelligence attempted to establish whether the immorality of the inferior classes was based on lack of understanding, that is, inability to tell the difference between good and evil, or on lack of industry and self-control.45

In many countries, including Germany and the United States, the eugenic movement eventually took a racist turn. Some feared that the pure blood of the ‘White’ or the ‘Aryan’ race becomes mixed in multiethnic societies;46 others were concerned about the high birth-rates of the latest immigrant groups.47 A German study aimed to show that among Hottentots in Africa children whose parents were of different races turned out to be inferior to both their parents.48 American physicians and politicians launched a war against abortion, at least partly because they wanted to save the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant population from extinction.49

Racism was in many cases naturally followed by nationalism. Romantic illusions of past glory were popular in European nation states, and these made room for the doctrine that the purity of ancestral blood must be preserved. Degeneration was in this model caused by foreigners who have contaminated and thus violated the national gene pool. The metaphor of contamination served as a basis for the ‘medical’ solution, which was brought to its extreme in Germany.50 The image of violation is presumably intended to trigger the rhetoric of rape, which is obviously useful for racist purposes.

The practical methods of eugenics ranged from allowances to preferred families, education, and propaganda, to the sexual segregation and involuntary sterilisation of individuals who were seen as a threat to racial hygiene.51 Although conservative proponents of eugenics believed that organised health care tends to frustrate human evolution by helping the unfit to survive, not all of them opposed humanitarian measures, or the development of public medicine. The effects of eugenic programmes were different in different countries, not least because the definitions of the fit and the unfit varied considerably. Nazi Germany, with its

45 Buchanan et al. 2000, pp. 31-45.
47 Buchanan et al. 2000, p. 33.
48 Buchanan et al. 2000, p. 41.
49 See, e.g., Mohr 1978.
51 Buchanan et al. 2000, pp. 32-33.
blatantly racist definitions, managed to include genocide among its instruments of racial improvement.\textsuperscript{52}

Meanwhile, in Sweden …

Reformist champions of eugenics in Sweden, Denmark, and in other countries proceeded from slightly different premises. Their main concern was to establish a socially conscious and democratic welfare state, where all citizens can enjoy equal security throughout their lives. In theory, if not always in practice, this model denounced class bias and racial discrimination. The aim was to make the sciences, social as well as natural, serve the promotion of human well-being regardless of biological, ethnic or cultural boundaries.\textsuperscript{53}

Swedish intellectuals argued in the 1930s that a modern social democratic welfare state is possible, but only if everyone contributes adequately to its gross product. Idleness, stupidity, and crime cannot be tolerated in such a state, because they would corrode the foundation of the rationally organised society. People who do not work, or who cannot be assigned to jobs which require mental alertness, do not advance the national product, and criminals deliberately drain common resources. Since individuals like these are a burden to a just society, it would be an advantage if they could be detected at an early stage, preferably before they are even born.\textsuperscript{54}

This is where Swedish social democrats thought eugenics could lend them a hand. If scientists could identify individuals whose children would probably be a burden to others, this information could be used to prevent the existence of unproductive citizens and the emergence of socially unnecessary needs. Eugenicists in Sweden went on to sterilise tens of thousands of people, who were suspected to bear, given the opportunity, progeny which would be genetically unfit to the welfare state. In addition to the mentally and physically deficient, they targeted a relatively small, itinerant \textit{Tattare} population, who were believed to be racially different from the rest of the ‘Nordic’ Swedes.\textsuperscript{55}

The Swedish experience is interesting and potentially alarming. It seems to provide evidence against the view that eugenic ideas result in discriminative selection only in the hands of totalitarian rulers. A democratic and egalitarian system can apparently create considerable havoc when it is armed with dreams of a better race.

\textsuperscript{52} For an account of this, see, e.g., Weikart 2004.
\textsuperscript{53} Buchanan et al. 2000, pp. 34-36.
\textsuperscript{54} Buchanan et al. 2000, p. 35.
\textsuperscript{55} Buchanan et al. 2000, p. 35.
SOCIAL CONCERNS AND INDIVIDUAL PREFERENCES

Just before the outbreak of the Second World War, some eugenicists signed a manifesto, where they stressed the social dimension of genetic improvements.\textsuperscript{56} They wanted to reach beyond the conservative aspect of preventing genetic decay, and encourage features which would make the lives of all people more secure and enjoyable. In addition to health and intelligence, they advocated the promotion of fellow feeling and social behaviour, and hoped that these would be preferred to qualities which are conducive to mere individual success.

Seventy years later, their dream is as far from coming true as it was then. Genetic tests are performed to detect signs of flaws and decay, and research is focused on the biological roots of deviance and individual excellence, not on altruism or solidarity. When parents select their offspring, they are more interested in the future personal success of their children than their ability or willingness to help other people.

This contemporary emphasis on individuals is, to a large extent, due to the tainted history of eugenics, principally in Nazi Germany. When parents say, ‘I just want my child to be healthy’, or, ‘I want the best child I can have’, virtually nobody is reminded of involuntary sterilisations or racist propaganda. When, on the other hand, state officials mention economic burdens and prenatal selection in the same sentence, quite a few ethicists and activists will have something to say. But it is important to realise that the woman and the man in the street do not seem to have problems with the current ‘liberal’ form of individual reproductive eugenics, or selection for eugenic purposes. The involvement of public authorities in certain areas of family planning can be seen as suspect, but potential parents are by and large granted the moral right, a right sometimes bordering on a moral duty, to ensure that their children are physically and mentally healthy.

Late terminations of pregnancy are a case in point. Even in countries where abortion laws are permissive or moderate, terminations are usually illegal during the third trimester. If the future child is expected to be ‘normal’, the woman’s life and health must be in serious danger before abortion is condoned. But if prenatal tests indicate that the child could be disabled, the situation is different. Legislation allows for exceptions in such cases, and popular opinion seems to back up this policy.\textsuperscript{57} Nobody wants to burden potential parents with a disabled child, if they can have healthy babies instead.

During the eugenic movement of 1870-1950, most moral philosophers seem to have agreed, at least silently, with its goals and its more moderate measures. Roman Catholic theorists opposed the enhancement of the race by population

\textsuperscript{56} Buchanan et al. 2000, p. 36; Crew et al. 1939 (this paper, written by Herman Muller and signed by 23 leading American and English scientists, became known as ‘the geneticists’ manifesto’).

\textsuperscript{57} See, e.g., Rhodes 1999; Häyry 2001a; Vehmas 2001.
control, but their objection was levelled at the attempts to check human reproduction in general, not at genetics or eugenics in particular. Other ethicists presumably held that it is natural, reasonable, and conducive to the greatest happiness to improve the human lot through attempts to increase the proportion of healthy and clever members of society.

Today, late abortions based on disability can be cogently criticised, as well as defended, from many angles. A possible reason is that smaller and smaller fractions of society can get their voices heard in public discussion. When their representatives apply traditional moral theories to contemporary reality, the results are often different from those reached by the relatively homogeneous community of academics in the past.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have shown that eugenic and related values and practices have deep cultural roots in European thinking. It is possible that opponents of all forms of eugenics are right in saying that science encourages attempts towards medically-induced physical and mental perfection. And it is possible that proponents of liberal eugenics have a point when they argue that aggressively state-controlled reproductive selection leads to atrocities more probably than individual parental choices. But what I have shown here is that the historical idea of a better race precedes modern scientific advances and totalitarian regimes by millennia. In addition to keeping vigil against technology and politics run amok, we should also be aware of the patterns of thought that we have inherited from our most celebrated philosophers, artists, and political reformists.

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