

The Mythology of Eugenics:  
Nature, War, and Politics in Early  
British Eugenic Thought

by

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## I N T R O D U C T I O N

*Justifications for a Mythological Analysis*

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*Eugenics and war—the clash between ideals and things as they are, is, perhaps, nowhere more terrible than here.*<sup>1</sup>

--Professor J. Arthur Thomson, The Second Galton Lecture  
delivered to the Eugenics Education Society on 16<sup>th</sup> February, 1915

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**E**ugenics and war both reside in the dark patches of history. They invoke feelings of physical and moral damage, violent coercion, and the reduction of human beings to disposable units of material refuse. They both manage to weigh human lives on the basis of their utility for a desired end rather than attribute to them a basic unalienable value. Despite these overlaps, this thesis will contend that eugenics and war are antithetical—not because war is, as the British eugenists declare, “bad for the race,” but because war constitutes a condition, a state of existence that the eugenists understood as natural—and it was their innermost conviction that this natural, warlike state of being can, and must, be transcended. This belief signifies a myth, an implicit story about historical redemption that animated the British eugenics discourse. This myth has never before been articulated in historical literature and is the subject for analysis in this project.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomson, 1915, p. 4.

i.

*Eugenics: What*

In historical works on eugenics it is a heuristic commonplace to begin by stating that the term eugenics was coined in 1883 by the Victorian naturalist Sir Francis Galton, who called it “the study of agencies under social control which may improve or impair the future quality of the race physically or mentally.”<sup>2</sup> Despite this benign-sounding definition, the memory of eugenics is bound up with Nazi Germany, ideas of Nordic racial purity, and draconian programs of “race hygiene,” reproductive regulation, and widespread social control. The historical literature, however, provides a more nuanced picture. The first issue to point out is that eugenics took on a variety of forms in different countries. There are a number of comparative histories on eugenics, juxtaposing the eugenic programs from different European nations, and even different continents.<sup>3</sup> The American practice of eugenics is largely to blame for the stigma attached to the word: in the United States, eugenic policies held the force of law, in many cases, up until the late 1970’s, and resulted in at least 60,000 forced sterilizations over the course of the twentieth century,<sup>4</sup> though eugenics did not become a bad word until the 1960’s.<sup>5</sup>

This thesis confines its analysis to the British eugenics movement, focusing on its early years between, roughly, 1905 to 1920. Furthermore, this is a project in

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<sup>2</sup> “Notes On the Early Days Of The ‘Eugenics Education Society,’” p. 1. Cited by Black, Edwin, *War Against the Weak: Eugenics and America’s Campaign to Create a Master Race*, New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2003, p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> See Adams, Mark, B., *The Wellborn Science: Eugenics in Germany, France, Brazil and Russia*, Oxford University Press, 1990.

<sup>4</sup> It is also worthy of note that one third, or 20,000, of these sterilizations took place in the state of California. CSUS, Center for Science, History, Policy, and Ethics: Eugenics in California. URL: <http://www.csus.edu/cshpe/eugenics/>

<sup>5</sup> Glad, John, “Notes on Eugenics,” *Mankind Quarterly*, vol. XLVIII, 2, (2007), p. 191.

intellectual history and will therefore focus on the discourse that took place largely within the pages of the quarterly journal the *Eugenics Review* rather than the interactions between the eugenics movement and British legislation. After all, unlike their American counterparts, the British eugenis<sup>6</sup> did not lobby incessantly to have eugenic policies become governmentally legislated. They talked, instead, about the need to generate a social awareness of eugenics; they hoped that its principles would be absorbed into the national consciousness, or, in Galton's words, that it would become an "orthodox religious tenet of the future."<sup>7</sup> They did manage to generate some legislation, such as the Mental Deficiency Act of 1914, but most eugenis<sup>8</sup> were against coercive legislation; they felt that eugenics "should commend *itself*," for it springs "from a fine sense of social duty."<sup>8</sup>

The number and caliber of prestigious British intellectuals who ducked in and out of the eugenics movement may surprise those who are not well acquainted with the subject. Many prominent figures of recent British history were self-designated eugenis<sup>9</sup> at one time or another, including the economists William Beveridge and John Maynard Keynes; the Jewish political theorist Harold Laski; the Fabian socialists George Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells, and Sidney Webb; Arthur Balfour and even the future Prime Minister Winston Churchill.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, a number of eugenis<sup>10</sup> were fellows of the Royal Society and the British Academy.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In America, the designated term for a devotee of eugenics was "eugenicist," while in Britain, the members of the Eugenics Education Society referred to themselves as "eugenis."

<sup>7</sup> Galton, Francis, "Eugenics: Its Definition, Scope, and Aims," *The American Journal of Sociology*, vol. X, no. 1, (1904), p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Crackanthorpe, Montague, *Population and Progress*, London, 1907, pp. 46-7. Emphasis added.

<sup>9</sup> Okuefuna, David "Racism: a history," BBC documentary response, 2007. URL: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcfour/documentaries/features/racism-history.shtml>. With the exceptions of Harold Laski and H. G. Wells, the figures mentioned here did not support eugenics during the time in which this analysis takes place. Laski, however, wrote an article on eugenics in 1910 that was highly

The basic assumption of eugenics was that “like tends to beget like,” or in a less literary formulation, “not only the physical but also the mental characteristics are inherited.”<sup>11</sup> Consequently, the eugenicists held that feeble-mindedness, criminality, and pauperism (to name a few) were hereditary traits.<sup>12</sup> The logic of eugenics was Darwinian: it argued that racial quality is variable, and if the lineages or “stocks” of higher quality reproduce at greater frequency than the “stocks” of lower quality, the average genetic worth or “fitness” of the race will improve over time. In the early years, eugenics promised to usher in a new era of human perfection: in the hands of the eugenicist, Galton testifies, the “structure of future generations... is almost as plastic as clay.”<sup>13</sup>

While the method for assessing an individual’s genetic quality, or, as it was called by Galton, “civic worth,” was at times the subject of controversy, most eugenicists held that biological quality roughly corresponded to position in the class hierarchy, with the very best genetic specimens being found in the upper-middle class. They noted exceptions, but as they described the characteristics that corresponded to “fitness,” such as virility, intelligence, sociality, and morality, the picture of a middle-class gentleman was the image that took shape.

Nevertheless, a number of eugenicists challenged the assumption that biological quality could be easily appraised, even to the point of demonstrating that human

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praised. Its reception was so positive that it brought him an invitation to take tea with Francis Galton. Laski’s essay will be heavily drawn upon in Chapter 2. (Searle, 1978, p. 13)

<sup>10</sup> For example, Sir Arthur Keith was a fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons, and G. G. Coulton a fellow of the British Academy.

<sup>11</sup> Carr-Saunders, Alexander, Morris, “A Criticism of Eugenics,” *Eugenics Review*, vol. V, (1913), p. 215.

<sup>12</sup> Laski, Harold, “The Scope of Eugenics,” *Westminster Review*, vol. 174, (1910), p. 197.

<sup>13</sup> Galton, 1865; excerpted in Mazumdar, Pauline, *The Eugenics Movement: An International Perspective*, vol. II, London, New York, 2007, p. 81.

judgements of worth have no concrete basis. The presence of these arguments in the *Eugenics Review* should demonstrate that the eugenists welcomed a critical discourse. A. M. Carr-Saunders, who would later become a prominent demographer, wrote an article called “A Criticism of Eugenics” that challenged the degree to which there can be any consensus regarding what constitutes the best example of a certain “feature.”

Let us consider for a moment the cause of beauty. There is not only no agreement as to its definition, but no agreement as to what it is in actual fact. It would be quite impossible to encourage any one stock because it excelled in this feature, and it seems more likely than not that this difficulty will always remain. If we are correct in our analysis of these qualities, we are faced with a difficulty which is not merely temporary but, as far as we can see, insuperable.

This, of course, is not so with regard to all qualities. It is clearly possible to distinguish between certain stocks—those which are pathological for the most part, such as the feeble-minded and the tuberculous.<sup>14</sup>

While Carr-Saunders is willing to concede that certain characteristics are not only heritable but undoubtedly negative, he provides an unusually subtle articulation of the “difficulty” of making judgments of genetic quality. This passage makes the implicit claim that what is most “beautiful,” or even what is “best” in a general sense, cannot be empirically established, nor can any opinion regarding what epitomizes these concepts remain permanently uncontested. To bring Carr-Saunders’s argument to its conclusion, the eugenic aim of “improving the race” contains a socially constructed ideal. While Carr-Saunders would not bring his argument this far, his passage begins to suggest that there are no objective criteria upon which to judge whether or not the

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<sup>14</sup> Carr-Saunders, 1913, pp. 229-30.



race has “improved,” and therefore the eugenic dream of a perfected human society can never become more than a farcical delusion.

Some eugenists even questioned the scientific credibility of the term “race.” The eugenist and Oxford philosopher F. C. S. Schiller queries the “political notions of ‘race’ and ‘nationality,’

...for neither of these terms appears to have any definable biological meaning. Except for the Andaman islanders, the Pygmies and the Eskimos there do not seem to be any *pure* races on the face of the earth, and the current race-names are mostly misnomers.<sup>15</sup>

Schiller cannot necessarily speak for all British eugenists, but his awareness that the term “race” has no “definable biological meaning” gives him some credibility. While this does not suggest that he was socially unprejudiced, it at least evinces a critical attitude towards eugenic terminology.

Nevertheless, it is not difficult to show that classism and racism played large roles in the discourse and popularity of eugenics. Indeed, eugenic rhetoric teems with evaluative, prejudiced terms. For example, the eugenist A. P. Roper deplors the advancements of medical science that have decreased the rate of infant mortality: “instead of sacrificing the unfit in the interests of the fit, we have employed every resource of modern science to keep alight the feeble flame of life in the baseborn child of a degenerate parent.”<sup>16</sup> It is undeniable that the eugenic discourse constructed a certain type of “degenerate” deviant who needed to abstain from “parenthood” for the sake of future race purity.

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<sup>15</sup> Schiller, 1916, p. 170.

<sup>16</sup> Roper, Allen, G., *Ancient Eugenics*, Oxford University Press, 1913, p. 5.

The emphasis on the future, however, is crucial. The eugenists articulated their goals in terms of gradual evolutionary change; they were concerned with long-term racial improvement rather than the immediate elimination of those who they held to be socially or morally contemptible. That is, to remain close to the eugenic discourse itself, eugenics is not merely about justifying social prejudices—it is about the ability to exert control over mankind’s evolutionary fate.

Eugenics, then, is interesting because it pulls together two diametrically opposed philosophical positions—a deterministic outlook and a capacity for free will. Eugenics begins with a biological, scientific, or mechanistic view of the universe that holds every element of existence to be governed by strict laws of physical causality. In other words, this view is deterministic and would suggest that *all* actions, from the oscillations of cellular flagella to a human being’s most deliberative decisions, are determined by fixed laws. There is no contingency in this view; nothing could have been different from what it was, and nothing that *will* happen can possibly happen differently. Darwinian evolution is conducive to this view because it reduces all phenomena to terms of motion, with one cause leading to another, every event being linked to every other in the chain of causality. While eugenics ascribes to this deterministic view, interestingly it also posits the possibility of changing or controlling the future of human evolution. This latter idea breaks free from the chain of causality, asserting a principle of *self*-movement, or the possibility of free will. When one considers the interplay between determinism and free will in the eugenic discourse, a myth begins to present itself.

## ii.

*Eugenics: A Mythological Analysis*

While eugenics has been called many things—a science, a pseudo-science, a paradigm, a social movement, a political platform, and even a religious creed—this thesis will put forward an understanding of eugenics as a conception or philosophy of history based upon a particular myth in which the eugenicist functions as a redemptive figure. In other words, I intend to develop the historical understanding of eugenics, and challenge the existing historical literature, by reinterpreting the British eugenics movement in mythological terms.

The eugenic myth itself can be understood in terms of the interplay between determinism and free will. When Charles Darwin revealed the biological mechanism by which species change in his 1859 work *The Origin of Species*, one might say that he laid bare the laws of causality; he showed how one cause leads to another. It is in this moment of understanding the rules by which causality operates that one can presume the ability to alter its course. The eugenic myth reformulates this logic into spatial terms: in nature, one is governed by the laws of causality—nature represents the realm of determinism; however, once the natural being discovers and understands these laws, it transcends nature and inhabits a metaphysical space above it. From this transcendent position, it gains free will—the ability to control causality and direct the future course of human history.

