Eugenics and the Future of the Human Species

By Sam Vaknin

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"It is clear that modern medicine has created a serious dilemma ... In the past, there were many children who never survived - they succumbed to various diseases ... But in a sense modern medicine has put natural selection out of commission. Something that has helped one individual over a serious illness can in the long run contribute to weakening the resistance of the whole human race to certain diseases. If we pay absolutely no attention to what is called hereditary hygiene, we could find ourselves facing a degeneration of the human race. Mankind's hereditary potential for resisting serious disease will be weakened."

Jostein Gaarder in "Sophie's World", a bestselling philosophy textbook for adolescents published in Oslo, Norway, in 1991 and, afterwards, throughout the world, having been translated to dozens of languages.

The Nazis regarded the murder of the feeble-minded and the mentally insane - intended to purify the race and maintain hereditary hygiene - as a form of euthanasia. German doctors were enthusiastic proponents of an eugenics movements rooted in 19th century social Darwinism. Luke Gormally writes, in his essay "Walton, Davies, and Boyd" (published in "Euthanasia Examined - Ethical, Clinical, and Legal Perspectives", ed. John Keown, Cambridge University Press, 1995):

"When the jurist Karl Binding and the psychiatrist Alfred Hoche published their tract The Permission to Destroy Life that is Not Worth Living in 1920 ... their motive was to rid society of the 'human ballast and enormous economic burden' of care for the mentally ill, the handicapped, retarded and deformed children, and the incurably ill. But the reason they invoked to justify the killing of human beings who fell into these categories was that the lives of such human beings were 'not worth living', were 'devoid of value'"

It is this association with the hideous Nazi regime that gave eugenics - a term coined by a relative of Charles Darwin, Sir Francis Galton, in 1883 - its bad name. Richard Lynn, of the University of Ulster of North Ireland, thinks that this recoil resulted in "Dysgenics - the genetic deterioration of modern (human) population", as the title of his controversial tome puts it.

The crux of the argument for eugenics is that a host of technological, cultural, and social developments conspired to give rise to negative selection of the weakest, least intelligent, sickest, the habitually criminal, the sexually deviant, the mentally-ill, and the

least adapted.

Contraception is more widely used by the affluent and the well-educated than by the destitute and dull. Birth control as practiced in places like China distorted both the sex distribution in the cities - and increased the weight of the rural population (rural couples in China are allowed to have two children rather than the urban one).

Modern medicine and the welfare state collaborate in sustaining alive individuals - mainly the mentally retarded, the mentally ill, the sick, and the genetically defective - who would otherwise have been culled by natural selection to the betterment of the entire species.

Eugenics may be based on a literal understanding of Darwin's metaphor.

The 2002 edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica has this to say:

"Darwin's description of the process of natural selection as the survival of the fittest in the struggle for life is a metaphor. 'Struggle' does not necessarily mean contention, strife, or combat; 'survival' does not mean that ravages of death are needed to make the selection effective; and 'fittest' is virtually never a single optimal genotype but rather an array of genotypes that collectively enhance population survival rather than extinction. All these considerations are most apposite to consideration of natural selection in humans. Decreasing infant and childhood mortality rates do not necessarily mean that natural selection in the human species no longer operates. Theoretically, natural selection could be very effective if all the children born reached maturity. Two conditions are needed to make this theoretical possibility realized: first, variation in the number of children per family and, second, variation correlated with the genetic properties of the parents. Neither of these conditions is farfetched."

The eugenics debate is only the visible extremity of the Man vs. Nature conundrum. Have we truly conquered nature and extracted ourselves from its determinism? Have we graduated from natural to cultural evolution, from natural to artificial selection, and from genes to memes?

Does the evolutionary process culminate in a being that transcends its genetic baggage, that programs and charts its future, and that allows its weakest and sickest to survive? Supplanting the imperative of the survival of the fittest with a culturally-sensitive principle may be the hallmark of a successful evolution, rather than the beginning of an inexorable decline.

