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Eugenical Sterilization

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EUGENICAL STERILIZATION

According to conservative estimates¹ there are about twenty millions of individuals in the United States who are degenerate—mentally, morally or physically. Some of these are entirely helpless—slobbering idiots or hopeless imbeciles, others such as the criminal insane, sexual perverts and confirmed drug addicts, are dangerous to the public welfare. All are either a burden on or a menace to society. Moreover the increase in the numbers of these undesirable types, or “social inadequates” as they are termed in legal phraseology, is much more rapid than the increase in the population as a whole.² As a result, the institutions for the care of the feeble-minded, insane and criminals are becoming more and more overcrowded and the states and nation called upon to provide constantly increasing budgets for the upkeep of these eleemosynary and punitive institutions. The commonwealth of Kentucky, for example, has between 8,000 and 10,000 “wards” who must be supported by the state at a cost of more than \$2,000,000 per year at the expense of the taxpayers. This burden to society has resulted in a serious social and economic problem and the important and very logical question arises as to whether or not it is fair to the normal, honest and hardworking citizen to require him to support degenerates and criminals.

Most of the causes of social inadequacy are largely and positively the results of heredity. The laws of heredity are well enough known to indicate definitely that we can not, for example, expect to have normal offspring from feeble-minded parents. It is true that the genes for most undesirable characters seem to be recessive which means that if one parent is normal and the other an imbecile, we may expect all of the offspring (or F_1 generation) to show normality, but all of these children will be carriers of the feeble-mindedness and will be able to transmit it to their progeny with the result that the matings of the second (or F_2) generation will produce feeble-minded individuals in the ratio of one to three. Consequently the unde-

¹ Human Betterment Foundation. 1930.

² Archiv für Rassen und Gesellschafts Biologie. 1930.

sirable characters may be hidden for several generations and then suddenly appear when the right combination of genes occurs. According to the laws governing Mendelian expectations it is possible to predict, with a surprising degree of accuracy, the proportion of inadequates which will appear in any generation in the population as a whole.

Naturally, therefore, every thinking person is interested in suggested methods of improving the race, particularly if such methods are based on sound biological principles. Many plans have been proposed by eugenicists, biologists, students of the social sciences and legal scholars and these plans have largely centered around the ideas of elimination of the unfit, more discriminating marriage laws, birth control, better control of immigration, segregation of defectives, sex education, social reforms and the subsidizing of proper matings. The two methods which are now attracting the most interest are contraception and sterilization and of these the plan of eugenical sterilization is believed by most eugenicists to offer the most satisfactory and most permanent solution to the problem. It is based on sound biology, conforms with well established laws of heredity, can be controlled by the state and above all is humane.

The contrasts between the ideas of contraception and eugenical sterilization have been well pointed out by Gosney³ as follows:

1. Eugenic sterilization is applied, for the most part by the state, to persons who are irresponsible. Contraceptives are used voluntarily by persons who are responsible.
2. Eugenic sterilization is intentionally irreversible, permanent. Contraception is intentionally reversible, never permanent.
3. Eugenic sterilization carried out properly as under existing state laws is dependable in results. No unwanted pregnancies or consequent tragedies can occur. Contraceptive methods depend for success on many variable factors. When not carefully applied under definite instructions from a competent, experienced physician, after examination, they often result in unexpected pregnancies, sometimes in abortions and other tragedies. This is especially true with the young and inexperienced. What succeeds with one person may not succeed with another.
4. Eugenic sterilization is ordered or permitted by the state for the benefit of the state. Contraception is practiced by the individual, generally on his own initiative and for his own benefit rather than for the benefit of the state or posterity.
5. Society assumes the responsibility in the application of eugenic sterilization. The individual alone assumes the responsibility in the application of contraceptive methods.

³ Gosney, E. S., *Sterilization for Human Betterment*. 1929.

6. Eugenic sterilization starts where contraception stops. It is applied primarily to persons without the intelligence, emotional stability, or self-control to handle contraceptives successfully. In such cases, sterilization succeeds where contraception would fail.

Each measure may have its place in modern society, but these places are not the same. In practice they apply to different classes of people and for different reasons and since the biologist is primarily interested in the race rather than in the individual, and since the pressing problem is the elimination of the unfit, the eugenicist advocates the careful and intelligent consideration of the possibilities offered by eugenical sterilization.

The condition of many of the unfortunates who must be included in the category of undesirable members of the human race is indeed most pathetic. Doomed to the most terrible of all existences—perhaps with the mind an absolute blank, with no recognition of anything in the world about them, sometimes confined to a straight-jacket for life and often in great physical pain—surely they are pitiable objects. And yet it is not their fault that they are on earth; they are not to blame for their hopeless condition. Certainly the least that we can do is to try to care for them as best we can, to make them as comfortable and happy as possible and relieve their sufferings to the best of our ability. But something else should be done, namely, to see to it that they leave no progeny like themselves for us to support. Unfortunately most types of degenerates are entirely potent sexually and many are over sexed. They respond to the purely animal instincts whenever opportunity offers and are therefore a menace to their own and to future generations for of course such individuals can find occasion to mate only with those as weak mentally or as low morally as themselves. If such individuals are rendered incapable of reproducing, a great boon is rendered to generations yet unborn.

