

Eugenic Logic: Eliminating the Disabled

John J. Conley, S.J.

ABSTRACT

In the early twentieth century *The Birth Control Review* published numerous articles supporting the eugenic elimination of the disabled. Justifying coercive sterilization by the state, these articles manifest the anthropological, ethical, and rhetorical logic of the eugenics campaign.

PUBLISHED FROM 1917 until 1940, *The Birth Control Review*, sponsored by the American Birth Control League, published hundreds of articles justifying the eugenic elimination of the disabled.¹ The articles supported the most controversial political salient of the eugenics campaign of the period: the forced sterilization of the mentally and physically disabled by the state. Starting with Indiana in 1907, thirty-two American states authorized such eugenic compulsory sterilizations. In the *Buck v. Bell* case in 1927, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld such sterilization laws as constitutional. In his celebrated opinion for the majority, Associate Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. claimed: “It is better for all the world, if instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime, or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind. The principle that sustains compulsory vaccination is broad enough to cover cutting the Fallopian tubes.... Three generations of imbeciles are enough.”²

¹ A substantial selection of quotations from the more controversial articles in *The Birth Control Review* can be found on the web page of Human Life International: www.hli.org/bcr_intro.html.

² Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., “Majority Opinion in *Buck v. Bell*,” 274 U.S. 200 (1927); www.law.du.edu/russell/lh/alh/docs/buckvbell.html; referenced 9 May 2006.

The articles in *The Birth Control Review* clearly reveal the logic of the eugenic approach to life, one that insists that because of a lack of quality, certain human lives are simply not worth living. In this perspective, the disabled person should be eliminated as an intolerable burden. While the dispute in the pages of *The Birth Control Review* dealt primarily with the controversy over compulsory sterilization, the eugenic logic championed by the *Review* illuminates the quality-of-life arguments that are still animating our current disputes over abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia. Furthermore, this older eugenic argument still fascinates by the prestige of the authors who crafted it nearly a century ago. Any journal featuring the writings of the philosophers Herbert Spencer, Bertrand Russell, and John Dewey, the novelists Theodore Dreiser and H.G. Wells, the theologian Dean Inge, the psychologist Havelock Ellis, and the civil rights activist W.E.B. Dubois is not pulling its arguments from the marginal.

This eugenic logic operates on several levels. On the anthropological level, it insists that there is little difference between human beings and non-rational animals. The new science of animal breeding can be used without impunity to cull the human stock of its defective members. On the rhetorical level, it denies the humanity of the disabled by a series of denigrating terms. On the ethical level, it proposes a hierarchy of human goods in which intelligence, productivity, self-reliance, and social conformity trump other considerations. The justification of such political practices as compulsory sterilization rests on such a theoretical framing of the disabled (and many ethnic and social classes assimilated to the disabled) as a burden rightly eliminated.

ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE BREED

As recent histories have argued, the immediate impetus for the American eugenics movement came from the scientific advances in animal breeding in the late nineteenth-century.³ A group of scientists, clustered around the

³ For histories of the modern eugenics movement, see Edwin Black, *War Against the Weak: Eugenics and America's Campaign to Create a Master Race* (New York NY: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2003); Elof Alex Carlson, *The Unfit: A History of a Bad Idea* (Cold Spring Harbor NY: Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory

biologist Charles B. Davenport at the Cold Spring Harbor laboratory, attempted to apply the new breeding techniques to the human population in order to cull defective members and to promote a healthier, more intelligent race. Strengthened by foundation funds from the Carnegie Institute starting in 1904, Davenport's Station for Experimental Evolution and its related Eugenics Record Office (founded in 1910) provided scientific data to bolster the political campaigns for forced sterilization, for restrictive marriage laws based on eugenic criteria, and for anti-miscegenation laws.

Many articles in *The Birth Control Review* justify their eugenic arguments within this fundamental framework of the necessity to create a healthier race using scientific techniques of breeding. Elise Robinson insists on the social duty to apply the successful techniques of horticulture and animal culture to human propagation: "Birth control of insects and cattle has come into vigorous effect. But it merely controlled the birth of our lesser treasure—the output of gardens, fields, and pastures. Over the greatest treasure of all, the output of our homes, we exercised no precautionary supervision. We fought scab on fruit trees and tuberculosis in cattle. We would not allow congestion in stables nor breeding in diseased herds. We protected our fruit crop by forbidding the entrance of doubtful fruit from unprotected areas. But at the same time we continued to allow tubercular, idiotic, criminal and insane human stock to breed without restriction or regulation and declared illegal any attempt to stop the same."⁴ Clearly the new moral duty of humanity is to eliminate defective members of the human stock by using the technology that has improved our dairy cows and our rose gardens. In the appropriately titled article "Animal Aristocracy and Human Democracy," L.J. Cole explains the social discrimination that he rightly believes that human eugenics should import from current practices in animal breeding: "The cardinal practice of livestock breeding is selection of the individuals which shall perpetuate the stock.... The others may be killed, castrated or disposed of otherwise.... The progressive livestock breeder is not misled by any

Press, 2001); Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1998).