The final element of the eugenic myth is the connection between nature and war. The eugenicists derived their understanding of nature from Darwin, for whom, it can be argued, nature and war are inseparable. For the eugenicists, to be in nature

meant to be in a condition of war, which attached to nature a train of negative connotations; it embodied violence, evil, suffering, and conflict. The eugenicist who is perched above nature and has the capacity to control human evolution, can, in doing so, change nature itself, and therefore cleanse human nature of its association with war. This is the promise of redemption contained in the eugenic myth—the idea that human nature can be limitlessly perfected. However, war still embodies the space in which determinism dominates the capacity for free will, and insofar as war is ultimately unavoidable, or is an indelible attribute of political systems, it poses as the mythical antithesis to eugenic transcendence; war asserts itself, despite the claims of the eugenicists, as state of being which simply cannot be transcended.

While there are a number of key elements that remain to be articulated, the basic structure of the eugenic myth has been laid out. In this thesis, I will aim to construct this myth and pose it as the implicit idea structure that underlay the British eugenics movement—the story through which the eugenicists made sense of themselves and their self-allotted roles as shapers of history. To do this, I will draw from the literature of eugenicists, such as Francis Galton, Major Leonard Darwin, Harold Laski, David Starr Jordan, Edward B. Poulton, and Theodore Chambers, as well as relevant historians and intellectuals. While the movement itself was amorphous and diffuse, this myth may serve as a basis for conceiving of the British eugenicists as a singular, cohesive group of thinkers.

The title of this project, the *Mythology of Eugenics*, therefore signifies not a body of myths, but rather an analysis of a group of thinkers through the implicit myth with which they understood themselves. Because no historians have regarded British

eugenics as a mythical movement, I need to establish that this myth existed in order to justify a mythological analysis, and this is one of the basic goals of my thesis; however, there is one intellectual from whom I might immediately garner support for this task. Michel Foucault, whose work I will draw from in Chapter 3, described the larger discourse of which British eugenics was a part as “an intensely mythical discourse; it is a discourse of bitterness, but also of insane hopes.”<sup>17</sup> Foucault does not explain precisely what he means by this, but if one grants that eugenics is a “mythical discourse,” I think I am justified in attempting to construct its implicit myth.

*iii.*

#### *On Making Arguments*

In the structure of the myth I have already outlined, a number of highly complex terms are construed in specific ways. Nature, war, and transcendence are terms which in themselves constitute whole worlds of philosophical thought. I would like to propose, then, that my thesis builds what might be called a hermeneutic structure, with each term being interpreted in such a way that the pieces fit together. If the terms are defined or construed in just the right way, the myth, I submit, is coherent, or rationally functional. This is not to say, however, that my argument is somehow true, or correct, or constitutes the only or even the best way to understand the British eugenics movement. Because it is workable, or rationally comprehensible, does not mean that it has the capacity to negate other understandings, nor does it suggest that I have succeeded in some vague sense—it merely indicates my aesthetic

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<sup>17</sup> Foucault, 1976, p. 57

preference for a certain type of argument. Moreover, the internal consistency of my argument's logic does not establish it in some grand hierarchy of sense, at the top of which would be rational omniscience or the apex of understanding; rather, I would like for it to stand on its own, as an idea sculpture that is not complicit in reinforcing this hierarchy, but is, I hope, appreciable in its own aesthetic composure.

Accordingly, I think it might be worthwhile for me to state my own feeling that if one decides to construct a rational argument or a rational scheme that proposes to give the definitive explanation for a certain phenomenon, it is best to do so in irony. That is, the construction of a rational argument or a cogent conceptual arrangement should be done with the acknowledgement that there is an infinite number of alternative conceptual arrangements, and even the irrational or absurd ones are no less valid—they may be less practical or less persuasive, but not necessarily inferior.

I do not mean to say that it would be horribly wrong to assert a conviction in a certain rational understanding of things. To extrapolate from the need for irony in making arguments the injunction that all arguments follow suit would be to forget why irony was necessary in the first place. Irony allows one to recognize that the making of meaning is an art, not a competition; but to demand that everyone engage in irony would be to fall back into the competitive mode. In other words, the internal consistency of your logic does not provide a justification for exerting your will over another person, or claiming a higher position in a hierarchy of truth.

In summary, then, I chose my argument not because I was groping for the truth about the British eugenics movement, but because this argument and the

arrangement of concepts that it implies is not only convincing, but also aesthetically appealing to me. In other words, while I think that my mythological analysis of eugenics is an original contribution to eugenics historiography, I cannot say that it is definitive, or attempt to claim that it is the truth. Rather, it is a single way to make sense of the British eugenicists as individuals and as thinkers, and I hope it will make for interesting reading.

*iv.*

*Practical Concerns*

This thesis is composed of three chapters. While the overall structure is far from symmetrical, there is a scheme by which the length of each chapter relates to the others—each subsequent chapter is roughly twice the length of the one before it. Also, the chapters sequentially increase in importance.

The first chapter focuses on eugenics historiography, and does not seek to put forward my argument or describe the eugenic myth in any systematic sense. The second chapter provides a brief history of eugenics, focusing at first on the mania of “degeneration” as a contributing factor to the popularity of eugenics, and then the founding of the Eugenics Education Society in London. In the second half of this chapter, the mythological analysis of eugenics begins to take shape as I seek to support the claim that eugenics is based upon a belief in mythical transcendence by drawing upon eugenic literature and pointing out parallels between eugenic ideas and two Western stories or myths: Prometheus and the Fall of Man. The third chapter consists of three sections. In the first section I seek to demonstrate that the eugenicists

adhered to a Hobbesian, warlike view of nature. In the second section, I describe what the utopian eugenic state would look like, drawing from eugenic literature as well as from Foucault and Carl Schmitt to bring out its mythical aspects. In the third and final section I put forward the eugenists' views on war as they formed them in the context of World War I, attempting, again, to draw out the mythical undertones in their discourse.



## I

**History, Philosophy, and Philosophers of History:**  
*A Historiography of Eugenics*

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**T**he “horror of a great war—the greatest the world has ever known—is upon us,” read the editorial piece in the July 1914 edition of the *Eugenics Review*. As these words were published, the specter of World War I loomed over the European continent; it was unavoidable—“all we can now do is put forward every endeavour to mitigate the racial injury to the utmost of our power.”<sup>18</sup> For British eugenicists, no tragedy could exceed the unmitigated, indiscriminate violence of the coming war; and yet, only a few years after its resolution George Santayana looked back with nostalgia and relished its realness. He addressed the British soldier in soliloquy: “this war has given you your first glimpse of the ancient, fundamental, normal state of the world, your first taste of reality.”<sup>19</sup> This attitude resonates very little with twenty-first century consciousness, but Santayana echoes a recurrent theme in Western literature whose origins are impossible to trace. “There is eternal war in nature,” he remarks, and man is the “barbarian,” the Nietzschean beast destined (or doomed) to wage war interminably. Almost a century earlier Tennyson invoked “Nature” as “red in tooth and claw” and before him Hobbes held with

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<sup>18</sup> Anon, “Eugenics and the War,” *Eugenics Review*, vol. VI, (1914), p. 197.

<sup>19</sup> Santayana, George, *Soliloquies in England, and Later Soliloquies*, New York, 1924, p. 103.

widespread influence that in nature, men are in “a condition of war... of every man, against every man.”<sup>20</sup>

When Hobbes put forth this notion of the state of nature, however, it was not without a sense of relief. Man, or at least European man, had long since left the brutish state of perpetual warfare, finding comfort, “a more contented life,” in political society.<sup>21</sup> Arguably, it was the publication of Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* in 1859 that undermined this qualitative distinction. Darwin’s hypothesis of transformism, which argued that *Homo Sapiens* were the descendents of animal ancestors, rendered God a distant first cause or even unnecessary, insinuated the indelibility of human instinct, and cast man back into the state of nature which Hobbes supposed he had abandoned. Darwin insisted that he used the term “struggle for existence” in “a large and metaphorical sense,”<sup>22</sup> but the subtlety of his notion of struggle was overlooked by those who found in it a powerful justification and naturalization of war. If pugnacity was evolutionarily ingrained into the genetic fabric of humanity, then war was not an accidental phenomenon, but rather a biological inevitability—a perfectly natural event.

This was the creed of German militarism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, articulated most forcefully by General Friedrich von Bernhardi. Although his thought was influenced most heavily by philosophers such as Goethe, Schiller, and Nietzsche, it was Darwin’s theory that caused him to think of war,

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<sup>20</sup> Hobbes, Thomas, *Leviathan*, Penguin Books, 1985, p. 185-6.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p. 223.

<sup>22</sup> Darwin, Charles, *The Origin of Species*, London, 1859, p. 116. This sentence was often cited by those who opposed the use of Darwinism as a “natural” justification for unregulated economic competition.

famously, as a “biological necessity.”<sup>23</sup> This type of biological or Darwinian militarism, also called instinct or conflict theory, has been charged with serving as the cause for World War I.<sup>24</sup> However, many strains of thought arose out of Darwin’s paradigm. Peace or anti-war biology, for example, found in the holism of Darwin’s “entangled bank” a persuasive grounds for an indictment of war.<sup>25</sup> Eugenics, another tradition of thought borne from Darwinism, acknowledged both the competitive and cooperative instincts inherited by man, but asked not which instinct would triumph over the other, but rather, how can we *change* our instincts for the better? Whether war was a biological exhortation or whether cooperation was the more “natural” human trait thereby became irrelevant—the eugenicist positioned himself above this debate, denying the primacy of instinctual inheritance, for if eugenics could be properly implemented, nature itself could conform to human needs.

*i.*

### *Introducing Eugenics*

Francis Galton coined the term eugenics in 1883, at a time when Darwin’s books were being sold to the public. Eugenics began as an organized movement in England coupled with the belief that traits such as intelligence, talent, as well as disease, pauperism, feeble-mindedness, and immorality were primarily controlled by

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<sup>23</sup> Bernhardt, *Germany and the Next War*, London, 1912, p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> See Crook, *Darwinism, War and History*, Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> Darwin (1859), p. 459. In the last paragraph of *The Origin of Species* Darwin describes “an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth...” This paragraph is widely held as a counterexample to the argument that Darwin put forth an inherently violent theory of nature.

inheritance.<sup>26</sup> Galton defined eugenics as “the study of agencies under social control that may improve or impair the racial qualities of future generations either physically or mentally.”<sup>27</sup> The phrase “agencies under social control” is purposefully vague, as the eugenists believed that any element of culture can be assessed on the basis of whether or not it was beneficial or detrimental to the genetic stock of the population. The British eugenists argued most frequently over the effects of legislation, often excoriating the London poor law authorities for, quite euphemistically, undoing the “natural” checks to the population that would be in place if the lower classes were not given any governmental assistance. Many eugenists felt that poor law legislation needed to be reformed on the basis of eugenic principles, because it helped the “unfit” pass their genes onto the next generation, propagating character types that were, in their eyes, unsuited for modern civilization. This was similar to the social Darwinist position, a doctrine of severe *laissez faire* and a faith that those who fall behind do so because of their poor genetic inheritance. Both Social Darwinists and eugenists flirted with numerous different theories of inheritance and cultural evolution, and both freely employed biological analogies to understand social phenomena; however, it is incorrect to equate the two.<sup>28</sup> While social Darwinists were *laissez faire* purists, eugenists were fervid proponents for government intervention and many socialists

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<sup>26</sup> Hofstadter, Richard, *Social Darwinism in American Thought*, 1944, p. 161.

<sup>27</sup> “Notes On the Early Days Of The ‘Eugenics Education Society,’” p. 1. Cited by Black, Edwin, *War Against the Weak: Eugenics and America’s Campaign to Create a Master Race*, New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2003, p. 18.

<sup>28</sup> While there was some overlap between eugenics and social Darwinism, this thesis maintains that there was a clear distinction between the central dogmas of each doctrine. The eugenicist Caleb Saleeby gives testimony to the divide. He strongly censures the “Darwinian eugenists” for arguing that slum life is a eugenic influence because it “weeds out” the infirm. Saleeby condemns them as a school of “better-dead” eugenists. (Saleeby, Caleb, Williams, *The Progress of Eugenics*, New York, London, 1914, p. 146 and p. 151).

were numbered among them; but they held that State reform must always be undertaken along with the consideration of its eugenic effects.

