

Chapter 9

Race, Eugenics, and the Holocaust



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Abstract This chapter will focus on how the Holocaust shaped the concepts of race and eugenics in bioethics. I will begin with a brief account of how these terms were used before the Second World War, and then discuss how the Nazi eugenics programs and the Holocaust altered how scholars think about race and eugenics. In particular, I will discuss the 1948 United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and 1950 Statement on Race, which signaled a change in how race and eugenics would be used in the second half of the twentieth century. Finally, I will consider how liberal eugenics in contemporary bioethics differs from older forms of eugenics, and how newer views about human populations (as genetic clusters) differ from older views of race. In doing so, I will explore how the Holocaust shaped modern taboos related to human genetics research.

9.1 Introduction

The terms “eugenics” and “racism” have become so closely tied together by journalists and public intellectuals that they are sometimes interchangeable terms of abuse hurled at anyone who gives a biological explanation of human behavior. To take a recent example, when *New York Times* staff writer Brett Stephens mentioned in an editorial that Ashkenazi Jews have a higher than average IQ, possibly for biological reasons, he was called a racist and a eugenicist (Jones 2020), and many activists on the internet demanded that he resign from his position or be fired by the newspaper.

It may seem odd for a Jewish intellectual to be slandered with terms often associated with Nazi atrocities. It is to some extent an understandable overreaction to history and a conflation of ideas that were forever shaped by the Holocaust. In this chapter, I will review how the concepts of race and eugenics were used before and after 1945, with special focus on the implications for bioethics.

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9.2 What Was “Race” then and What is It Now?

9.2.1 *Before the War*

The first modern scientist to categorize people by race was Johan Blumenbach, a German physician. Blumenbach separated humanity into five basic groups: Caucasian, Mongolian, Malayan, Ethiopian, and American (1775). These groups correspond with European, East Asian, South Asian, African, and Native American. Unlike some of his contemporaries, Blumenbach was not especially interested in ranking races by their relative level of achievement. He instead wanted to classify them by reference to their continent of origin and physical similarities. It is striking how close Blumenbach was to the five genetic groupings picked out by recent mathematical cluster analysis (Rosenberg et al. 2002, 2005).

While serious scientific attempts to classify human populations did not improve much until the advent of computational genetics in the early twenty-first century, many Europeans speculated about the nature of race and the value of different racial groups. For five centuries Europeans explored the world, colonized novel territory, and encountered new and seemingly strange people. Like the Greeks and Romans of the classical era, modern Europeans saw themselves at the center of civilization, and regarded other groups as barbaric. The observations philosophers made about race were often couched in negative value judgments. David Hume, for instance, confessed in an essay on human differences that:

I am apt to suspect the negroes, and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences (1748, 20, note 6).

In the final edition of his essay, Hume restricted his claim of inferiority only to Black Africans: “I am apt to suspect the negroes to be naturally inferior to the whites. There scarcely ever was a civilized nation of that complexion, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation” (1777, 20, note 6). In a rare point of agreement, Immanuel Kant echoed David Hume’s view of Africans:

The Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling. Mr. [David] Hume challenges anyone to cite a single example in which a Negro has shown talents, and asserts that among the hundreds of thousands of blacks who are transported elsewhere from their countries, although many of them have even been set free, still not a single one was ever found who presented anything great in art or science or any other praiseworthy quality, even though among the whites some continually rise aloft from the lowest rabble, and through superior gifts earn respect in the world. So fundamental is the difference between these two races of man, and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color (1760, 110).

Hume and Kant relied primarily on anthropological reports from other authors to justify their claims. Speculation about race and racial differences had to be based on

casual observation, since genetics and the theory of evolution by natural selection had not yet emerged.

An example of a crude and pernicious anthropological report is that of Arthur de Gobineau. An influential French author, his *Essay on the Inequality of Human Races* (1853) separated humanity into three races corresponding to skin color—white, yellow, and black. Gobineau described Aryans as the most exalted race, with Alpine and Mediterranean ethnicities as degenerative versions of the pure Aryans. This view was popularized by the American author, Madison Grant, and adopted by Adolf Hitler. Unlike Grant and Hitler, Gobineau had complimentary things to say about Jews, describing them as a “free, strong, and intelligent” people (p. 59). Despite his attitude to Jews, Gobineau’s idea that Aryans were a “master race” influenced antisemites like Richard Wagner, Grant, and eventually Hitler.