⁴ Elise Robinson, "Press Clippings," *The Birth Control Review* X/10 (1926): 317.

conception that his animals are ‘born equal;’ he knows that some are inherently better than others.... The breed register is therefore a ‘bluebook’ far more rigid in its requirements than any system of royal families or noble blood ever established in human society.”⁵ The author celebrates the clearly anti-democratic nature of such a qualitative view of human worth; ‘equality’ is treated as a prejudice. Ominously the author’s positive reference to the killing of defective animals suggests that the door to euthanasia and not only to sterilization has been opened by this defense of selective human breeding.

An anonymous religious author adds a biblical foundation to the new eugenic duty to be selective in one’s appreciation of human stock. “And Ecclesiasticus says: ‘Desire not a multitude of unprofitable children.’ If we are to have children it is surely only right that we should have wholesome ones. The connoisseur in horses, cattle, homing pigeons, and 100 other creatures of use or beauty has mastered a branch of Eugenics.”⁶ Good taste emerges as an aesthetic and religious duty. The class-based nature of this apologetic for human culling emerges.

The repeated reference to animal breeding as a proper framework for looking at human propagation masks an anthropological presupposition: that there is no difference in kind between human beings and other animals. In the pages of *The Birth Control Review*, one looks in vain for an argument on how human beings are different: on the grounding of human dignity in the possession of a rational soul, in the exercise of intellect and will, or in the exercise of love and compassion. It is precisely this difference that has long justified why humans are treated differently from other animals in scientific experimentation or in the treatment of illness or injury. But in the *Review*’s steely assimilation of human beings to other animals, purely material beings whose status is determined by their state of health or rate of productivity, the grounds for such a differential ethic have vanished. A materialist anthropology governs the concept of human nature that dominates the *Review* and that easily

⁵ L.J. Cole, “Animal Aristocracy and Human Democracy,” *The Birth Control Review* VIII/1 (1924): 20-21.

⁶ Anonymous, “Press Clippings—Unprofitable Children,” *The Birth Control Review*, VIII/3 (1924): 76.

conceives human worth in terms of the economic values of the herd or the orchard.

RHETORIC OF DENIGRATION

To eliminate the disabled, it is not enough to use scientific arguments imported from the zoological and botanical categories of the breed. The disabled must be targeted as subhuman or antihuman by a rhetoric of denigration. The articles in *The Birth Control Review* repeatedly dismiss the mentally disabled by referring to them with the following soubriquets: defective, moron, idiot, imbecile, subnormal, degenerated, perverted, grotesque. The frequently used “feeble-minded” is the kindest of the terms.

Especially striking is the mocking tone used by many of the authors to describe the disabled and their families. The physician Anna Blount ridicules her collection of social anomalies as she argues for their destruction: “There they are, a motley group, from the gay, light hearted moron, who cannot make an intelligent plan, even to do mischief; to the doddering idiot, the crafty paranoiac, the wretched epileptic, the moral imbecile, the chronic criminal with hereditary taint, and even the village ne’er do well. What do they cost us, in wealth, in labor and in misery? They must be eliminated.”⁷ As in many of the articles in the review, the category of the mentally disabled is generously expanded to include the criminal and the social nonconformist.

One of the repeated techniques of denigration is to describe the disabled human being as an animal that has lost all claim to human protection: “Unless the moron’s rapid increase is checked by Birth Control, he will destroy our civilization. About ten years ago our federal government discovered the moron—in multitudes. Unsentimental and rigid examination revealed him to be so inadequate and incapable that he was worthless even for cannon fodder. Mentally meager, culturally nothing, socially as selfish as a shark, sexually as eager as a rabbit, careless as a crow and prolific as a rat, the moron now in astonishing numbers confronts society as a grinning, scoffing brute in boots—and in full

⁷ Anna E. Blout, M.D., “Large Families and Human Waste,” *The Birth Control Review*, II/9 (1918): 3.

possession of sovereign political rights.”⁸ Here the mentally disabled person becomes a criminal figure inasmuch as he or she commands a certain part of the community’s resources for his or her sustenance.