The eugenic effects of war were the subject of controversy. Humanity itself was the result of nature “red in tooth and claw,” and therefore conflict could be considered a genetic balm, conducive to biological progress. Was war a reversion to the primal state of nature in which unchecked conflict would cleanse humanity of the weak and congenitally unfit, or was modern warfare, mechanized and indiscriminating, one of those preventable “social agencies” that killed off the best and brightest men from the warring societies? The latter view, that war was *dysgenic* (the opposite of eugenic), was first expressed by Darwin in *The Descent of Man*,<sup>29</sup> and it was the prevailing opinion of British eugenicists, conforming nicely with their emphasis on the rational control of the population through social reform. Not only did the eugenicists hold war to be a dysgenic influence, but it also embodied a condition in which humans function on the basis of natural instinct. This condition, for reasons that will be articulated in the subsequent chapters, was anathema to the eugenic ideal.

*ii.*

*Eugenics Historiography*

The debate over the eugenic status of war has received little historical attention. The historiography of social Darwinism, however, is now a rich field, as is the historical study of eugenics. In most works the focus is placed on the interactions between advocacy and reform, or what is revealed to be the eugenicists’ attempts to

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<sup>29</sup> Darwin, Charles, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, Penguin, New York, 2003; initially published 1871, p. 160.

crystallize social prejudice in the form of governmental decree. While the increased number of published works on eugenics probably owes to the increased interest in the history of science, the diversity of approaches challenges the idea that all the books and articles are part of a cohesive disciplinary movement. Richard Hofstadter's *Social Darwinism in American Thought*, first published in 1944, serves as a useful starting place because it arguably introduced a new historical field—the study of social theories ostensibly based upon Darwinism. Although the explicit discussion of eugenics only comprises a few pages in this volume, Hofstadter remarks that “eugenics has proved to be the most enduring aspect of social Darwinism.”<sup>30</sup> This, however, is not the only reason why eugenics has generated a robust historical literature of its own. There are at least two other reasons; eugenics lies at the interface of the biological sciences and society, shedding light onto the complex interplay between the scientific and the social. Second, it is historically taboo because it is widely considered as the ideological engine out of which Nazism sprung.

As the word eugenics took on a pejorative meaning in the 1960's, the historical study of eugenics movements gained momentum. Notably, Mark Haller published *Eugenics: Hereditarian Attitudes in American Thought* in 1963, followed by Daniel Picken's *Eugenics and the Progressives* (1968), and Kenneth Ludmerer's *Genetics and American Society: A Historical Appraisal*, published in 1972. Daniel Kelves's *In the Name of Eugenics* (1985) discussed both the United States and Britain, and broke new controversial ground by fusing the history of eugenics with the study of post-war medical genetics, thereby demonstrating the continuity between

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<sup>30</sup> Hofstadter (1944), p. 161.

eugenics and contemporary medical practices.<sup>31</sup> The approach taken in these works omits the eugenic movements that took place in all countries except Great Britain and the United States, and focuses on the interactions between science and the state, attempting to discern how scientific ideas reinforce and are reinforced by social movements; how they are appropriated by various social agendas; and how they gain the authority to influence policy formation.

The main departure from this approach was not in type of analysis but in subject matter. Mark Adams, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, held a three-day conference in 1983 entitled “The History of Eugenics: Work in Progress” in which he called for the study of eugenics through comparative historical analysis. Not only Britain and the United States, but also Germany, France, Venezuela, Mexico and at least twenty other countries were homes to mainstream eugenics movements in which scientists, government officials, and the unfortunate individuals marked as “unfit” were involved. Since then, eugenics research has radiated geographically into South America and Central and Eastern Europe, beginning with Adams’s *The Wellborn Science* (1990) and Nancy Stepan’s “*The Hour of Eugenics*” (1991), both focusing on Latin American eugenics, and most recently Marius and Weindling’s *Blood and Homeland* (2007), providing a look at the historically neglected eugenics programs of Southeastern Europe. In Adam’s view, comparative analysis is essential for illuminating the “particular character” of each national context.<sup>32</sup> His work, as well as the historiographical shift he catalyzed, illuminates how the Galtonian notion

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<sup>31</sup> Adams, Mark B., *The Wellborn Science: Eugenics in Germany, France, Brazil and Russia*, Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 4.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, p. 5.

of eugenics has been appropriated by different national cultures and transformed to respond to specific contextual concerns.

In addition to comparative analysis, historians of eugenics have distinguished their work by narrowing the discussion to predetermined subtopics. Historians have studied the eugenics movement through biography (Sir Francis Galton has a multitude of biographers, notably C. P. Blacker who published *Eugenics: Galton and After* in 1952), the analysis of specific eugenic societies (Mazumdar, 1992; Searle, 1976), the appropriation of eugenic language by other groups (Rosen's *Preaching Eugenics*, 2004), and still others have focused on specific topics within the discourse itself, such as degeneration theory (Soloway, 1990)<sup>33</sup> and the use of statistics to support eugenic arguments (Louca, 2008). Continuing Kelves' thread, a number of historians have constructed eugenics as a precursor to the current science of genetics, discerning similarities and differences but usually concluding that they are troublingly similar (Duster, 1990; Galton, 2001; Ekberg, 2007). The analysis of the connection between eugenics and war should also be mentioned here although it will be discussed in more depth below. (Stepan, 1987; Crook, 1994).

Historians of eugenics have also differentiated themselves by assuming different analytic approaches. Eugenics has been understood by historians in diverse ways. It is at once a science, a pseudo-science, a social movement, a paradigm, a form of rhetoric, a problematic,<sup>34</sup> and, most conventionally, a pretense for classists and

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<sup>33</sup> Degeneration theory was part of a larger debate, but was still a central theme of eugenics.

<sup>34</sup> For Hasian (Hasian, Marouf, A., *The Rhetoric of Eugenics in Anglo-American Thought*, The University of Georgia Press, 1996) eugenics is a rhetoric, while for Mazumdar eugenics is a "problematic," which she defines as "a field of concepts which organizes a particular science by making it possible to ask some kinds of questions and suppressing others." (Mazumdar, P. *Eugenics, Human Genetics and Human Failings*, London, New York, 1992, p. 1)



racists to vent their moral prejudices. It is useful to call attention to the type of analytic approach being used; by conceiving of eugenics, for example, as a discourse which dictates what types of questions are relevant for its adherents, the disparate intellectual contexts of the eugenicist on the one hand and the historian on the other can be, if not reconciled, at least acknowledged as mutually compelling. Texts that do not do so tend to spoil analysis with moral pointedness. Edwin Black's *War Against the Weak* (2003) is a good example of this type of literature. He does not approach the subject as a historian of science, but as a journalist with an implicit agenda. The tone of his introduction is decidedly vindictive: the "victims" of the "fraudulent science of eugenics" were "snared up" and "persecuted" by "raceologists and bureaucrats masquerading as medical men."<sup>35</sup> Black implicitly positions his text within the journalistic genre of muckraking: "now that newspaper and magazine articles have placed the crime of eugenics on the front burner, my book explains in depth exactly how this fraudulent science infected our society and then reached across the world and right into Nazi Germany."<sup>36</sup> He tells us that his text is "aggressive,"<sup>37</sup> as if his work would exact revenge on the past. While the eugenicists undoubtedly promulgated theories that are antithetical to modern conceptions of racial and social equality, the moral indignation that animates Black's prose implicates him in the same type of fallacious thinking of which he accuses the eugenicists: the failure to perceive the degree to which a morally charged lens influences conclusions. Black's work is detailed and well-researched, but by understanding the eugenicists as bigots who

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<sup>35</sup> Black (2003), xx.

<sup>36</sup> Black (2003), xxiii-xxiv.

<sup>37</sup> Black (2003), xxv.

“sought to shroud their racist beliefs under the protective canopy of science”<sup>38</sup> he infuses his entire paradigm with a moral lesson, propelling his work away from the epistemological and towards the sensational. In other words, he does not seem interested in understanding the eugenists as they understood themselves.

Like many of the works just mentioned, this thesis maintains a closely defined subject matter and a specific type of analysis. The work done by Stepan and Crook on the nexus between Darwinism and conceptions of war serve as the principal precursors to this project. Nancy Stepan’s article, “‘Nature’s Pruning Hook’: War, Race and Evolution, 1914—18” (1987) is the first scholarly work to focus directly on the war debates amongst social theorists and eugenists. She argues that World War I coaxed a shift in thinking—those who, before the war, justified violence on the basis of the Darwinian struggle for existence reconsidered this analogy from the biological to the social and began to espouse more pacifistic ideologies. Paul Crook responded to her article with “Nature’s Pruning Hook? War and Evolution, 1890—1918: A Response to Nancy Stepan” (1987) and then published a number of articles on the same subject, including “Man the Fighting Animal: Belligerent Images of Humankind in the Anglo-American World, 1914—18” (1989) and “War as Genetic Disaster? The World War I Debate over the Eugenics of Warfare” (1990). In 1994, Crook published what is now the only large work on this topic, called *Darwinism, War and History*, in which he argues (elaborating on his critique of Stepan) that historians have exaggerated the magnitude of conflict theory while neglecting the prominence of pacifistic thought amongst British and American theorists during the period between

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<sup>38</sup> Black (2003), p. 51

1880—1919. Challenging Stepan's thesis, Crook argues that a robust discourse of pacifism not only thrived but also predated WWI. His work offers a broad view of the different opinions held by biologists, social theorists, psychologists, and eugenists on the topic of war. Currently, no book exists that focuses exclusively on the British eugenists and the war debate.

*iii.*

*Eugenics as Philosophy of History*

Fifteen years have passed since the publication of Crook's work, and while new books are continually published on eugenics, dust is settling on the topic of eugenics and war. The lively debates that comprise this topic are of interest to any historian fascinated by the complex interplay between the biological, the social, and the political. This thesis picks up where Stepan and Crook left off, but departs from the historical literature by choosing to conceive of eugenics as a fundamentally mythical idea, which will be treated later on. However, bound up with the eugenic myth, I would like to contend, is also a specific theory or philosophy of history. This claim reorients the historiographical model by situating the eugenists within a different tradition of theorists. One reason for this approach is to guard against the type of vindictive argumentation that comprises Edwin Black's book. Through the attempt to reconstruct the historical paradigm of eugenics, it will be easier to abstain from assuming a moral stance. My goal is not to indict the eugenists, but to understand in what ways their world view was compelling and how they made sense of themselves. I will pursue this goal by focusing on the eugenists' discussion of

warfare. This provides an especially promising locus of inquiry because war is both fundamentally natural and horribly aberrant, capturing the full range of human extremes and begging an eternally relevant question—to what extent is inhumanity a human trait?

Another reason for asserting that eugenics contains a philosophy of history is the versatility and viability of this approach facilitates an emphasis which is not usually placed in historical literature. Namely, eugenic thought is fundamentally macro-historical. It is a way of looking at history that emphasizes the human race as an evolving species. It redefines social groups as gene pools whose characteristics are determined by their evolutionary origins, and concerns itself with legislation not for the betterment of society as it exists in the present, but for the sake of posterity on a grand scale. Eugenics thereby dissolves the concerns of the present into a fixation with both the remote past and the distant future, absorbing grand narratives of race, class, and civilization that help to legitimate its cause. While historians can conceive of the eugenicists in many ways, the eugenicists saw themselves, first and foremost, as the heirs of history, and eugenics was their attempt to champion this legacy by shaping the future.

Specifically, eugenics can be classed within the tradition of speculative philosophy of history, the type of historical reflection that discerns an intelligible pattern in the history of mankind. In the West this type of thought begins with St. Augustine's *City of God* (412–426), and finds its most influential contributors in Herder, Kant, Hegel, and Marx. Implicit in speculative philosophy of history is, usually, an autonomous process operating on a macrocosmic scale. Augustine, for

example, proposed a theological conception of historical change, imagining history as the struggle between two communities, the Heavenly City and the Earthly City. He posited a divine providence in history that the post-enlightenment thinkers just mentioned would transmute into an immanent historical force. For Hegel this force was Reason; for Marx, it was the material conditions of society. Hegel viewed history as the actualization of Spirit; Kant, the inevitable progression towards a cosmopolitan world authority; and Marx, the story of class struggle, culminating in revolution and communism.<sup>39</sup>

The eugenic theory of history is marked by a crucial difference with respect to the theories just mentioned. It denies the autonomy of the historical process, placing the macrocosmic direction of history directly into the hands of microcosmic agents. Eugenics is akin to Marxism in that it prescribes a specific type of political action; however, unlike the proletariat revolution, eugenic progress is not inevitable—degeneration is just as, if not more likely. For eugenists the progress of civilization depends on the “racial expediency” of the social agencies operative in a society, and in modern times, a benevolent group of eugenists is required to both safeguard the genetic stock of the human race and facilitate its progress towards a preconceived ideal. Charged with this task the British eugenists saw themselves as analogues to the keepers of domestic animals, and in the words of Charles Darwin, “hardly anyone is so ignorant as to allow his worst animals to breed.”<sup>40</sup> Eugenists frequently pointed to the significant physical alterations that breeders had produced through experimenting

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<sup>39</sup> For definitions of speculative philosophy of history the Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy and Paul Edwards’ *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* were consulted. (Audi, Robert, *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, Cambridge, 1995, p. 585; Edwards, Paul, *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Volume XI, The Macmillan Co., New York: 1967, p. 250-254)

<sup>40</sup> Quoted by Mazumdar (2007), p. 102.

with pigeons and cattle as demonstrations of the malleability of biological forms. The principles of animal domestication were thereby used to explain change in human history, and they promised that those who attended to the biological quality of the human population, reproducing the mentally and physically best while trimming away excess, would gain a spot in history, or even reign supreme within it.