Charles Darwin discussed human races, and race differences, though he didn’t focus on them much. The full title to his most important book is *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (1859). Despite the subtitle, which sounds provocative to modern ears, by “race” Darwin just meant a group of related organisms. He did not specifically focus much on human races, but instead was interested in how various populations throughout the natural world evolved through variation and selection. Nevertheless, in *The Descent of Man* Darwin discussed human racial differences, describing Native Americans as “utterly indifferent to the sufferings of strangers” and as “lacking in feelings of sympathy and kindness” to people outside their tribe, and to animals (1871, 90). Darwin also argued that some races of people were better adapted to the modern world, and he predicted (but did not advocate) that they would eventually exterminate the other races:

At some future period, not very distant as measured by centuries, the civilized races of man will almost certainly exterminate, and replace, the savage races throughout the world....The break between man and his nearest allies will then be wider, for it will intervene between man in a more civilized state, as we may hope, than the Caucasian, and some apes as low as a baboon, instead of as now between the negro or Australian and the gorilla (1871, 193).

It is worth remembering that Darwin wrote these words at a time when Europeans had conquered or colonized a large part of the earth’s surface, so it was unclear how they would use their power over other groups.

In the decades leading up to the Nazi ascent to power, there was disagreement among German scientists about race and racial differences. In particular, there were deep disputes about the status of Jews. Antisemitism was on the rise in Germany, including among cultural icons like Richard Wagner (whom Friedrich Nietzsche broke away from, in part because of Wagner’s increasingly rabid antisemitism and conversion to Christianity).¹

Antisemitism began to take a racial (rather than religious) turn decades before the National Socialists took power. Influential German biologist and eugenics advocate Eugen Fischer considered Jews to be ethnically distinct from Germans (owing to their origin in the Middle East), but also a group with exceptional mental abilities.

¹ See *Nietzsche contra Wagner* (1889).

Going against Fritz Lenz, the first Professor of “racial hygiene” under the Nazi regime, Eugen Fischer argued that Jewish-German intermarriage might actually be beneficial. Indeed, Fischer’s sympathetic view of Jews is likely the main reason he was replaced by the Nazi party in 1933 as the Director of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology, Genetics, and Eugenics (Proctor 1988).

Some have suggested that Hitler’s Aryan ideal was adopted more from American authors than from German scientists (Proctor 1988). For example, it is well known that Hitler greatly admired the work of the American naturalist, Madison Grant, who followed Gobineau in exalting the Nordic (or “Aryan”) race as the most physically beautiful and psychologically capable of all Europeans. Grant complained that America had been admitting fewer Nordic immigrants and more Celts, Jews, and Italians. Upon reading Grant’s *Passing of the Great Race* in the late 1920s, Hitler declared “This book is my Bible” (Spiro 2009, xi). Whether Grant was a primary cause of Hitler’s antisemitism, or simply helped him justify it, is hard to know.

9.2.2 *During the War: Race Under Hitler’s Regime*

As I will argue in the second part of this chapter, the relationship between eugenics and race in Nazi Germany, as in America and Britain, was complicated and subtle. Many people seem to think that those who supported forced sterilizations also supported racially discriminatory laws. However, this view is incorrect. Some influential racists did not support eugenics, and some influential eugenicists did not support the implementation of racist policies. Some of the most famous proponents of eugenic thinking—including Francis Galton, Hermann Muller, Ronald Fisher, and Julian Huxley—thought that instituting eugenic policies was a way to encourage the best members of each race to have more children. This was as true in Germany as it was in the US and the UK.

When German scholars formed an organization dedicated to using advances in biology to improve the gene pool, they coined the ambiguous term “rassenhygiene” (translated as “racial hygiene”), which meant essentially the same thing as “eugenics” in English (Turda 2010). Just as we use “human *race*” to refer to the human *species*, so too in German “rassen” was sometimes used to refer to people in general, and sometimes to particular races. “Rassenhygiene” did not necessarily refer to race-based eugenics.

In fact, many of the early members of the largest German eugenics society, the Racial Hygiene Society, were Jewish (Friedlander 1995). Some Gentile members of the Society were antisemitic, but many were not. Germans who advocated for the separation of the races did not always think of the Jews as “inferior,” but simply as a different race, and thus as a people who should not mix with Germans. According to the historian Henry Friedlander, “before the victory of the Nazis altered the rules of the game for academics, they did not consider Jews inferior or demand their exclusion. They only argued that Jews were different and that racial mingling of Jews and Aryans was undesirable” (p. 33). Historian Paul Weindling concurs that

“the Nazi takeover [of the Racial Hygiene Society] marked a shift from an inclusive biological approach to welfare to one based on race, coercion, and violence against those deemed undesirable for biological and racial reasons” (2010, 321).

As soon as the Nazis took power, they passed sweeping laws intended to segregate non-Germans, including Jews, and prevent them from marrying Germans. The goal was not only to keep the German race pure from outside elements, but also to improve it. Thus, when the first eugenic sterilization laws were passed in 1933, they were primarily aimed at “defective” Germans, not Jews: “The 1933 Sterilization Law made no provision for sterilization on racial grounds. (Jews, for example, were never specifically targeted by the law)” (Proctor 1988, 112).