The eugenics movement turns this argument on its head. They accept the premise that the contribution of natural selection to the makeup of future human generations is glacial and negligible. But they reject the conclusion that, having ridden ourselves of its tyranny, we can now let the weak and sick among us survive and multiply. Rather, they propose to replace natural selection with eugenics.

But who, by which authority, and according to what guidelines will administer this man-made culling and decide who is to live and who is to die, who is to breed and who may not? Why select by intelligence and not by courtesy or altruism or church-going - or

al of them together? It is here that eugenics fails miserably. Should the criterion be physical, like in ancient Sparta? Should it be mental? Should IQ determine one's fate - or social status or wealth? Different answers yield disparate eugenic programs and target dissimilar groups in the population.

Aren't eugenic criteria liable to be unduly influenced by fashion and cultural bias? Can we agree on a universal eugenic agenda in a world as ethnically and culturally diverse as ours? If we do get it wrong - and the chances are overwhelming - will we not damage our gene pool irreparably and, with it, the future of our species?

And even if many will avoid a slippery slope leading from eugenics to active extermination of "inferior" groups in the general population - can we guarantee that everyone will? How to prevent eugenics from being appropriated by an intrusive, authoritarian, or even murderous state?

Modern eugenicists distance themselves from the crude methods adopted at the beginning of the last century by 29 countries, including Germany, The United States, Canada, Switzerland, Austria, Venezuela, Estonia, Argentina, Norway, Denmark, Sweden (until 1976), Brazil, Italy, Greece, and Spain.

They talk about free contraceptives for low-IQ women, vasectomies or tubal ligations for criminals, sperm banks with contributions from high achievers, and incentives for college students to procreate. Modern genetic engineering and biotechnology are readily applicable to eugenic projects. Cloning can serve to preserve the genes of the fittest. Embryo selection and prenatal diagnosis of genetically diseased embryos can reduce the number of the unfit.

But even these innocuous variants of eugenics fly in the face of liberalism. Inequality, claim the proponents of hereditary amelioration, is genetic, not environmental. All men are created unequal and as much subject to the natural laws of heredity as are cows and bees. Inferior people give birth to inferior offspring and, thus, propagate their inferiority.

Even if this were true - which is at best debatable - the question is whether the inferior specimen of our species possess the inalienable right to reproduce? If society is to bear the costs of over-population - social welfare, medical care, daycare centers - then society has the right to regulate procreation. But does it have the right to act discriminately in doing so?

Another dilemma is whether we have the moral right - let alone the necessary knowledge - to interfere with natural as well as social and demographic trends. Eugenicists counter that contraception and indiscriminate medicine already do just that. Yet, studies show that the more affluent and educated a population becomes - the less fecund it is. Birth rates throughout the world have dropped dramatically already.

Instead of culling the great unwashed and the unworthy - wouldn't it be a better idea to educate them (or their off-spring) and provide them with economic opportunities (euthenics rather than eugenics)? Human populations seem to self-regulate. A gentle and persistent nudge in the right direction - of increased affluence and better schooling -

might achieve more than a hundred eugenic programs, voluntary or compulsory.

That eugenics presents itself not merely as a biological-social agenda, but as a panacea, ought to arouse suspicion. The typical eugenics text reads more like a catechism than a reasoned argument. Previous all-encompassing and omnicompetent plans tended to end traumatically - especially when they contrasted a human elite with a dispensable underclass of persons.

Above all, eugenics is about human hubris. To presume to know better than the lottery of life is haughty. Modern medicine largely obviates the need for eugenics in that it allows even genetically defective people to lead pretty normal lives. Of course, Man himself - being part of Nature - may be regarded as nothing more than an agent of natural selection. Still, many of the arguments advanced in favor of eugenics can be turned against it with embarrassing ease.

Consider sick children. True, they are a burden to society and a probable menace to the gene pool of the species. But they also inhibit further reproduction in their family by consuming the financial and mental resources of the parents. Their genes - however flawed - contribute to genetic diversity. Even a badly mutated phenotype sometimes yields precious scientific knowledge and an interesting genotype.