While Darwinian and Malthusian ideas combined to provide the mechanism for historical change, Auguste Comte's positivism and the theories of Herbert Spencer were also influential in shaping the eugenicist's views on the progression of history. Comte's positivist narrative, known as the "law of three states," postulated a three stage process in the historical development of human intellect. According to Comte, history had first passed from a primitive theological stage to a second transitional metaphysical stage, and had arrived at a third and final positive stage ruled by the authority of empirical science.<sup>41</sup> Allied with a Victorian ethos of progress, this mythic view of history as an ascension from the superstitious to the scientific helped shape the equally optimistic eugenic view of history. The eugenicists not only existed within the positive stage; they represented it, and armed with statistical science they hoped to respond to the allegedly biological exigencies of racial or social progress.

Comte has been charged with hypocrisy for denying teleology in one breath and positing a staged theory of historical development in another.<sup>42</sup> However, despite an implicit teleological framework, Comte's explicit denial of a metaphysical or externally existing teleology is made in the service of human agency—it puts the

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<sup>41</sup> Crook, 1994, p. 37.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

course of history in human hands. This idea of historical agency was basic to the eugenic paradigm, and it was the ingredient that made the exigencies of social progress so dire. Dysgenic effects, supposedly, were everywhere, and therefore reversion to a previous stage through genetic degeneration was an imminent possibility. On the other hand, the nonexistence of a metaphysical teleology imbued the historical actor with a sense of autonomy. The eugenicist saw himself as both responsible for the biological quality of posterity, but also capable of directing history towards a limitlessly perfected biological age. This historical autonomy brought utopianism oddly close—Galton himself could not resist to “give reins to our fancy, and imagine a Utopia” in which marriages were arranged by political authority.

Galton’s entreaty was simple:

If a twentieth part of the cost and pains were spent in measures for the improvement of the human race that is spent on the improvement of the breed of horses and cattle, what a galaxy of genius might we not create!<sup>43</sup>

An ideal society in which every member was a specimen of moral perfection looked to the eugenicist as attainable as the proletariat revolution might have looked to a Marxist. The eugenic utopia will be discussed in detail in chapter 3.

The notion of an ideal society is usually where eugenics becomes problematic. Because eugenics was not based upon a historical teleology, the composition of the eugenic ideal would consist of that which the eugenicists felt was “best.” The goal of eugenics sometimes appeared as a bitter tasting combination of cosmopolitanism and authoritarianism. But ultimately, it was confused, lacked consensus, and tended to congeal unclarified around dangerously evaluative terms like “fittest,” “best,” and

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<sup>43</sup> Mazumdar (2007), p. 89.

“morally superior.” Many eugenisists were well aware that to Darwin the term “fit” meant nothing more than adaptability to environmental conditions, but they were convinced (as was Darwin) that the biological variation observed within animal species also exists within human populations and that, therefore, “civic worth”—Galton’s term with no definite meaning—was unequally distributed. The corollary was this: if civilizations rise and fall based on the genetic fitness of their populations, then there must be a way to rationally produce the perfect civilization by heeding the laws of biological evolution. Especially in America this doctrine of perfectibility served as the basis for discriminatory legislation. Many historians have pointed out that the enthusiasts behind eugenic movements universally sought to replicate their own kind at the expense of other races, social classes, and immigrants. While in America this led to a great number of forced sterilizations,<sup>44</sup> in Britain, still in 1917, the President of the Eugenics Education Society lamented that “no adequate steps are being taken to prevent... lunatics, imbeciles, drunkards and criminals from parenthood, let alone the host of the other unfit.”<sup>45</sup> That there was no clear boundary between social prejudices and biological science is not surprising; a more interesting issue however is discerning the status of war within the eugenic matrix of biological, social, political, ethical, and historical ideas.

Within the eugenic theory of history, the role of war is the most controversial and significant unresolved issue. Is war, as Arthur Keith contended, “Nature’s pruning hook,” trimming away excess, or is it, conversely, the destroyer of otherwise

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<sup>44</sup> CSUS, Center for Science, History, Policy, and Ethics: Eugenics in California. URL: <http://www.csus.edu/cshpe/eugenics/>

<sup>45</sup> Darwin, Major, Leonard, “The Disabled Sailor and Soldier and the Future of Our Race,” *Eugenics Review*, 1917, p. 4.



healthy nations? Is it an engine of progress or of degradation?—The manifestation of human nature or its perversion? Undoubtedly war held a prominent position in human history, but many eugenists and social theorists hoped that it would soon become an anachronism. On the other hand, was belligerence an essential piece of human virtue? If so, how could a society produce citizens with martial virtue and not send them to slaughter? These questions were central to the war debates that took place amongst British eugenists in the early twentieth century. However, I hope, especially in Chapter 3, to draw out the implicit meaning of war for the eugenist. Namely as a type of mythical antithesis to theirs plans.

## II

## Origins, Myths, and Myths of Origins

### *A History of Eugenics*

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The people were degenerating. Fitness was diminishing. Idiots, imbeciles, and lunatics were begetting hordes of offspring, and the result would be nothing less than “*race suicide*.”<sup>46</sup> Or so went a dominant catechism of degeneration theory as it existed during late Victorian and early Edwardian Britain. Newspapers, politicians, and public intellectuals were in general consensus that the population itself was suffering from wholesale biological deterioration. While public concern over “degeneration” pervaded the British middle class, many felt that there was a solution to this rapidly worsening (albeit imaginary) national catastrophe: the practice of eugenics, a scheme for “race betterment” that could not only reverse biological degeneration, but also, the eugenicists felt, bring the biological quality of the race to new heights. Out of this climate of both cataclysmic fears and boundless optimism, the London based Eugenics Education Society was founded. Established in 1907, this society hoped to study the interactions between evolutionary laws and social customs in order to influence the course of human evolution, or, in the eugenicists’ words, “promote the welfare of the race.”

As early as the first decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century there was public concern over the issue of degeneration—essentially a blanket term that expressed a vague anxiety over the physiological, moral, mental, or economic state of the lower classes in early

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<sup>46</sup> Walters, George, “Eugenic Problems and the War,” London: H. C. Bell, 1916, p. 5. Also, see Soloway, Richard, A., *Demography and Degeneration*, University of North Carolina Press, 1990, p. 5.

modern Europe.<sup>47</sup> In late nineteenth-century Britain, unease over a declining birthrate combined with modern ideas of heredity to not only invigorate degeneration theory as a social and political problem, but also transform it into an ostensibly biological or scientific discourse. In other words, with the increasing popularity of Darwinism, degeneration theory shifted its emphasis from the moral to the biological.<sup>48</sup>

This chapter consists of four sections. The first two sections are significantly shorter than the last two and are less crucial for the larger argument of this thesis; the first describes degeneration theory and poses it as an essential factor in the sudden growth and popularity of eugenics, and the second section narrates the origins of the Eugenics Education Society. The third section puts forth three competing origin stories that seek to explain how the British eugenics movement came into being. This section culminates by designating Darwinism as not only the crucial originary factor, but also an idea which represented to the eugenicists a mythical power. The fourth and final section develops the notion of a eugenic myth through analyzing the relationship between eugenics and the militarism-pacifism debate that existed at the time.

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<sup>47</sup> These various types of degeneracy can be associated with specific issues that preoccupied various segments of the public. Physiological degeneracy was caused by masturbation, occupational exposure, or alcoholism; the moral was associated with criminality and vulgarity in general; the mental referred to feeble-mindedness or insanity; and economic degeneracy can be equated with pauperism, or an inability to rise from poverty. These concerns were vaguely associated with heredity, but not until the works of Darwin and Benedict Augustin Morel, a Viennese psychiatrist who published a treatise on degeneration in 1857, did degeneration become embedded in a more ostensibly scientific discourse. (Carlson, Elof, Axel, *The Unfit: A History of a Bad Idea*, New York, 2001, p. 23, 40).

<sup>48</sup> Mazumdar, Pauline, *Eugenics, Human Genetics and Human Failings: The Eugenics Society, its Sources and Critics in Britain*, London, New York, 1992, p. 13.

i.

*Degenerating “Plasms” and Proliferating Degenerates*<sup>49</sup>

Degeneration theory, as it existed in late nineteenth-century Britain, was heavily shaped by population statistics. A number of quantitative studies seemed to indicate a loss of vitality within an expanding imperial nation whose golden age had recently come to a close. The annual crude birthrate of about 35 or 36 births per 1,000 individuals which persisted throughout most of the nineteenth century began to fall in the 1880's, and by the end of Queen Victoria's reign in 1901, the birthrate had declined almost 21 percent to a new low of 28.5 births per 1,000 individuals.<sup>50</sup> Opinions varied, but it was a routine assessment that the British civilization was in peril. The decrease in births seemed to indicate a concomitant lack of virility in the population. In 1903, the *Daily Mail* averred that the diminishing birthrate had “set in with ominous steadiness.” In the paper's assessment it was “beginning to menace the predominance of the race.”<sup>51</sup> Neo-Malthusians found it ironic that what had been their chief goal for decades—the minimization of population growth—was now being decried as a sign of decay.<sup>52</sup> Nonetheless, the alarmists were more vociferous than the

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<sup>49</sup> The word “plasm” refers to Auguste Weismann's germ plasm theory of genetic inheritance that will be discussed later on in this chapter.

<sup>50</sup> Lindsay, J. A., “The Eugenic and Social Influence of War,” *Eugenics Review*, vol. X, (1918), p. 137. For more statistics and discussion, see Soloway, 1990, p. 4.

<sup>51</sup> Quoted in Soloway, 1990, p. 5.

<sup>52</sup> Thomas Robert Malthus, a clergyman and son of a British intellectual, published *An Essay on the Principle of Population* in 1803, demonstrating the difference in the ratios of the increase of population and food. He argued that while agricultural innovation allows food output to increase on an arithmetic scale (i.e. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5...), human populations increase on an exponential scale (1, 2, 4, 8, 16...) thereby making the existence of scarcity, poverty, and misery a natural or largely incurable phenomenon. Because there must always be “checks” to a population, Malthus concludes that widespread “moral restraint” is indispensable if famine and disease are to be avoided. Malthus also claims that the lower classes tend to reproduce themselves more rapidly than the upper classes and he argues that the English Poor Laws are generally self-defeating, only serving to “spread the evil over a much larger surface.” (Malthus, Thomas, Robert, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, Cambridge University Press,

skeptics, and public opinion was gripped by a pervasive sense of pessimism. The falling birthrate, in the words of the medical journal the *Lancet*, was “a national calamity seriously threatening the future welfare of our race.”<sup>53</sup>

The falling birthrate was only one of a number of social phenomena that was charged with biological significance and then translated into a process with dire historical consequences. The degeneration debate of the late nineteenth century was brought to a new level of urgency in 1899 by the British military’s unfavorable performance in the Boer War—it seemed to be “an indication of decadence.”<sup>54</sup> While the British finally overwhelmed the Boers in 1902, they had “conquered by the weight of superior numbers alone,”<sup>55</sup> and spent £250 million and three years in bitter conflict with a military force which was widely held as racially inferior.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, the rejection rates for recruits to the British military—a staggering 40 percent in industrial towns<sup>57</sup>—seemed to evince a veritable physical decline, especially since rejects were being suggestively designated as “unfit.” In 1903, the Army Medical Services were stirred to support a national inquiry “to determine the extent of deterioration and offer corrective recommendations.”<sup>58</sup> The early eugenicist Arnold White was not alone in questioning whether Great Britain still possessed the “racial efficiency” to support her grand imperial pretensions<sup>59</sup> and even the optimistic

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1992, p. 19, *passim*, p. 89.) For Neo-Malthusians on the alarm over the declining birthrate see Soloway, Chap. 5.