In 1935, however, the Nuremberg Laws were passed, specifically forbidding marriage between Jews and Germans. Jews who violated the laws were sent to concentration camps. Many Jews were fired from high status jobs at universities. By 1938 Jews were banned from all occupations. The mass killing of Jews did not begin until late 1941, well after the eugenics programs had sterilized and killed tens of thousands of Germans. It is important to distinguish the mass killing of Jews from the broader German eugenics programs, in part because the rationale seems to have been different and the informal orders authorizing the mass killing of Jews were separate from the official decrees that authorized the Racial Hygiene program meant to improve the genetic stock of the Aryan race (Friedlander 1995).

“The Final Solution,” which authorized the mass killing of Jews, was a response to “the Jewish Question,” which originated several centuries earlier in Europe. The question in its original form was whether European Jews should be given the same rights and privileges as Christians, given that Christianity was the official religion of nearly all European countries. Answers to the Jewish Question were often infused with assumptions that Jews were untrustworthy because they rejected Jesus as the Messiah.

Hitler posed the Jewish Question in purely racial terms. He portrayed Jews as ruthless capitalists and as parasitic communists. He blamed them for Russian Bolshevism and for controlling world affairs through international finance. Finally, Hitler even blamed the Jews for “provoking” a Second World War, despite the fact that Germany obviously started the war by invading Poland. Hitler had said in a speech earlier that year that “if the international Jewish financiers in and outside Europe should succeed in plunging nations once more into a world war, then the result will not be the bolshevization of the earth and the victory of Jewry, but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe!” (Hitler, 1941).² Whether Hitler *believed* that the Jews actually started either of the two World Wars is hard to know. It’s possible he had deluded himself into believing this, perhaps to help him come to terms with the fact that he would be sending millions of German troops to their death in a war that could have been easily avoided. Either way, Hitler invoked the idea of a Jewish threat to

² For an overview of Hitler’s transcribed speeches blaming the two world wars on Jews, see The Jewish Virtual Library: <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/hitler-s-threats-against-the-jews-1941-1945>.

Europe as a pretext to launch the Final Solution, which would end with the killing of nearly six million Jews.

The best evidence suggests that the Final Solution was initiated through informal channels in late 1941 (Friedlander 1995). Despite meticulous documentation of most aspects of the war, Nazi officials were careful to conceal the authorization and details of the Final Solution presumably because they understood that ordinary people, even those who supported National Socialism, could not stomach the mass torture and extermination of people they had known as neighbors and co-workers just a few years earlier. Whatever the reasons, it is noteworthy that the Final Solution was not an extension of Nazi eugenic policies. The main connection between eugenic euthanasia and the Final Solution is the *method* used to kill large numbers of people. The mass murder of millions of Jewish prisoners was conducted primarily through the same methods as the *Aktion T4* euthanasia program, named after the street address at which it was conceived.

The T4 program was first tested when, in 1939, Hitler authorized physicians to kill patients deemed unworthy of life. Henry Friedlander summarizes the connection between gassing Germans and Jews:

The murder of the handicapped preceded the murder of Jews and Gypsies, and it is therefore reasonable to conclude that T4's killing operation served as a model for the final solution. The success of the euthanasia policy convinced the Nazi leadership that mass murder was technically feasible, that ordinary men and women were willing to kill large numbers of innocent human beings, and that the bureaucracy would cooperate in such an unprecedented enterprise (1995, 288).

The Final Solution began when the SS was authorized to shoot Jews captured in Russia. However, this was too public and inefficient, so SS officers began deporting Jews to concentration camps. By 1942, the SS had moved from shooting Jews in the open, to killing them in vans with carbon monoxide, and then to stationary gas chambers in more clandestine death camps like Treblinka and Auschwitz (Friedlander 1995). By the time Auschwitz was liberated in 1945, millions of Jews and hundreds of thousands of Sinti and other perceived enemies of the Nazis had been killed.

9.2.3 After the War: The United Nations' Statement on Race

Within months of the war's end, the United Nations (UN) had emerged. By the end of 1945 it had ratified a preliminary Constitution, and, by 1948, the UN Declaration of Human Rights was adopted. While the Declaration's ideals are part of a much longer tradition of liberal political thought that emphasizes individual liberty, responsibility, and equality under the law, its first ten provisions are clearly a reaction to Nazi policies. They include a repudiation of racism, as well as the most egregious forms of coercive eugenics. Article 16, for example, contends that “[m]en and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family” (Declaration 1948). By implication, this provision

expressed opposition to forced sterilization and the unequal application of laws to different racial groups.