Asexualization can of course be accomplished in many different ways but eugenical sterilization does not involve the crude practices of ancient days which were used to produce the eunuchs for the harems or the severe operations often necessary in surgery in cases of critical pathological conditions. In the male, phalloorchidectomy, the true "castrata" of the Romans, in which both penis and testes were removed to produce eunuchs with no

external genitalia, is still practiced by certain African tribes to produce slaves for the Mohammedan trade but is unknown in civilized medicine. Phallectomy, or amputation of the penis is sometimes necessary in advanced venereal cases but is never resorted to for eugenical purposes. Castration, or the removal of both testes in their entirety is still performed on lower animals by stock breeders but is unthought of in eugenical work. Likewise, in the female, panhysterokolpectomy, the removal of womb and vagina, and even hysterosalpingo-oophorectomy, the removal of uterus, ovaries and oviducts are sometimes performed to save the life of the patient in cases of cancer or following a Caesarian operation, but such operations are of course not contemplated in modern eugenics. For the same reasons hysterectomy, the removal of the uterus and oophorectomy, the removal of the ovaries, are sometimes necessary in cases of tumors, cancers or other diseases of the genital organs but have no place in the practice of ordinary asexualization.⁴

The reproductive mechanism in the human body is quite simple, in fact one of the least specialized of any to be found in the higher animals. Eggs are produced in the ovaries of the female and are passed out through tubes known as the oviducts. Sperm is produced in the testes of the male and discharged through the vasa deferentia. All that is necessary, therefore, to prevent procreation, is to make it impossible for the egg to be fertilized by the sperm or for the sperm to leave the body of the male. This can be done by very simple methods which do not destroy or remove the genital organs and which do not in any way affect the sexual life or prevent the sexual pleasures of the individual. In the male, the method used is that of vasectomy which consists of making a slight incision in the skin of the scrotum and resecting a small portion of the vas deferens. It is known to the medical profession as an "office" operation, painlessly performed in a few minutes and entailing no wound infection and no confinement to bed.⁵ In fact, according to Dr. W. B. Belfield of Chicago, it is less painful and less serious than having a tooth pulled. Dr. C. H. Sharp, of the Indiana Reformatory, makes this comment:

⁴ Laughlin, H. H., *Eugenical Sterilization in the United States*.

⁵ Report of Psychopathic Laboratory, Municipal Court of Chicago. 1922.

"This operation is, indeed, very simple and easy to perform. I do it without administering an anesthetic, either general or local. It requires about three minutes time to perform the operation, and the subject returns to his work immediately, suffers no inconvenience and is in no way impaired for his pursuit of life, liberty and happiness. I have been doing this operation for over nine years. I have two hundred and thirty-six cases that have afforded splendid opportunity for post-operative observation, and I have never seen any unfavorable symptoms. There is no disturbed mental or nervous condition following, but, on the contrary, the patient becomes of a more sunny disposition, brighter of intellect, ceases excessive masturbation, and advises his fellows to submit to the operation for their own good. And here is where this method of preventing procreation is so infinitely superior to all others—that it is indorsed by the subjected persons."

In the female the procedure is similar but not so simple, since the oviducts which are ligated or resected are more deep-seated than the vas deferens. The method is the same, however, and the method is known as salpingectomy.

Other methods may be used to accomplish the same purpose but these are not as satisfactory nor as dependable. The tubes may be ligated instead of being excised. But if the ligature is absorbed, as it may be if of gut or silk, or if the patient removes the ligature (which can easily be accomplished in the case of the male), the operation is useless. On the other hand, if the pressure of the ligature causes the tube to grow together and become permanently closed, the result is the same as in vasectomy.

The sexual glands may be destroyed by x-rays, which of course involves no operation, but when the gland is thus destroyed the entire physical and mental nature of the subject is likely to be disturbed, since the effect, in the male for example, would be the same as castration. The advantage of vasectomy and salpingectomy are that these operations do not disturb the normal life of the individual, either sexually or otherwise.

Eugenical sterilization has social and institutional as well as biological advantages. Feeble-minded girls, for example, are not as much of a social menace as boys and men of the same mental deficiency. Girls may often be taught, even if of unsound mind, to perform simple household tasks and can be kept more easily in the home than boys. Either sex, however, if allowed on the street is very likely to get into difficulties. If placed in asylums or institutes for the feeble-minded, they are often released and sent home (due usually to the overcrowded conditions of these institutions) to make a place for others more

dangerous to society or more in need of care. In case of the girls, it is the old and tragic story, borne out by the records of all institutions, that they usually return in a year or so with a feeble-minded baby, to increase the population of the unfit. In the case of the boys, the result is probably a case of attempted rape or worse. If sterilization were practiced, the less dangerous of the feeble-minded and insane could be allowed to live at home. The girl, even if unmarriageable, could never become pregnant and the boy, even though a rapist, could never add the horrors of maternity to his victim's suffering. It is very evident, also, from reports from clinics, that the social inadequates themselves often have sense enough to appreciate the benefits of sterilization and voluntarily request to be freed from the dangers which they realize are constantly confronting them.

Eugenical sterilization has passed the experimental stage in the United States. A majority of the states have placed on their statute books laws providing for the sterilization of degenerates of one kind or another and over 16,000 operations have been performed to date as a result of these laws. In California alone nine thousand inmates of insane asylums and feeble-minded institutes have been sterilized since 1909.⁶ In those states where consistent and regular use of the measure has been followed, since it was first legally adopted in 1899, the results are startling even after one generation. No new patients are appearing to fill the slowly decreasing ranks in the asylums and hospitals except those who come from other states. This decrease will of course be greater with each succeeding generation. In fact it is claimed that if sterilization laws could be enforced in the whole United States, less than four generations would eliminate nine-tenths of the feeble-mindedness, insanity and crime of the country.

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⁶ Popenoe and Johnson. Applied Eugenics. 1933.