<sup>53</sup> Quoted in Soloway, p. 5.

<sup>54</sup> Laski, Harold, “The Scope of Eugenics,” *Westminster Review*, vol. 174, (1910), p. 193.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> Searle, G. R., *Eugenics and Politics in Britain, 1900-1914*, Leyden, 1976, p. 22; also Soloway, 1990, p. 2.

<sup>57</sup> Soloway, p. 41.

<sup>58</sup> Soloway, p. 42.

<sup>59</sup> See Soloway page 41.

eugenist Major Leonard Darwin affirms an “anxiety about our country’s future fame.”<sup>60</sup> The empire, it seemed, was not what it had once been.

Not only was there evidence of Britain’s decline in the country’s deplorable rates of recruitment, but there were reasons to believe that degeneration would worsen. Social welfare programs and poor houses had been controversial since their inception, but they were, in the 1880’s and 90’s, now incurring the scorn of social Darwinists who viewed pity as a sign of social infirmity or effeteness. Darwin himself remarked in *The Descent of Man* that “we civilised men... build asylums for the imbecile, the maimed, and the sick [and] we institute poor-laws” thereby ensuring “that the weak members of civilised societies propagate their kind... This,” he surmised, “must be highly injurious to the race of man.”<sup>61</sup> The “asylums” and “poor-laws” of “civilised societies” that Darwin mentions led to what Harold Laski, the political theorist and eugenist, called the “fostering” of the “weaker part of mankind”—“a positive danger to the community... the gravity of which it is difficult to exaggerate.”<sup>62</sup> Eugenists unanimously agreed that “civilization,” in a vague sense, was perhaps the crucial underlying cause of degeneration. “One of the effects of civilization,” writes Francis Galton, “is to diminish the rigour of the application of the law of natural selection. It preserves weakly lives, that would have perished in barbarous lands.”<sup>63</sup> While Galton writes in terms of the “strong” and the “weak,” or the fit and the unfit, these terms generally functioned as euphemisms for the rich and the poor.

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<sup>60</sup> Darwin, Leonard, Major, “Eugenics During and After the War,” *Eugenics Review*, vol. VII, (1915), p. 99.

<sup>61</sup> Darwin, *Descent of Man*, p. 159.

<sup>62</sup> Laski, 1910, p. 192.

<sup>63</sup> Galton, 1865; excerpted in Mazumdar, 2003, p. 98.

Both the sense of certainty and the urgency that surrounded degeneration theory arose out of the greater sophistication of the methods of social investigators, whose graphic descriptions of urban squalor accompanied by arguments posed in quantitative terms seemed to evince a graver situation than had existed ever before.<sup>64</sup> Social surveys, such as those of Charles Booth and Joseph Rowntree,<sup>65</sup> led the British middle class to wonder whether the benefits of urbanization and industrialization might be outweighed by the costs of abandoning the countryside for lives less “in tune” with the seasons.<sup>66</sup> Anxiety over modernization was not a new phenomenon, but in the context of degeneration theory it provided a persuasive rationalization for marking the lower classes as racially inferior—while middle-class Britons could commute in and out of the urban environment, the poor were confined to it, and seemed therefore to be biologically tainted by the filth and foulness of slum life.

Arguably, the central issue of degeneration theory was a phenomenon called the “differential birthrate.” This meant, simply, that the poor were reproducing themselves much more rapidly than the wealthy.<sup>67</sup> This demographic observation was explained not only with the advent of modern poor-laws and asylums, but also by means of a supposed discrepancy in economic prudence exercised by different classes. Major Leonard Darwin states categorically, “the poorest strata of society are

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<sup>64</sup> Searle, p. 21.

<sup>65</sup> Especially Rowntree’s work, first published in 1899, *The Temperance Problem and Social Reform*, was widely cited by eugenicists. Cf. Carr-Saunders, 1913, p. 224.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, p. 20.

<sup>67</sup> Harold Laski compiles a great deal of statistical evidence which is suggestive of a “differential birthrate.” For example, he notes that “Sidney Webb has calculated that the average number of offspring among English intellectuals is 1.5,” and compares this datum to “the pathological stocks. The birth-rate among the London mentally defective per family is 7; in Manchester it is 6.3...” (Laski, 1910, pp. 201-2).

prolific mainly because they are deficient in natural forethought.”<sup>68</sup> While Malthus had shown the differential birthrate to be a perennial feature of British demographics, in the context of degeneration theory this discrepancy in relative birthrates took on newfound significance. That is to say, the general acceptance of Darwinism imbued it with evolutionary implications. It would be useful to describe how this shift took place.

In the decades following the publication of Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* in 1859 large portions of the public were beginning to believe that species, races, or even populations were not comprised of unalterable lineages but instead could change enormously depending on whose genes were passed on to the next generation.<sup>69</sup> As John Dewey observed in 1909, *The Origin of Species* had “[laid] hands upon the sacred ark of absolute permanency.”<sup>70</sup> His implication was that “man” had ceased to be a static concept—Darwinism meant that the material makeup of human beings changes over time. In quantitative terms, Karl Pearson, Galton’s protégé and an influential eugenicist and statistician, calculated that one quarter of a generation produces half of the following generation—a seemingly sturdy avowal that the rights to posterity were at stake.<sup>71</sup> Harold Laski argued that in light of Pearson’s calculations, “it is obvious that the State which is careless in the selection of its

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<sup>68</sup> Darwin, Major, 1915, p. 93.

<sup>69</sup> While theories of evolution existed prior to Darwin, most naturalists in the 18<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century believed that species were fixed in the system of taxonomic classification invented by the Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus. When, in 1800, Jean Baptiste de Lamarck proposed a theory of evolution in which acquired characteristics are inherited, the idea that species can evolve or transmute into new species was met with skepticism and disdain. Both Robert Chambers and Herbert Spencer would put forth theories of evolution (a term coined by Spencer in the 1850’s) before Darwin finally published his theory of the origin of species by natural selection in 1859. See Carlson, 2001, pp. 111, 119, 283.

<sup>70</sup> Quoted in Crook, p. 13.

<sup>71</sup> Laski, 1910, p. 200.



parents begins to undermine its foundations.”<sup>72</sup> Malthus’ notion of a “struggle for existence” thereby became more salient as the middle class feared that they were being reproductively outmatched by the lower, or in their terms, pauper classes.<sup>73</sup> The logical outcome of this situation—that is, the combination of a differential birthrate and a general decline in fertility—was high tragedy for a middle class fixated on progress. The unchecked fertility of the lower classes would allegedly alter the genetic composition of the British nation so that degenerates and “undesirable” types would come to predominate. Presumably this would reverse the evolutionary progress that had raised civilized man from his lowly origins and plunge the British mainland into a biological perdition from which it would never return.

It is worth reiterating that degeneration theory was not always bound up with the fear of evolutionary change within a human population. The words used to describe this process—decay, degeneration, deterioration, decadence—were used sloppily and despite attempts to distinguish their various nuanced meanings, they were employed in ways that tended to confuse biological and cultural concerns. It is not difficult to maintain that degeneration theory sprung from social attitudes, and masked prejudice in scientific terminology: “the lower classes,” Galton regrets, “are, in truth, ‘the residuum.’”<sup>74</sup> Thus, it seems almost self-evident that degeneration theory had far more to do with social psychology than biology. Indeed, nearly all historians

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> it was Malthus who coined this phrase, he was not concerned with how the struggle for existence affected the quality of a population—he merely endeavored to show that it made moral restraint indispensable. Historian Gertrude Himmelfarb discusses the relationship between Darwin and Malthus, p. 159.

<sup>74</sup> Galton, *English Men of Science*, New York: Appleton and Co., 1895, p. 17.

see the degeneration debate as a vehicle or outlet for prejudice that was buoyed and protected by the authority of science rather than a legitimate social concern.<sup>75</sup>

Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that the participators in the degeneration discourse not only sought to support their feelings with empirical data, but were sincerely fearful. They felt that the evidence was incontrovertible that the declining and differential birthrate would combine to alter human evolution and bring about a biological cataclysm that would destroy the eminence of the British nation and empire. It was with this ominous possibility in mind that British intellectuals made their cries of “race suicide,” a term with two important connotations.

*Subsection: To “Look on Men as Organisms:”<sup>76</sup>*

*the Implications of “Race Suicide”*

The first connotation of race suicide is the elevation of biology to the status of a worldview or social paradigm. The notion of a suicide or death on the scale of a population evoked the idea of extinction, implying that biological terminology can be used to explain human phenomena. The fall of Rome was once an historical event, explainable with politics or, in the case of Saint Augustine, with theology, but amid the increasingly scientific rhetoric of degeneration theory, it was reconceived in biological terms as the extinction of the Roman race; and Britain, as some of the more apocalyptic commentators surmised, might suffer the same fate. Explaining the rise and fall of nations thereby became the vocation of the biologist: “no race of men, no nation,” proclaims David Starr Jordan in the pages of the *Eugenics Review*, “ever

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<sup>75</sup> Soloway makes this point, p. 41.

<sup>76</sup> Jordan, “War and Manhood,” *Eugenics Review*, vol. II, (1910), p. 99.

declined, ever decayed, every went out for any reason except the killing out of the strong and the continuous breeding from inferior stock. ‘The blood of a nation determines its history.’”<sup>77</sup> Likewise, Laski maintains in a less dramatic formulation, “The decline of every great nation is probably to be traced to the fostering of the unfit at the expense of the fit, and their consequent over-propagation.”<sup>78</sup>

This way of thinking went beyond mere analogy between the biological and the social; it represented an increasingly popular philosophical stance. H. G. Wells, a literary authority among British eugenicists, expressed this philosophy in the form of an injunction: “hold fast to the assertion of the fundamental nature of life as a tissue and succession of births.”<sup>79</sup> This exhortation, which served as the conceptual basis for what Wells called “New Republicanism,” entailed a rejection of “all abstract, refined, and intellectualized ideas as starting propositions, such ideas as Right, Liberty, Happiness, Duty or Beauty.”<sup>80</sup> It was less a statement of philosophical relativism than the result of Wells’ search for “some general principle”<sup>81</sup> upon which there could be universal agreement; in his view, the notion that humans are governed by their biological composition could provide the basis for this consensus. In other words, he was expressing a desire to rest his beliefs upon a secure ground of knowledge in the face of the disconcerting realization that concepts such as “right” and “liberty” are culturally relativistic. Such ideals are perhaps important—even crucial—but they are, nevertheless, human abstractions and therefore essentially ephemeral.

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<sup>77</sup> Jordan, 1913, p. 198.

<sup>78</sup> Laski, 1910, p. 200.

<sup>79</sup> Wells, *Mankind in the Making*, p. 8, 1903.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> Wells, p. 4.

While New Republicanism suggests that Wells recognized the provinciality of the Western discourse of truth, it more importantly demonstrates that biology was championed as a particular form of knowledge that eluded the problems associated with those “abstract, refined, and intellectualized ideas” mentioned above. Biology appeared to be culturally neutral. Consequently, Wells felt justified in presenting it as a sort of universally applicable lens through which social phenomena would, allegedly, appear with unparalleled clarity. However, despite these grand pretensions, implicit in Well’s Republicanism was a hierarchy of quality based upon social class. Likewise, the notion of “race suicide,” which grew out of this biological lens, was also coated in a thick residue of class prejudice. The term expressed a fear of extinction, but the future of humanity, of course, was not at stake not of humanity—it implied, then, that a race composed entirely of “inferior stocks” would be concomitant to a massive, national death.