In 1946, Julian Huxley wrote an influential manifesto defending the UN's aim to create a Declaration of Rights, as well as a division tasked with promoting science and education. In defense of the Declaration, Huxley argued that all nations should enable every individual within every group to flourish, even if there are genetic inequalities between individuals and groups. He stressed that there should be "equality of educational opportunity without regard to race, sex or any distinctions, economic or social" (p. 4). And he emphasized that the preamble to the UN's 1945 Constitution "expressly repudiates racialism and any belief in superior or inferior races, nations, or ethnic groups" (p. 6).

After the Declaration was ratified, the UN assembled a group of scientists and public intellectuals to craft a statement on the science and morality of race. The statement was crafted by UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), of which Huxley was the first Director. From the outset, UNESCO's statement on race was politically fraught, since the people selected for the task had strong political views and were drawn primarily from the humanities and social sciences rather than from the natural sciences. This is no surprise, since the stated purpose of the Declaration on Race was "to make known the scientific facts about race and *to combat racial prejudice*" (1969, 5, emphasis added).

The 1950 Statement on Race defined "race" as "a group or population characterized by some concentrations, relative as to frequency and distribution, of hereditary particles (genes) or physical characters" (1969, 30). While this conception of "race" was fairly standard, the authors also asserted that there were probably no socially significant racial differences, arguing that "the range of mental capacities in all ethnic groups is much the same" (1969, 34). After the Statement on Race was published, a handful of biologists, including Ernst Mayr, Ronald Fisher, and Julian Huxley, harshly criticized it. They objected not only to the politicization of science, but also to the implicit attempt to connect moral equality (which they all wished to affirm) with the scientific claim of biological equality (which many of them doubted).

Ernst Mayr affirmed that "equality of opportunity and equality in law do not depend on physical, intellectual, and genetic identity" (1952, 18).³ Like Mayr, many of the biologists who were asked for feedback on the Statement on Race worried that the committee was under pressure to manipulate the science to fit a political agenda. For example, biologist Walter Lindauer concluded that "the UNESCO document was written on the assumption that from a certain body of scientific facts necessarily flowed certain ethical commandments" (1952, 19). The geneticist Kenneth Mather was concerned that the committee may be telling "noble lies"—*scientifically* inaccurate statements about race in order to promote the *moral* goal of toleration: "I felt that at times it was bending over backwards to deny the existence of race in the sense that this term has been used for political purposes in the recent past. I, of course, entirely agree in condemning Nazi race theory, but I do not think that the

³ More than five decades later, Mayr reaffirmed this view in "The Biology of Race and the Concept of Equality" (2002).

case against it is strengthened by playing down the possibility of statistical differences in, for example, the mental capacities of different human groups” (1952, 25). Agreeing with other dissenting scientists, the biologist Sir Ronald Fisher concluded that “the practical international problem is that of learning to share the resources of this planet amicably with persons of materially different nature, [but] this problem is being obscured by entirely well-intentioned efforts to minimize the real differences that exist” (1952, 27).

9.2.4 *After the War: Race in Contemporary Bioethics*

While we do not have good survey evidence on what bioethicists believe, some of the most influential bioethicists today explicitly argue against the tendency to tie moral equality together with genetic equality (Singer 2011; Buchanan 2009). Outside of bioethics, however, many people seem to implicitly connect moral status with genetic abilities. For example, people who have stronger egalitarian political concerns are more likely to dismiss scientific findings that purport to reveal group differences (Anomaly and Winegard 2020b). As *New York Times* science writer Nicholas Wade put the point, “[m]any people, including social scientists and much of the academic left, have long made what seems to me an unsupportable choice, that of basing their opposition to racism not on principle but on the claim that race is a social construct, not a biological reality” (2014, viii).

The persistence of the post-war attitudes about race can be illustrated by the furious condemnations by many journalists and academics of Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray’s *The Bell Curve* (1994). The book’s main focus was on the relationship between measured intelligence (IQ) and social outcomes, but they included a chapter on average *group* differences in intelligence. Although they said they were agnostic about the causes of racial differences in intelligence, the book provoked a furious reaction by many journalists and academics who saw the book as a means to support racist inequalities. More recently, as Nathan Cofnas has documented (2016, 2020), many professional philosophers, including some who work in bioethics, have called for research on race and intelligence to be banned or otherwise shunned. This is yet another illustration of how political considerations altered the conception of race in philosophy (Sesardic 2010) and informed taboos around investigating racial differences (Pinker 2002).

It is likely that biological conceptions of race fell out of favor after the war in part because of their invidious use by Germany and Japan to justify their conquest of other nations. Anthropologists after the war began to increasingly describe race as a “social construct,” rather than a natural fact or natural kinds. Philosophers, too, began embracing this view of race, and it is only recently, with the advent of cluster analysis in genetics, that “race realism”—the view that some of our common concepts of race map onto biological reality—has made a comeback. One would be hard-pressed, though, to find an academic race realist who thinks some races are *better than* others,

or that average group differences *justify* treating members of other groups better or worse than one's own group simply by virtue of their membership in that group.