Often described in terms of waste, trash, or refuse, the mentally disabled in the pages of the review are seen as socially worthless, indeed as a threat to the socially productive and healthy. Several writers describe the condition of the disabled as worse than death itself: “Think of the many cases that are infinitely worse than death: the thousands, the hundreds of thousands of children that are born or develop into hopeless cripples; the blind children; and above all the feeble minded.”⁹ Clearly no argument can be made for the right to life of those whose existence is already worse than death.

Many articles describe the families of the mentally disabled with open contempt. In the following family portrait, the author depicts the disabled members of a family with religious sarcasm: “The little sister of Jimmy the microceph was there, in worse case than he. Seven and helpless, crippled, silent, passive, with a head smaller than Jimmy’s and less in it. There were ten in that family. The first eight were normal, and some exceptionally bright. Perhaps Jimmy’s mother was tired by the time he came. At any rate the last two are miserable failures—and—are they the last? Or will she go on bearing microcephalic idiots until the Lord chooses to stop sending them?”¹⁰ As in many other pieces in the journal, the author of this article treats the existence of the disabled as a moral affront.

The rhetoric of denigration clearly pursues the purpose of showing the disabled human being to be other than human and, hence, not deserving of the rights and protections usually accorded a human person. The disgust expressed in the presence of the disabled forestalls any movement of compassion or respect that might lead the sentimental citizen to increase the portion of the disabled in society. Also striking are the absences in the text of *The Birth Control Review*. One fails to find a single

⁸ George R. Kirkpatrick, “Salvation from the Moron,” *The Birth Control Review* XIII/1 (1929): 290.

⁹ I.N. Thurman, “Birth Control by Radio,” *The Birth Control Review* VIII/3 (1924): 86.

¹⁰ Florence Lucy, “Idiots,” *The Birth Control Review* IV/2 (1920): 16.

article on the triumph of individuals over their physical handicaps. There is no Helen Keller in these pages. There are no accounts of advances in special education or the development of specialized workplaces. No parents, teachers, doctors, or pastors testify as to the values brought by the disabled to a particular social forum. Whenever the disabled appear in the narrative, the atmosphere is one of frustration, denigration, and contempt.

HIERARCHY AND BURDEN

Behind the denigration of the disabled lies a hierarchy of goods that dismisses the disabled as non-human because they lack certain goods of health, intelligence, and industry. The otherness of the disabled is a negation of human nature rather than a variant of it. The primary charge against the continued existence and propagation of the disabled is the claim that they constitute an economic burden on society. It is striking how many authors in the journal use precise mathematical statistics to demonstrate the exact economic burden of the disabled on the taxpayer and to warn the reader of the necessity of eliminating the disabled if society is to use its limited resources on the development of the healthy and the sane.

E.E. Gosney, the President of the Human Betterment Foundation, demonstrates the argument on the necessity of eugenic measures to save the taxpayer the burden of supporting a family tree of undesirables: "Consider such a case as that recently reported in the eugenics journal, entitled 'Four Generations of the Dysgenic Family.' From Alma, feeble-minded progenitor, who came to America in 1850, have been traced about forty living adult descendants. Among these are so many feeble-minded, so many criminal, so many incestuous, so many alcoholic, so many deformed, so many epileptics, so many dependent on charity that the total goes way above the forty members of the family—in other words some of these are two or three kinds of defective or delinquent in one person. The cost to the state of this group doubles every five years and will total \$45,000 in the next five years. Now suppose Alma, the grandmother, had been sterilized before she had children! Several social workers would be out of a job and the taxpayers would be relieved.

Sterilization of the feeble-minded pays compound interest to society.”¹¹ The worth of the disabled person is clearly weighed in a scale of values that considers economic productivity the cardinal virtue and economic dependency the capital sin.

In one of her many articles for *The Birth Control Review*, Margaret Sanger condemns the propagation of the disabled as a type of social theft. Resources that should go to the further development of the healthy members of the society are illegitimately channeled to the care of the chronically ill. “Those least fit to carry on the race are increasing more rapidly. People who cannot support their own offspring are encouraged by the Church and State to produce large families. Many of the children thus begotten are diseased or feeble-minded; many become criminals. The burden of supporting these unwanted types has to borne by the healthy elements of the nation. Funds that should be used to raise the standard of our civilization are diverted to the maintenance of those who should have never been born.”¹² Again the disabled person’s lack of worth is based on the fact that he or she does not contribute to the society’s production of material worth and that he or she disproportionately commandeers a share of the wealth created by others. The specter of the disabled citizen as a pillaging parasite fills the pages of the journal.