The second connotation of “race suicide” is that degeneration would constitute a conscious act of self-destruction—not just a death, but a *self-inflicted* fatality. Above all, employing this term was a dramatic way of emphasizing that degeneration, even as a heritable racial disease or a harbinger of social extinction, was preventable. Since British intellectuals were certain that inheritance was guided by unchanging natural laws, the manipulation of these laws on the national level could avert genetic disaster; this idea is contained within the term “race suicide”—the term implies that the biological quality of the populace is under direct social control. Moreover, it meant that the means to reverse degeneration were available, if only society as a whole would rally around the cause. This is the thought process that transformed

eugenics from the relatively obscure thought experiment of Francis Galton into an organized movement. It was put forth as both “an attempt to estimate the extent of the social problem in its biological aspect, and an indication of the scientific means for its solution.”<sup>82</sup>

Eugenics, however, was not merely posed as a solution to the problem—it contained the rather mythical possibility to bring humanity to biological perfection. Indeed, the eugenicists maintained that the first society to seize the godlike powers promised by eugenics would “inherit the earth.”<sup>83</sup> Insofar as racial deterioration was a specter that haunted the imagination of the British middle class, eugenics was the savior that could rescue the population from mortal danger. It was therefore not a coincidence that the popularization of eugenics in Britain coincided with the Boer War, the climax of the degeneration scare. And yet, eugenics represented more than a solution—it promised historical redemption. As an early member of the eugenics movement, Dr. Caleb Williams Saleeby, proclaimed in his 1909 work *Parenthood and Race Culture*, “the present writer believes that eugenics is going to save the world.”<sup>84</sup>

*ii.*

*The Eugenics Education Society*

This was the climate in which the Eugenics Education Society was founded in 1907 by an obscure but remarkably industrious individual. Sybil Gotto was only twenty-one when she was inspired by one of Francis Galton’s books to approach the

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> This was a statement made with numerous variations, but first uttered by Galton in the *Eugenics Review*. (Galton, 1910, p. 150; quoted in Soloway, p. 62, and Searle, pp. 34-36).

<sup>84</sup> Saleeby, Caleb, Williams, M.D., F.R.S., *Parenthood and Race Culture: an Outline of Eugenics*, New York: Moffat, Yard and Co., 1915, p. 211.

Secretary of the Sociological Society, James W. Slaughter, with the idea of forming a society that would promote eugenics. He introduced her to Montague Crackanthrope, a lawyer and friend of Galton's, who, in turn, introduced Gotto to Galton himself. In 1907, and with Galton's consent, Gotto endeavored to form a society dedicated to Galton's ideas with the explicit purpose of spreading and popularizing eugenics.<sup>85</sup> Mrs. Gotto approached the Moral Education League with her ideas and suggested that the League should incorporate eugenics into their mission. The Moral Education League, described by historian G. R. Searle as a "somewhat nebulous organization," declined the offer, but many of its members, mostly women at first, agreed to join the Eugenics Education Society [abbreviated EES] as a separate, newly formed entity.<sup>86</sup> Soon the Eugenics Education Society was composed of 341 members—a modest beginning to the British eugenics movement.<sup>87</sup>

The first general meeting of the Eugenics Education Society was held in a London University building called Denison hall on February 14<sup>th</sup> of 1908. It was attended by members of the Committee of the Moral Education League, "a number of people interested in Eugenics," and a few prominent British biologists, including Sir Francis Galton and Major Leonard Darwin, the fourth son of Charles Darwin.<sup>88</sup> Dr. Saleeby was the first to speak up: "the Inebriates Act of 1898," he proclaimed, drawing censorious attention to the imprudent legislation of the London County Council, "set adrift in London... some hundreds of chronic inebriate women... with

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<sup>85</sup> Pauline Mazumdar is the only historian to give this detailed account of the origins of the EES, while others tend to credit Francis Galton with its formation (Mazumdar, 1992, p. 28)

<sup>86</sup> Searle, 1976, p. 10.

<sup>87</sup> Mazumdar, 1992, p. 8.

<sup>88</sup> Anon. "The Eugenics Education Society: its Origins and Work," *The Eugenics Review*, vol. I, (1909), p. 51.

an inevitably detrimental result to the race.”<sup>89</sup> The first official action of the Eugenics Education Society was then unanimously agreed upon—to enter a formal protest against the London County Council for having unleashed countless female debauchees into society. There was no telling how many little drunkards would spring from their libidinous conduct.

By taking up the popular issue of inebriate women, the society was able to garner a great deal of favorable publicity, and by March 1909, when the EES held its second general meeting, the society was firmly established. In 1910, the society began publication of the *Eugenics Review*, a quarterly journal in which eugenicists would share their ideas on relevant topics as well as review recently published books. While the membership of the EES never grew very large, it was unusually prestigious when compared to some of the other societies within Britain’s middle-class activist network. While many British intellectuals, especially medical men, were either hostile to eugenic ideas or did not take them seriously, this element of prestige helped to set the eugenics movement on a sturdy foundation. The Australian historian Lyndsay Farrall noted that 80 percent of the early membership of the society was eminent enough to be included in the *Dictionary of National Biography*.<sup>90</sup> Cambridge and Oxford professors joined the movement; Sir James Barr, the president of the British Medical Association in 1913, was one of the society’s vice-presidents; the eminent psychologists Cyril Burt and William McDougall were convinced eugenicists; as were well-known literary figures such as Lowes Dickinson, T. C. Horsfall, and

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid, p. 52.

<sup>90</sup> Mazumdar, 1992, p. 8.

Havelock Ellis.<sup>91</sup> The economist John Maynard Keynes was a life long eugenicist, and published a number of articles in the *Eugenics Review*.<sup>92</sup> Members of the Darwin family frequently attended meetings and in 1911, Major Leonard Darwin consented to become the society's president. By 1914, membership had risen to 634, with affiliated branches in Belfast, Birmingham, Haslemere, Liverpool, Cambridge, and Oxford.<sup>93</sup>

Although historian of science Pauline Mazumdar argues that eugenics belongs within what she calls the tradition of middle-class meliorism, the eugenicists themselves rejected this association, and the eugenic paradigm is in some respects antithetical to the ideas of meliorism.<sup>94</sup> Undoubtedly, many of the concerns of the EES overlapped with the agendas of other social organizations: In very general terms, managing or improving the living conditions of the pauper class—an actual administrative category that generally included “the feebleminded” and “drunkards”<sup>95</sup>—was similarly the self-allotted responsibility of the Moral Education League, the Charity Organisation Society, the National Association for the Care and Protection of the Feeble Minded, and the Society for the Study of Inebriety. Mazumdar maintains that these societies “must be taken as a complex whole, a tissue of strands of thought and feeling of the highly educated professional middle class of the period.”<sup>96</sup> Undoubtedly the groups shared interests and had many members in common—to transfer from one society into the EES, it seems, one needed only to

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<sup>91</sup> Searle, 1976, p. 12.

<sup>92</sup> Soloway, 1990, p. 35 and passim. See Keynes' article in the *Eugenics Review*, “Some Economic Consequences of the Declining Population,” vol. 29(1), p. 13-17.

<sup>93</sup> Searle, 1976, p. 11 and Soloway, 1990, p. 36.

<sup>94</sup> Mazumdar, 1992, p. 2.

<sup>95</sup> In the first decade of the twentieth century the Poor Law Commission based in London also used terms such as “the idle and worthless” to categorize specific demographic groups within the pauper class. Bosanquet, Helen, *The Poor Law of 1909*, p. 7-8 and passim.

<sup>96</sup> Mazumdar, 1992, p. 22.



finish his or her sentences with the phrase “with a detrimental result to the race.” However, the ideas and rhetoric of the eugenists, if not their explicit actions, serve unquestionably to differentiate them. The historian might be capable of construing the EES as a thread woven within the tradition of middle-class meliorism, but the intellectual historian by contrast must be concerned with the ideas that set this group apart. The eugenists, too, were adamant about differentiating themselves from “non-eugenists.” Like most groups that insist on distinguishing themselves, the eugenists were fond of claiming ancient foundations and constructing themselves as inheritors of a historical tradition. In the case of eugenics, there are a number of competing stories of origin.

*iii.*

*Origin Narratives and Technological Transcendence*

Most historians trace the origins of eugenics to Sir Francis Galton and the publication of his 1869 work *Hereditary Genius*, but Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* (1859) is a more justifiable starting point. As already mentioned, Pauline Mazumdar, denying a purely intellectual origin, suggests that eugenics or at least the widespread eugenics movement continues an older tradition of middle-class meliorism. Not surprisingly, the origins can be pushed backwards chronologically, to the work of the French naturalist Lamarck, or Protestantism, or further, as most eugenists do, to Plato’s *Republic* or even the Bible. The three most compelling narratives—Mazumdar’s meliorist narrative, the Darwinian, and then the eugenist’s, which can be termed the antiquarian—do not necessarily conflict with each other but, as different methods of historicizing, they make varying emphases. Exploring these narratives

will both provide a useful background to eugenics and also help return to the topic of this thesis—that is, the implicit myth underlying the eugenics movement. While none of these stories can be proven invalid, for the purposes of this analysis, the Darwinian is the most revealing.

a) *The Meliorist*

While eugenics is inseparable from the temperament and values of the British middle class, its scope and aims were too multivalent to be easily accommodated within Mazumdar's meliorist narrative. In Mazumdar's defense, the work of Darwin, the eugenicist's highest scientific authority, was deeply influenced by British class relations. In the introduction to Darwin's *Descent of Man* James Moore and Adrian Desmond confirm that "middle-class mores were central to [Darwin's] theorizing."<sup>97</sup> Nevertheless, eugenics transcends the tradition of meliorism insofar as it was a concept that also appealed to those on the opposite side of the political spectrum. Historian Paul Crook senses "a taxpayer revolt against the burdens of pauperism, crime, and insanity" as a key factor in the popularity of eugenics.<sup>98</sup> It was, then, not only the humanitarian or meliorist reformers, but also their opposition which found eugenics attractive, and sought to use eugenic principles to justify lowering taxes and diminishing the amount of money allotted to poverty relief.

From the eugenic perspective, the eugenicist and the non-eugenic social reformer were separated by different understandings of the importance of "environment." The eugenicist, in theory, is entirely indifferent to the quality of the

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<sup>97</sup> Darwin, Charles, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, New York: Penguin, 2003, p. lvi.

<sup>98</sup> Crook, 1994, p. 85.

environment for its own sake. In fact, the degree to which the environment would affect the quality of offspring was a fundamental issue of debate for eugenicists, a ceaseless topic of polemics over the relative value of “nature” and “nurture” which occupied “most of the time at eugenic meetings.”<sup>99</sup> Nonetheless, eugenicists followed the “common sense” principle that “like begets like,” leading the vast majority to believe that any reforms directed towards the improvement of the environment alone were largely extraneous to eugenics—only of interest to the extent that they determined who is most likely to pass on their genes. Environmental reform functioned only as an intermediary, a means for maximizing the number of offspring from “healthy stocks,” and minimizing the number from “diseased ones.”<sup>100</sup> Put more simply, they emphasized, with varying degrees of intensity, the influence of nature over the effects of nurture.

While conceptually this distinction is crucial, its subtlety caused the eugenicists to fear that their ranks were in risk of being infiltrated by those who were not “sincerely eugenic minded.”<sup>101</sup> Some who joined the EES were merely confused about the meaning of eugenics; others deliberately posed as eugenicists in order to promote some other related cause such as temperance, control of venereal disease, or

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<sup>99</sup> Saleeby, 1914, p. 19. The more scientifically inclined eugenicists sought to suppress the “nature vs. nurture” debate with quantitative analysis. A. M. Carr-Saunders asserts that “correlations between parent and offspring for a number of features have been calculated, and the mean is found to be somewhere about 5. Correlations between individuals and various aspects of their environment have also been worked out... and the mean value is found to be about .03. It is then said that the mean ‘nature value’ is at least five to ten times as great as the mean ‘nurture value,’ and upon this is founded the generalisation that ‘nature’ is of far greater importance than ‘nurture.’” However, he qualifies the definitiveness of these figures stating that “it is quite beyond our power at present to sum up the full effect of environment upon the individual and compare it with the full effect of heredity.” (Carr-Saunders, “A Criticism of Eugenics,” *Eugenics Review*, vol. V, p. 219). His citation for these figures is as follows: T. H. Morgan, “Influence of Heredity and Environment in Determining the Coat Colours in Mice,” *Annals of the New York Academy of Science*, vol. XXI., (1911), p. 87, p. 117.

<sup>100</sup> Saleeby, 1914, p. 40.