Roughly speaking, there are three views of race in contemporary philosophy: *race realism*, which holds that race is a biologically and metaphysically real category in the world (Hardimon 2017); *social constructionism* (or “anti-realism”), which holds that race is a social category separate from any biological categorization of human populations (Haslanger 2012); and *pragmatism*, which holds that there are differences between human genetic populations that may correspond with our ordinary concept of race, but whether we should divide the world up in this way depends on the practical value of doing so (Kitcher 2007). As with any philosophical dispute, there are more than three ways of thinking about race, and each position includes plenty of subtleties. But these three views provide a simple way of thinking about the different conceptions of race held by philosophers in general, and bioethicists in particular.

Nearly all philosophers who think about race concede that there are more or less useful ways of grouping people together. And nearly all of them agree that race is—like other categories—socially constructed. How we divide up the world is a function of how we wish to navigate the world. We may wish to do so in some contexts to investigate how and when groups of humans diverged from one another and populated the world (Reich 2018). In another context, we may wish to divide groups into categories based on susceptibility to disease, which may more neatly map onto sub-groups within a larger group (e.g., Ashkenazi Jews are more susceptible to Tay Sachs than Sephardic Jews; sub-Saharan Africans are much more likely to develop sickle cell anemia than North Africans).

The biologist Theo Dobzhansky anticipated this view in his response to UNESCO's 1950 Statement on Race:

Populations which are geographically remote show greater genetic differences, on the average, than do populations which reside close together. It is, then, an arbitrary matter whether we divide mankind, for purposes of classification, into few or into many races. The number of races recognized by giving them names is a matter of convenience. Some anthropologists find it useful to distinguish only few major races, while others prefer finer subdivisions.

But while the number of races which we recognize is, thus, arbitrary, the existence of racial differences is an objectively ascertainable fact. Mankind is not a single breeding population, but a very complex system of breeding communities. These communities are maintained by geographic, cultural and economic barriers. And these communities are racially distinct when they differ in the frequencies of various hereditary traits. We set up races and give them names for the purpose of describing human diversity; racial differences between human populations are a biological reality. (1952, 80-81).

As Dobzhansky argues, to ask whether something is socially constructed or metaphysically real is often a false dichotomy. We distinguish between tables and chairs, for example, because doing so helps us decide whether we should sit on an object, or put our food and drinks on it. The distinction between a table and a chair can be blurry, and categories don't have strict implications for what we should do. For example, we can use tables to sit on and chairs to eat on if we feel like it. Likewise, race realists can concede to social constructionists that it is up to us how to divide the

world into groups, and concede to pragmatists that some divisions are more useful than others for social or scientific purposes. But race realists, in contrast to pragmatists and social constructionists, think some divisions are more scientifically fruitful than others.

In a recent editorial in the journal *Science*, a number of scholars argued that since “race” is vague, and potentially invidious, it should be eliminated from biomedical discourse. According to Michael Yudell et al., “Phasing out racial terminology in biological sciences would send an important message to scientists and the public alike: Historical racial categories that are treated as natural and infused with notions of superiority and inferiority have no place in biology” (2016, 565). The authors seem to think that people find it hard to disentangle racial categories from moral judgments, so we should throw out racial categories.

In a rejoinder to Yudell and his colleagues, a prominent philosopher of race has argued that the way people talk about race corresponds quite closely with the underlying genetic structure of human populations (Spencer 2019). According to Quayshawn Spencer, “In a landmark study by Noah Rosenberg et al. (2002), which was cross-checked by Rosenberg et al. (2005), five levels of genetic structure were detected,” and these clusters closely match the categories the US government uses to divide populations up (2019, 18). Spencer agrees that “race” is, in part, a socio-linguistic convention, and thus our language may change as our concepts do. It may be that conceptions of race in bioethics will diverge from those in biology or that English conventions will move away from “race” altogether, in favor of “population” or “ethnicity.” Only time will tell. However, it is clear that the divisive ways racial categories were used to justify the Nuremberg Laws and the Holocaust have led some scholars to reject the concept of race and the possibility of group differences (Yudell et al. 2016), while other scholars still consider race to be a meaningful concept, and argue that group differences are a likely result of Darwinian evolution (Winegard et al. 2020).

9.3 What Was Eugenics, and What is It Now?

9.3.1 *Before the War: American and British Eugenics*

The idea of eugenics was born in England around the same time naturalists were beginning to piece together how evolutionary forces shape different populations. Long before genetics emerged as a distinctive science, it became obvious that traits are somehow transmitted from parents to children. In formulating his theory of evolution by natural selection, Charles Darwin drew on the knowledge farmers had gained through the intentional breeding of animals, and discussed how different environmental niches could unintentionally do the same thing (1859). Darwin’s cousin, Francis Galton, figured that if we could understand the mechanisms of heredity, we could use that knowledge to direct evolution down a path of our own choosing.