The implicit Weltbild of eugenics is static - but the real world is dynamic. There is no such thing as a "correct" genetic makeup towards which we must all strive. A combination of genes may be perfectly adaptable to one environment - but woefully inadequate in another. It is therefore prudent to encourage genetic diversity or polymorphism.

The more rapidly the world changes, the greater the value of mutations of all sorts. One never knows whether today's maladaptation will not prove to be tomorrow's winner. Ecosystems are invariably comprised of niches and different genes - even mutated ones - may fit different niches.

In the 18th century most peppered moths in Britain were silvery gray, indistinguishable from lichen-covered trunks of silver birches - their habitat. Darker moths were gobbled up by rapacious birds. Their mutated genes proved to be lethal. As soot from sprouting factories blackened these trunks - the very same genes, hitherto fatal, became an unmitigated blessing. The blacker specimen survived while their hitherto perfectly adapted fairer brethren perished ("industrial melanism"). This mode of natural selection is called directional.

Moreover, "bad" genes are often connected to "desirable genes" (pleitropy). Sickle cell anemia protects certain African tribes against malaria. This is called "diversifying or disruptive natural selection". Artificial selection can thus fast deteriorate into adverse selection due to ignorance.

Modern eugenics relies on statistics. It is no longer concerned with causes - but with phenomena and the likely effects of intervention. If the adverse traits of off-spring and parents are strongly correlated - then preventing parents with certain undesirable qualities from multiplying will surely reduce the incidence of said dispositions in the

general population. Yet, correlation does not necessarily imply causation. The manipulation of one parameter of the correlation does not inevitably alter it - or the incidence of the outcome.

Eugenicists often hark back to wisdom garnered by generations of breeders and farmers. But the unequivocal lesson of thousands of years of artificial selection is that cross-breeding (hybridization) - even of two lines of inferior genetic stock - yields valuable genotypes. Inter-marriage between races, groups in the population, ethnic groups, and clans is thus bound to improve the species' chances of survival more than any eugenic scheme.

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The future of the Human Species - Part 2:Where next? by K.A.Cassimally

Many scientists are currently exploring the idea of going to live on Mars. Mars is the nearest planet to Earth and scientists actually think that the red planet resembled our Earth some million years ago. Some other scientists from the NASA Ames Center have already started the creation of a ‘Mars town’ and many others are in fact already experimenting it. Of course, these experiments are done on Earth itself but this ‘Mars town’ has an environment practically alike to that of Mars. And the perfect place for the conduction of this experiment is in Texas, USA.

The astronauts working in these towns wear their space suit and also do everything they would really have to carry out if they ever go to Mars in the future.

But Mars would be, like Earth a temporary place for humans. When the Sun starts engulfing the planets, Mars will disappear barely hours after the earth. So Mars only seems to be the ideal place to spread the human species. It is also a good location to send humans if ever there is a disaster on Earth. By saying disaster, I mean asteroid collision and things like that.

If we, humans do not want to disappear when the earth or mars get swallowed up, we will have to go and live beyond the solar system. But are there any planets outside our solar system prepared to support life? Astronomers’ answer is:
“If Earth can support life, why can’t other planets do same too? Astronomers have already discovered a Jupiter-like planet orbiting a Sun-like star so why not an Earth-like planet orbiting a Sun-like star next?”
Astronomers clearly think that, yes, there has to be other planets alike to Earth waiting to be colonised out there. And maybe, these planets will in the future hold our species.

But in all cases, this is exactly what some astronomers have in mind: transplant the human species to these planets before it is too late.

Before colonising places outside our system though, it is logical to try and colonise our neighbour, Mars.
To achieve this goal though, many other problems have to be taken into consideration. How do we transform a dusty planet like Mars into one more or less alike to our Earth? How should we proceed? Before we plan to perform any of these though, we should ask ourselves whether we are really prepared to go out there where nobody has ever gone.

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