<sup>101</sup> Searle, 1976, p. 14.

the establishment of milk depots.<sup>102</sup> As Major Darwin asserts in his Presidential Address from June 1913, “Eugenics is always in some danger of being used as a dumping-ground for cranks.”<sup>103</sup> In Major Darwin’s words, the social reformer sometimes sought the eugenicist’s support “in connection with some minor eugenical advantages resulting from his proposals... when once the eugenic blessing has been received, all thoughts of hereditary influences are likely to disappear from his mind.”<sup>104</sup> Eugenicists were not hostile to social reformers, but they imagined themselves to carry a certain prestige, a marker of difference that justified a distinction between the “eugenicists” and “everyone else.” Dr. Saleeby attests to this desire to differentiate: “the difference between the people called eugenicists and all other people whatsoever lies in the fact that they recognise the factor of nature, or heredity... in the making of human beings.”<sup>105</sup>

Moreover, to group the eugenicists with the social reformers whose task was the management of pauperism neglects some of the key nuances of the eugenic cause. The social reformer on the one hand and the eugenicist on the other concerned themselves with fundamentally different notions of deviancy. The typical activist concentrated her efforts on the “pauper,” who, for various reasons—idleness, intemperance, disease, or “thriftlessness.”<sup>106</sup>—was incapable of self-sufficiency, while the eugenicist was concerned with a different category: the “unfit.” The terms overlap, but conceptually this gives the eugenicist jurisdiction over a far greater

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<sup>102</sup> Many individuals believed that eugenics (probably owing to its etymology, meaning in Greek, “well born”) related to any cause that might increase the health or happiness of babies (Ibid, p. 14).

<sup>103</sup> *EES Annual Report*, 1912-13, pp. 5-6. Quoted in Searle, 1976, p. 14.

<sup>104</sup> *EES Annual Report*, 1912-13, p. 6. Quoted in Searle, 1976, p. 15.

<sup>105</sup> Saleeby, 1914, p. 25.

<sup>106</sup> Bosanquet, p. 24. Tk.

proportion of the national population. In the eyes of eugenists, for example, the hereditary nobility were in danger of degeneration as a result of inbreeding and perennial decadence. Some eugenists proposed that the House of Lords be reconstituted in accordance with eugenic principles.<sup>107</sup> Thus the eugenists moved past the preexisting class thinking that simply equated desirable or undesirable characteristics with different sectors of society. Instead, Galton believed that all individuals could be appraised on a genetic basis of “civic worth.”<sup>108</sup> The eugenists thereby fashioned a new conceptual arena of quality that, while largely corresponding to the class hierarchy, was *allegedly* built upon different criteria of merit than merely location within the social hierarchy.<sup>109</sup>

Yet another difference between the eugenist and other social activists lies in their different relationships to the notion of redemption; for the social reformer it was a personal potential, while for the eugenist it was only historical. In other words, non-eugenists could conceive of pauperism as a reversible condition—there was a class of “ins-and-outs” who were “constantly on and off the relief lists.”<sup>110</sup> The Poor Law administrators called them “seasonal paupers,” a term which suggests that in non-eugenic eyes, the stigma of pauperism could be, at least momentarily, removed.

Eugenists, on the other hand, conceived of pauperism or unfitness genetically, which

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<sup>107</sup> Kevles, 1985, p. 73.

<sup>108</sup> See Soloway, 1990, p. 65.

<sup>109</sup> The degree to which “civic worth” corresponded to social class was a point of contention. Many eugenists, such as the influential couple Mr. and Mrs. Whetham, maintained that the “good and noble qualities... are present in... a far higher proportion among the upper classes” (Whetham, W. C. D., and Whetham, C., “The Extinction of the Upper Classes,” *Nineteenth Century*, vol. 66, (1909), p. 98), while others such as A. M. Carr-Saunders argued that “the assumption that the lower lasses are inferior to the upper classes is unproven” (Carr-Saunders, 1913, p. 227).

<sup>110</sup> Bosanquet, p. 18. TK.

precludes the possibility of any therapeutic redemption. Leonard Darwin gives strong testimony to the distinction between eugenisists and mere “philanthropists:”

The efforts of philanthropists are greatly admired by us and will ever receive our warm sympathy... The nation must, however, not be kept in ignorance of the fact that the highest scientific authorities believe that there is as little chance of improving the *inborn* qualities of coming generations—that is, of increasing the start given to our descendants at their birth in the race of life—by improving the surroundings of our neighbors to-day as there would be of producing a breed of greyhounds by the careful training of pugs.<sup>111</sup>

Darwin makes clear in this slightly humorous passage that non-eugenic reformers and eugenisists operated within different paradigms. Eugenisists as a whole denied that any social apparatus can normalize or fix the deviant with which they were concerned—“no mechanism is known,” asserts Harold Laski, “which can remove from the nucleus that particular factor which manifests itself as [for example] epilepsy”<sup>112</sup>—elimination or sterilization were the only solutions, making individual redemption impossible. On the scale of the population, however, there was a potential for “race” redemption, a possibility that ties together a mythical conception of nature, war, and knowledge that is entirely absent in the more conventional tradition of meliorism or, for that matter, liberalism. While the eugenic paradigm was, therefore, new with respect to meliorism and preexisting methods of conceptualizing class hierarchy, the eugenisists endlessly appealed to ancient sources for justification.

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<sup>111</sup> Leonard Darwin, 1915, p. 103.

<sup>112</sup> Laski, 1910, p. 198.

### b) The Antiquarian

While eugenisists claimed that their mission corresponded with the “aim of the churches”<sup>113</sup> and frequently invoked ancient Christian figures in their support, it should be maintained that eugenics did not begin with those from whom the eugenists hoped to sequester authority and support. Nonetheless, it is impossible to identify to whom the eugenists would have us trace their origins because any creed that supports practices such as good marriages, a natural caste system, infanticide, or predestination can be retroactively labeled as essentially eugenic minded. Thus, it was common practice to turn towards history and designate an important figure as a proponent for eugenic policies. The prominent eugenist Sir James Barr proclaimed that “the followers of Calvin and John Knox should all be Eugenists,”<sup>114</sup> enlisting the entirety of protestant Christians in the cause. The Oxford professor Allen Roper, in his essay *Ancient Eugenics*, unhesitatingly compares the program of “Spartan eugenics” with the “eugenic” policies of the Athenians and the Romans.<sup>115</sup> His tiny volume is splendidly anachronistic—Roper remarks on the first page, “the first Eugenist was not the Spartan legislator, but the primitive savage who killed his sickly child.”<sup>116</sup> The actors of history could be designated as eugenists because there was a sense that eugenics was an eternal or spiritual calling. Plato was also deemed a eugenist because of a single sentence in his work the *Republic*.<sup>117</sup> However, it is mostly inaccurate to think of pre-Darwinian thinkers as eugenic in any meaningful sense because species were believed to be fixed before the doctrines of evolution put forth in the early

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<sup>113</sup> Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics*, 2004, p. 33.

<sup>114</sup> Searle, 1976, p. 3.

<sup>115</sup> Roper, Allen, G. *Ancient Eugenics*, Oxford University Press, 1913, p. 27 and passim.

<sup>116</sup> Roper, 1913, p. 1.

<sup>117</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, Book V, 460c.

nineteenth century. While the rhetoric of eugenics was at times explicitly Biblical, and borrowed from the tropes of preachers, this says more about the character of the British eugenics movement than its historical origins. To engage in “race improvement” necessitates a concept of race mutability, which is why Darwin, who popularized and made acceptable the notions of races as transforming lineages, is the essential starting point for eugenics.<sup>118</sup>

### c) The Darwinian

While Charles Darwin was not interested in causing an intellectual or historical revolution, historian Gertrude Himmelfarb asserts that “history persists in dividing itself into a pre-Darwin and a post-Darwin epoch.”<sup>119</sup> Darwin was a cautious man, and weary of generating controversy, he took solace in the fact that he was not the first to publish a theory of evolution.<sup>120</sup> However, the earlier theories of Lamarck, Erasmus Darwin, Spencer, and Chambers seemed implausible even to most scientists. Sir Arthur Keith wrote in the 1950’s, “the doctrine of Creation, as revealed in the Bible, was more appealing, and on the evidence available just as likely to be true as that advanced by the pioneers of Evolution.”<sup>121</sup> Darwin, on the other hand, outlined in the *Origin of Species* a simple and logical mechanism by which the transmutation of species could occur: “it was objective, it could be seen at work; it could be tested by

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<sup>118</sup> Historian G. R. Searle agrees: “eugenics in its modern form originates with Charles Darwin” (Searle, 1976, p. 4).

<sup>119</sup> Himmelfarb, Gertrude, *Darwin and the Darwinian Revolution*, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1959, p. 422.

<sup>120</sup> Crook, 1994, p. 12, 31.

<sup>121</sup> Keith, Sir Arthur, *Darwin Revalued*, Watts & Co, London, 1955, p. 126.



experiment; it could be extended by observation.”<sup>122</sup> In other words, Darwin provided a mechanism that made organic evolution plausible. He argued that within the conditions of a “struggle for existence,” only the organisms best adapted to their environment would succeed in rearing their offspring, while those that were less fit would die off. If variation is an inherent quality of life, as Darwin demonstrated with evidence, the variants most suited to their environment would predominate, and over time this would result in the emergence of new species.<sup>123</sup>

Not only was Darwin’s work, in Himmelfarb’s words, “the cataclysm that broke up the crust of conventional opinion,”<sup>124</sup> but it also led many intellectuals to believe in a new politics of science. There is a great deal of support for the idea that Darwinism caused a seismic shift in ideas. For instance, C. S. Lewis, the Irish novelist and academic, “drew a line in the middle of the nineteenth century” up until which point,

the prevailing tone continued to be ethical, rhetorical, and juristic... The knowledge of nature and science was not ‘the great or frequent business of the human mind.’ Science became the business of man when man became the business of science: when Watt applied himself to the invention of the steam engine and Darwin to the ancestry of mankind.<sup>125</sup>

That “man became the business of science” embodies a massive cultural shift from the “ethical, rhetorical, and juristic,” to the scientific—a new emphasis on scientific prowess and achievement. Not only was this bound up with new technologies, it also

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid, p. 127.

<sup>123</sup> Incidentally, there were a number of intellectuals that responded derogatorily to Darwin’s ideas. Nietzsche was repelled by Darwinism: “over the whole English Darwinism there hovers something of the suffocating air of over-crowded England, something of the odour of humble people in need and in straits.” The German historian and philosopher Oswald Spengler commented that Darwinism reeked of the English factory, and Karl Marx accused it of containing “deficiencies” (Himmelfarb, p. 396; p. 398).

<sup>124</sup> Himmelfarb, 1959, p. 426.

<sup>125</sup> Paraphrasing of Lewis’s *De Descriptione Temporum*, p. 10-11. Himmelfarb, 1959, p. 424-5.

suggested that science could revolutionize politics, and Darwinism served as a sort of Rosetta Stone that awoke this possibility in the British imagination. The eugenicists were foremost in entertaining this fantasy. Harold Laski remarks,

We are beginning nowadays to apply scientific formulae to national problems. The statesman, somewhat to his surprise, has discovered that they have political value. It is by the standard of the man of science that the legislation of the future will be tested, and political theories have undergone a profound change since the acceptance of Darwinian conceptions.<sup>126</sup>

Laski's confidence in the applicability of science to politics rests on a firm faith in the capacity of science to discern the laws of heredity and thereby understand the essential mechanism by which human behavior is governed. Laski is imagining technocracy as the future of politics, the basis for which were the new theories of inheritance that, by the time Laski wrote his essay on eugenics, had been proposed and absorbed by the public. The content of these theories was therefore politically relevant at the time, which justifies a momentary digression to discuss them.

The most influential theory of inheritance, and an idea of crucial importance to eugenics, was Auguste Weismann's theory of the germ plasm, first published in 1893. Weismann postulated that inheritance only takes place by means of the germ cells, or, in modern terms, only the gametes (that is, egg cells and sperm cells) determine the DNA of offspring. As a consequence, "acquired characteristics" (referring to any environmental effects on the somatic cells of the rest of the body) are not passed on to progeny. This theory was fully taken up by eugenicists,<sup>127</sup> and directly challenged Lamarck's view, which held that acquired characteristics were in

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<sup>126</sup> Laski, 1910, p. 192.