Long before Galton, Plato and Aristotle argued that a successful political society will have a strong set of norms and laws aimed at promoting good breeding, since the qualities of the citizens who comprise a polity will determine its success or failure (Ojakangas 2016).

Francis Galton coined term “eugenics,” and defined it as “the science which deals with all influences that improve the inborn qualities of a race; also with those that develop them to the utmost advantage” (1904). Galton’s definition captures two aspects of eugenics: it is both the *scientific study* of how traits are transmitted (which later became the field of genetics), and a *moral commitment* to harnessing our knowledge of genetics to improve the traits of our children. Galton and most classical eugenicists focused on populations, while many modern bioethicists who advocate for *liberal eugenics* focus more on the choices parents make to shape the traits of their kids. This ambiguity between whether the focus of eugenics should be on specific parental choices to have children with traits deemed beneficial for the child, or whether we should be concerned with the average traits in a population, persists in how the word is used in bioethics. For example, in a recent book called *The Ethics of the New Eugenics*, the term eugenics is defined as involving “strategies or decisions aimed at affecting, in a manner which is considered to be positive, the genetic heritage of a child, a community, or humanity in general” (MacKellar and Bechtel 2016, 3). This definition encompasses the individual and collective aspects of eugenics.

While Francis Galton and Charles Darwin were concerned that civilization might have begun to have a dysgenic⁴ effect on the population of England, neither advocated extensive coercion to solve the problem. Galton, in particular, was mainly concerned with documenting demographic trends and with publicizing findings from (what we now call) behavior genetics so that parents would make informed choices about whether and with whom they would have children. For example, Galton provided evidence that in modern industrialized societies, more educated couples tend to have fewer children than less educated couples, and they tend to delay reproduction so that they can pursue other ambitions. The cumulative effect of this, Galton thought, is that civilization tends to encourage dysgenic reproductive trends. Galton appeared to be vindicated by independent scholarship which, by the turn of the nineteenth century, “demonstrated an inverse correlation between fertility and socioeconomic status, with the birthrate apparently falling much more sharply among the middle and upper-middle classes than among workers and agricultural laborers” (Paul and Moore 2010, 12).

Like Galton, Darwin worried about successful and ambitious people having fewer children, but also speculated about the potentially dysgenic effects of social welfare programs:

With savages, the weak in body or mind are soon eliminated; and those that survive commonly exhibit a vigorous state of health. We civilized men, on the other hand, do our utmost to check the process of elimination; we build asylums for the imbecile, the maimed, and the sick; we institute poor-laws; and our medical men exert their utmost skill to save the life

⁴ *Dysgenic* is the opposite of *eugenic*: the idea is that socially valued traits like intelligence, kindness, or conscientiousness might be in decline rather than increasing in the general population.

of every one to the last moment... Thus the weak members of civilized societies propagate their kind. No one who has attended to the breeding of domestic animals will doubt that this must be highly injurious to the race of man. It is surprising how soon a want of care, or care wrongly directed, leads to the degeneration of a domestic race; but excepting in the case of man himself, hardly anyone is so ignorant as to allow his worst animals to breed (1871, 168).

Darwin did not altogether oppose social welfare programs. He did, however, worry about their long-term genetic consequences. He also counseled that “both sexes ought to refrain from marriage [procreation] if they are in any marked degree inferior in body or mind,” but he cautioned that “such hopes are utopian and will never be even partially realized until the laws of inheritance are thoroughly known” (1871, 403). Darwin worried that, “as Mr. Galton has remarked, if the prudent avoid marriage, whilst the reckless marry, the inferior members will tend to supplant the better members of society” (1871, 403).

While eugenics originated in England, it flourished in the United States. Unlike the British eugenics movement, which never produced much in the way of legislation, the American eugenics movement led just over half of American states to pass forced sterilization laws for those deemed especially “unfit” for reproduction. The British biologist and first Professor of Eugenics in England, Karl Pearson, had a race-based view of eugenics, and one that favored Northern Europeans. Pearson anticipated Hitler’s view that life is a struggle between different groups, or races, for living space and raw materials (Paul and Moore 2010). Nevertheless, Hitler seems to have been more directly influenced by the British author Houston Chamberlain, whose unscientific writings about race reflected the influence of authors like Gobineau rather than Karl Pearson, who located himself more in the Darwinian tradition (Richards 2013).

9.3.2 During the War: German Eugenics

The Racial Hygiene Society of Germany began in 1905 and concerned itself with purifying the race of unwanted traits (Weindling 2010). To this end, it pursued environmental efforts to reduce the intake of alcohol and tobacco, and its members considered ways to reverse some of the same demographic trends that were occurring in England: successful people in Germany were moving to cities, marrying later, and having fewer children than those with less ability, ambition, and education.