This presentation of social burden, of course, is selective. The journal’s authors never dwell on the burdens created by the practices of adultery, fornication, or concubinage, although statistics were widely available in criminological literature to sustain such an analysis. It is also striking what is absent from this relentless portrait of the disabled as an intolerable burden. There are no accounts of the virtues strengthened in families by responding to the challenges of the disabled person or of the particular non-economic virtues that might be possessed by a disabled person. In such a materialistic vision of gain and loss, where personal worth is strictly limited to one’s work productivity, the disabled person can only be perceived as a drain on society’s resources. The disabled

¹¹ E.E. Gosney, “Sterilization and Contraception,” *The Birth Control Review* XV/7 (1931): 202.

¹² Margaret Sanger, “The American Birth Control League,” *The Birth Control Review* VI/7 (1922): 138.

person's identity lies in the exact price of the resources he or she has squandered from the industrious.

ANALOGY OF DISABILITY

If the literature of *The Birth Control Review* focuses primarily on the mentally ill as the object of its opprobrium, the application of the terms for disability to other populations is remarkably broad. When the medical doctor E.A. Whitney insists on the necessity of sterilization for those he describes as "socially inadequate," he admires the broad reach of that term in various states already practicing eugenic sterilization.¹³ In addition to the mentally disabled, this expanded category includes epileptics, lepers, drug addicts, and syphilitics. Singled out among criminals are rapists, recidivist sex offenders, and those with a lifetime term. Homosexuals are targeted under the rubric of sodomites and those guilty of crimes against nature. The population marked for elimination goes beyond clinical indications of chronic infirmity; the social deviate is also to be targeted.

Especially disturbing in this expansion of the category of the socially inadequate is the patent racism that surrounds many of the journal's discussions of ethnic groups to be targeted for reduction. Ardent supporters of the 1924 national immigration law, which severely restricted the entry of immigrants outside of Northwestern Europe, the *Review* authors often argue that the Northern European race is clearly superior in health, strength, intellect, and capacity to govern the other races on the globe. To maintain the superior race's hegemony and to diminish the threat of subjugation by inferior races, certain ethnic groups must be targeted for aggressive birth control and sterilization campaigns.

Among the groups repeatedly branded as inferior by the *Review* are African-Americans, Jews, Italians, Slavs, Latinos, and Asians. Some of the grimmest condemnations are reserved for Hispanic communities. One report deplores the state of Puerto Rican culture: "The foulness of the Puerto Rican peon's existence can hardly be described. He lives in chronic starvation, crowding his filthy scarecrow body into a hut where his female counterpart and their numberless wretched children almost always share

¹³ See E.A. Whitney, M.D., "Selective Sterilization," *The Birth Control Review* XVII/4 (1933): 85-86.

at least one of his diseases.”¹⁴ A similar report on Mexicans details the alleged biological tares in Mexican blood: “Europe unquestionably is sending more desirable immigrants than we are receiving from Mexico. A very great proportion of these Mexicans are in large part of Indian blood and of a low cultural and economic level.”¹⁵ Under the veils of medical jargon, the clear purpose of the eugenics campaign is to eliminate certain undesirable ethnic groups as well as to eliminate internal social deviants. The “normalcy” that serves as a criterion to distinguish the healthy from the ill is clearly a social normalcy deployed to target various groups that threaten the hegemony of a particular community that has consecrated itself as the ideal embodiment of human nature.

CONCLUSION

The eugenic logic manifest in the pages of *The Birth Control Review* is more than theoretical. It provided the intellectual justification for the American eugenics campaign that by 1963 had claimed at least 64,000 forced sterilizations of those deemed socially unfit by the state. Quietly—and often despite the declared intentions of its authors—it provided the moral justification for a far more terrible campaign to eliminate the disabled and other social undesirables abroad. Its quaint appeals to horse breeding and the village lunatic are a reminder of how easily pseudo-biology, pseudo-economics, and an all too real xenophobia can construct a science whose aim, indeed whose passion, is the suppression of the disabled other.

⁰ Anonymous, “Puerto Rico: Old Woman in a Shoe,” *The Birth Control Review* VI/5 (1937): 6.

¹⁵ Roswell H. Johnson, “Population Control by Immigration,” *The Birth Control Review* XVI/2 (1932): 58.