Although antisemitism been on the rise since the late nineteenth century in Germany, Jews played an active role in the Racial Hygiene Society (which was not overtly antisemitic), until they were purged from the society when the National Socialists came to power (Weindling 2010). The first eugenic sterilization law was passed in 1933. By the time the war was over, at least 375,000 Germans were sterilized due to eugenic considerations (Weindling 2010).

Like the eugenic sterilization laws, the eugenic euthanasia program was primarily directed at Germans, not Jews. Unlike the sterilization laws, the euthanasia program was never formally legislated. The euthanasia program began after Hitler signed

an internal memorandum authorizing physicians to kill patients with birth defects, or with serious mental or physical problems that made them a public charge. The number of Germans killed in the euthanasia program has been estimated at almost 300,000 (Proctor 1988).

The Final Solution was initiated by a separate order, beginning at the end of 1941. Although it might be construed as a eugenics program in the broad sense that it aimed to purge Europe of a group Hitler considered parasitic, the rationale for the Final Solution was not that the Jews were disabled or intellectually inferior to Germans. It was instead that they were a threat to all Europeans, in part because of their presence in positions of power, including academic jobs, journalism, banking, and the arts.⁵ Because Jews were widely considered to have exceptional intellectual ability, an editorial in *The Eugenics Review*, published in Britain, opposed his treatment of the Jews, arguing “Herr Hitler has still not realised... that in declaring that the small number of Jews in Germany have achieved an altogether disproportionate measure of success...he has publicly acknowledged their superiority” (Bland and Hall 2010, 218).

Hitler saw Jews as a rival group competing with Germans for scarce resources and cultural influence. Whatever the psychological explanation is for Hitler’s obsession with Jews, The Final Solution succeeded in killing most European Jews, and Hitler’s war claimed tens of millions of European lives around the world. When the totality of torture and death was uncovered at the Nuremberg Trials after the war, there were two major consequences that remain with us today. First, Western nations crafted treaties that attempted to prevent future genocides by requiring European countries to accept refugees fleeing political persecution. Second, academics in Europe and the United States distanced themselves from anything that seemed connected to Nazi medicine, including what seemed to be scientific justifications for “racism” or “eugenics.” Even the mention of race, or of genetic influences on human behavior, fell out of favor in universities.

9.3.3 *After the War: UNESCO and Eugenics*

UNESCO (the branch of the UN tasked with promoting scientific education) was formed soon after the founding of the United Nations, and by 1948 the UN General Assembly ratified the Declaration of Human Rights. As discussed above, article 16 of the Declaration rejected state-sponsored, coercive eugenics by guaranteeing that “[m]en and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family” (UNDHR 1948). Nevertheless, UNESCO’s first Director, Julian Huxley, defended eugenics throughout his life (despite his brother’s objections, expressed in *Brave New World*). Huxley opposed most coercive forms of eugenics, while embracing voluntary eugenics, and opposed

⁵ The arts were especially targeted by Hitler in part because new forms of art and entertainment, including sexually explicit artwork and film, were thought to be subversive to traditional society.

racism and prejudice, while maintaining that race differences almost certainly exist. Many other influential biologists of the age agreed with Huxley on this, including JBS Haldane, Theodosius Dobzhansky, and Hermann Mueller (Crew et al. 1939).

In his 1946 manifesto explaining the aim of UNESCO, Julian Huxley argued that we need to acknowledge genetic differences in order to have fair institutions with policies that work for the good of all. According to Huxley, “Biological inequality is, of course, the bedrock fact on which all of eugenics is predicated. . . [The] primary aim of eugenics should be the raising of the mean level of all desirable qualities. While there may be dispute over certain qualities, there can be none over a number of the most important, such as a healthy constitution, a high innate general intelligence, or a special aptitude such as that for mathematics or music” (1946, 21).

Moreover, Huxley maintained that UNESCO should promote non-coercive eugenics:

At the moment, it is probable that the indirect effect of civilization is dysgenic instead of eugenic; and in any case it seems likely that the dead weight of genetic stupidity, physical weakness, mental instability, and disease-proneness, which already exist in the human species, will prove too great a burden for real progress to be achieved. Thus even though it is quite true that any radical eugenic policy will be for many years politically and psychologically impossible, it will be important for UNESCO to see that the eugenic problem is examined with the greatest care, and that the public mind is informed of the issues at stake so that much that now is unthinkable may at least become thinkable (Huxley 1946, 21).

Huxley was not alone. Although many intellectuals distanced themselves from eugenics after the war, it never entirely went away. Eugenic sterilizations continued to occur in various countries around the world, including Sweden and the United States, until the late twentieth century (Kevles 1985). Moreover, the Supreme Court decision that authorized coercive eugenics in the United States in 1927, *Buck v Bell*, has never been overturned. Although eugenic sterilizations are only rarely performed in the early twenty-first century, many states do have laws that permit physicians to sterilize patients with serious mental disabilities who are at risk of becoming pregnant.

Eugenics has not (yet) become a social movement in the way it did in the early twentieth century, but many prominent intellectuals continued to support some version of eugenics after World War II, despite its general decline. In 1963 the CIBA Foundation sponsored a symposium called “Man and His Future,” which was attended by some of the most well renowned scholars of the twentieth century, including Julian Huxley, and Nobel laureates like Hermann Muller, Francis Crick, and James Watson. Some of the ideas entertained included parental licensing, paying especially successful people to reproduce, and subsidizing the provision of genetic information so that parents could make informed reproductive choices (Crick 1963; Muller 1963).

9.3.4 *After the War: Eugenics in Modern Bioethics*

What people publicly say and privately believe are often very different. In the United States, survey evidence suggests that support for eugenic policies increases when people believe a condition is heavily influenced by genes (Zigerell 2020). Many ordinary people don't seem to understand just how powerfully our traits are sculpted by genetics, perhaps because experts in behavior genetics are routinely denounced when their findings contradict egalitarian and environmentalist orthodoxies (Pinker 2002; Plomin 2018). These taboos are plausibly explained by the legacy of the Second World War.

Bioethicists often *reflect* popular consensus as much as they *shape* it. And their views on eugenics fit this pattern. It is safe to say that most bioethicists reject eugenic sterilizations. However, many support the use of government power to redistribute resources in a way that empowers women to use techniques like in vitro fertilization and embryo selection (Daar 2017). These techniques enable parents to screen embryos for diseases such as Tay Sachs and will soon allow them to select for more complex traits (Greely 2018; Anomaly 2020). Many also support laws forbidding incest, and some even support the use of “wrongful life” laws to prevent parents from knowingly imposing genetic burdens on their children (Archard 2004). These examples show that “coercive eugenics” comes in different forms and enjoys different degrees of support.

Many bioethicists, including members of the US Presidential Bioethics Commission, have argued that reproductive rights are limited by the interests of future people, especially when children impose foreseeable harms on others (Buchanan et al. 2000; Brock 2005; Benatar 2010). Some suggest in addition that parents have a moral obligation to produce children with the best chance of the best life (Savulescu and Kahane 2009), or to produce children who are most likely to improve the welfare of other people (Douglas and Devolder 2013). These moral obligations are difficult to discharge without expert advice, and widespread access to enhancement technologies (Gyngell and Selgelid 2016, as well as social norms that encourage eugenic choices (Anomaly and Jones 2020a).

Contemporary bioethicists disagree about whether we should use the word “eugenics” to describe debates about the obligations parents and political institutions have in shaping the genetic endowment of future people (Cavaliere 2018). Some authors in bioethics prefer using the euphemism “genetic enhancement” rather than “eugenics” in order to avoid associations with Nazi eugenics (Wilkinson 2008; Camporesi 2014). Others prefer using “eugenics” to describe any actions we take to shape the traits of our children, focusing less on the word and more on the ethical issues surrounding particular kinds of interventions (Agar 2019; Anomaly 2018; MacKellar and Bechtel 2016; Selgelid 2014).

Another debate in bioethics concerns whether the word “eugenics” should be used solely to designate actions or laws that *intentionally* shape the traits of children, or also include actions or laws that *predictably affect* the genetic composition of future people (Veit et al. 2021). The historian of eugenics Daniel Kevles argues that

if policies that subsidize genetic counseling and contraception affect the gene pool, they are *eugenic* (or *dysgenic*) policies, even if this is not their intent (1985, 258). The philosopher Philip Kitcher agrees: “Once we have left the garden of genetic innocence, some form of eugenics is inescapable” (p. 174). This is because, Kitcher thinks, the choice to use *or not use* genetic screening, contraception, or abortion predictably influences what kinds of people are born, and what kinds of traits they will have. As Kitcher understands the term (consistent with Galton’s usage), eugenics is “a mixture of the study of heredity and some doctrines about the value of human lives” (1997, 191). He suggests that even if a parent or policy is not attempting to alter the human gene pool, insofar as policies that affect the genetic endowments of future people are shaped by values and beliefs about genetics, they constitute a form of eugenics.

Nobody has the power to unilaterally change the meanings of words, or the concepts words represent. Of course, scholars, journalists, and influential celebrities probably influence how words are used more than ordinary people do. But because language shapes how we frame political debates, we should be careful not to castigate people with whom we disagree by simply labeling their views as “racist” and “eugenicist.” Terms that have emotional associations with Nazi Germany are likely to lose their force if they continue to be used in imprecise ways by influential people in order to achieve political goals.

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