<sup>127</sup> It was commonplace for eugenicists to remark didactically, "acquired characteristics do not affect the germ plasm of the individual" (Laski, 1910, p. 195).

fact inherited.<sup>128</sup> “The modern followers of Darwin,” in Saleeby’s words, “have rejected [Lamarck’s] view, and proclaim natural selection as the only means of changing the character of a race.”<sup>129</sup> Weismann’s theory was the basis for the eugenists’ continual stress on the importance of nature rather than nurture. It functioned to justify the view of human beings as fixed units within a mechanistic system. Individuals could be conceptually reconfigured into vessels of a singular genetic type which could then be assessed on the basis of worthiness to society. While eugenists did not dispute that acquired characteristics were not inherited (a view accepted by modern biological science), the more specific process whereby traits passed from parents to offspring was a very controversial subject that polarized eugenists into two schools: the biometricians and the Mendelians.<sup>130</sup>

The contents of the early publications of the *Eugenics Review*, brimming with articles contrasting biometry and Mendelism, testify to the magnitude of the scientific debate. According to Harold Laski, “no contest is so important in the modern study of biology as that raging between the Mendelians and the Biometricians.”<sup>131</sup> Biometry was founded in the late nineteenth century by Francis Galton and his attempts to statistically measure the extent to which children resembled their parents. Biometry was entirely a statistical enterprise: biometricians pored over diagrams known as pedigrees that depicted each individual within a family tree over a number of

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<sup>128</sup> The conventional story told by Lamarckians is that the giraffe’s neck grew longer as each individual strained to eat food from the branches of trees, and that the collective effort on the part of each individual giraffe led to the species’ abnormally elongated neck. Herbert Spencer, a Lamarckian, felt that, as a consequence of Weismannism, his life’s work was being undermined (Searle, p. 6).

<sup>129</sup> Saleeby, 1914, p. 15.

<sup>130</sup> See Provine, William, *The Origins of Theoretical Population Genetics*, The University of Chicago Press, 1971, for the classic account of this debate.

<sup>131</sup> Laski, 1910, p. 196.

generations trying to discern a mathematical principle by which they could predict the probability of a given child containing the traits of his or her parents. Biometry contained a doctrine of blending that held the offspring to be a biological intermediary between parents. Mendelism, a theory first devised by Gregor Mendel in the 1860's but rediscovered at the turn of the century, by contrast, negated the idea of blending. It proposed that each biological trait corresponds to a specific segregated and indivisible "unit character" (gene) that cannot be mixed with others—it is either passed on or it is not. In other words, while the biometricians asked the question "to what extent," the Mendelians asked simply "yes or no?"<sup>132</sup> Biometry, with its institutional home in Karl Pearson's statistical laboratory at University College, provided the predominant theory of inheritance in the first decade of the twentieth century, but slowly gave way to Mendel's laws of gametic segregation. As it became clearer to scientists that Mendelism was the more plausible theory, the debate became more incisive: Caleb Saleeby, in 1914, mocked Pearson's efforts "to prove the inheritance of this or that human character to be 'not Mendelian.'"<sup>133</sup> It was, in the end, the Mendelians who, by being able to "breed 'rustiness' out of wheat,"<sup>134</sup> suggested most forcefully to the eugenicists that they would be able to "breed out" certain characteristics from human populations.

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<sup>132</sup> Soloway, 1990, p. 28.

<sup>133</sup> Saleeby, 1914, p. 5.

<sup>134</sup> Searle, 1976, p. 8.

*Subsection: Biological Self-Consciousness and  
Darwinian Divinity*

With the mechanistic insights of Weismann and Mendel, the eugenists imagined that Darwinism could correspond to their task of race improvement as mathematics corresponds to engineering. Led into the conceit that they could undertake the task of directing human evolution, eugenists transformed Darwinism into a social science or political platform—eugenics meant “the application to mankind of the Darwinian, and natural, principle of selection for parenthood.”<sup>135</sup> Himmelfarb wrote her work on Darwin in the 1950’s, and therefore, with an acute memory of the holocaust, felt the need to vilify eugenics without implicating Darwin. She maintains that “the very idea of reform is antithetical to Darwinism,” because natural selection is guided by an “impersonal, self-regulating process.”<sup>136</sup> According to Himmelfarb, John Dewey, who like the eugenists sensed political implications rising from Darwin’s work, “distorted [Darwinism] beyond recognition.”<sup>137</sup> It is debatable whether or not this is overstated, since to think as a eugenicist, or as John Dewey did—to follow in Galton’s footsteps—does not require more than simply stepping into the space of this “impersonal, self-regulating process,” or rather, the conceptual substitution of the human for the impersonal. While this revises Darwinism, it does not necessarily distort it. Rather, by substituting man for nature,

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<sup>135</sup> Saleeby, presumably to differentiate himself, always used the term “selection for parenthood” rather than natural selection (Saleeby, 1914, p. 147).

<sup>136</sup> Himmelfarb, 1959, p. 401.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 402.

eugenics subjugates Darwinism to the, perhaps, spiritual drive for “the *improvement* of human nature.”<sup>138</sup>

In this respect, eugenics was less a science or political persuasion than a philosophical view or even a spiritual cult. It is best described within the framework of a mythology, since, not only did it invoke myths, its purpose transcended science and politics and approached the mythical or religious. Its mission was fundamentally messianic; eugenics aims, asserts Saleeby, at “the improvement of the soul.”<sup>139</sup> Many eugenisists followed Francis Galton in conceiving their work in relation to the religious undertaking of redeeming mankind from original sin.<sup>140</sup> The Australian professor and eugenist George Walters gave a lecture at the EES permeated with theological language in which he charged that eugenics will some day “bring the human form and character a trifle nearer to the divine.”<sup>141</sup> The religious character of eugenics is most forcefully evinced by Galton’s original hope that it would “become part of the religion of the future.”<sup>142</sup> Karl Pearson also attests the inherent “holiness” of eugenics:

Let us bear in mind the words of Galton written almost in the last years of his life, words not of despair, but of wise caution: ‘When the desired fullness of information shall have been acquired, then and not till then, will be the fit moment to proclaim a “Jehad” or Holy War against customs and prejudices that impair the physical and moral qualities of our race.’<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> F. C. S. Schiller, 1915, p. 295.

<sup>139</sup> Saleeby, 1914, p. 22.

<sup>140</sup> Galton, 1865; excerpted in Mazumdar, 2007, p. 99.

<sup>141</sup> Walters, *Eugenics and the War*, p. 11.

<sup>142</sup> Saleeby, 1914, p. 15.

<sup>143</sup> Pearson and Elderton, 1925, p. 4.

Galton, whose words are reaffirmed by Pearson, equates the crusade of eugenics with “Holy War,” elevating it from a science into a sanctification. Moreover, this argumentative passage exposes a certain character of the spirituality embedded in eugenics, or, if you will, an element of the eugenic myth. Pearson argues that the mechanisms of heredity must be understood before eugenics can become fully implemented—eugenics requires a “fullness of information.” That is, prior to the “moment” in which eugenics can become active, there must be an epistemological stage that provides the knowledge for operating on the eugenic level—a knowledge, it seems, with the spiritual capacity to elevate man to that level. This evinces a relationship between knowledge, or rather, the technological application of knowledge, and divinity, which finds its original expression in the Greek myth of Prometheus. The eugenicists do not regard themselves as Promethean, but the mythical undertones of their rhetoric support the association. According to myth, the titan Prometheus stole fire from the gods and gifted it to man—man’s acquisition of fire, his first technological achievement, therefore was marked by a certain divine quality.<sup>144</sup> The historian G. R. Searle thus caricatures the eugenic fantasy: “Man, Prometheus-like, is at last acquiring the power to control his own genetic future.”<sup>145</sup>

That a sense of divinity accompanies the attainment or the technological utilization of knowledge has not been noticed by some intellectuals without a sense of irony. This perceived relationship, this idealized moment of divine technological transcendence that seems to have recurred in Western civilization, is a phenomenon upon which Sigmund Freud has rather cynically commented:

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<sup>144</sup> See Bulfinch, *Bulfinch’s Mythology*, 1855, pp. 12-3

<sup>145</sup> Searle, 1976, p. 1.

Long ago [Man] formed an ideal conception of omnipotence and omniscience which he embodied in his gods. To these gods he attributed everything that seemed unattainable to his wishes, or that was forbidden to him. One may say, therefore, that these gods were cultural ideals. Today he has... by his science and technology... come very close to the attainment of this ideal, he has almost become a god himself... Not completely; in some respects not at all, in others only half way. Man has, as it were, become a kind of prosthetic God.<sup>146</sup>

Freud's thought provoking caricature of the Western man who becomes a "prosthetic God" in the midst of an excess of technological achievements, describes an imagined approach towards the sublime. "Man" has tried to attain what he once idealized as unattainable, but has only succeeded in creating a fraud, or a "prosthetic" version of that which he envisioned. The excerpt depicts Western civilization in an exuberant march towards heaven, propelling itself along by means of a series of intellectual feats, that, according to Freud's theorizing, forever drives mankind towards a fictional horizon. For the eugenicists, there was no fiction here; the new knowledge provided by Darwin was an epistemological revelation that opened the door to a new quasi-religious technological order. The revelation associated with eugenics inhabits a historical moment that exemplifies the extent to which technology can appear to carry religious implications; however, Darwinism was not only an epistemological or Promethean feat—it was fundamentally bound up with the issue of self-consciousness.

The relationship between eugenics and self-consciousness, or "man," who is in the words of the eugenicist S. Herbert, "distinguished from the lower brute creation

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<sup>146</sup> Freud, Sigmund, *Civilization and its Discontents*, New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1961, p. 44.



by his self-consciousness,”<sup>147</sup> evinces what can be called a positional duality with respect to nature. Man, whose “place is in nature,”<sup>148</sup> subject to the same natural laws and mechanisms as all other organisms in the biosphere, is at the same time, by virtue of his self-consciousness with respect to his naturalness, able to imagine himself in the possession of a scientist’s objective viewpoint, or, what has been called a “view from nowhere.”<sup>149</sup> Self-consciousness therefore leads to the paradox whereby man exists simultaneously within and outside of nature. The eugenicist, so to speak, is the man who stepped out of man’s skin so as to observe him in his natural environment. That is, understanding the laws of heredity entrusts man, in D. S. Jordan’s words, with “the magician’s wand,”<sup>150</sup>—“it is,” explains an editorial writer in the *Eugenics Review*, “because we understand the law [of nature] that we can control the conditions of life.”<sup>151</sup> Self-consciousness thereby transmutes the human being into the twofold entity of both natural man and supernatural magician. The political problem of having both “natural men” and “supernatural magicians,” or “over-men” coexisting in the same population and the inherent violence of this conflict will be discussed in the following chapter.

Self-consciousness with respect to nature is then the particular attribute of the eugenicist’s Prometheus-like achievement, which makes relevant yet another myth associated with the cannon of Western thought: the Fall of Man.<sup>152</sup> This story, the

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<sup>147</sup> Herbert, S., “Eugenics and Socialism,” *Eugenics Review*, vol. II, (1910), p. 122.

<sup>148</sup> Jordan, 1913, p. 197.

<sup>149</sup> This is the title of Thomas Nagel’s 1986 work on objectivity as a philosophical problem (Nagel, Thomas, *The View from Nowhere*, Oxford University Press, 1986).

<sup>150</sup> Jordan, 1913, p. 198.

<sup>151</sup> Anonymous, “War, and the Survival of the Fittest,” *Eugenics Review*, vol. IX, (1917) p. 83.

<sup>152</sup> Michel Foucault emphasizes the close relationship between the Bible and the nineteenth-century “discourse of race struggle,” and therefore provides a basis of legitimacy for the use of this Biblical story as an interpretive guide for deciphering the mythological content embedded in eugenics

parable of the Garden of Eden, centers on the issue of self-consciousness, for once Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge, “the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they [were] naked.”<sup>153</sup> According to scripture, God then proclaimed “man is become as one of us, to know good and evil.” Consequently, “God sent him forth from the Garden of Eden... he drove out the man.”<sup>154</sup> Thus, the sudden acquisition of a new self-awareness or a self-knowledge that revealed to Adam and Eve their own nudity, served as an affront to God. This is explainable, perhaps, in Freud’s terms—Adam and Eve’s elevation to a higher epistemological stage represented the pretension of possessing godlike power—as God says, “man is become as one of us.” Darwin’s theory, likewise, which demonstrated that “man” is a descendant of apes, at the same time made him cognizant of his natural origins. By revealing to him his place in nature, he also provided him with the “view from nowhere” located outside of it. A sort of biological self-consciousness, then, paralleling the Garden of Eden story, both imbued “man” with a new divine power, and also forced him to leave nature. But there is now a choice of prepositions to describe this new position: below nature or above it? In gaining divine power does one transcend nature and become godlike or fall from nature for succumbing to arrogance? This unveils the ambiguity of the role of knowledge and technology in the eugenic myth. In other words, did Darwin give rise to a celebratory moment of divine ascendance or rather a lamentable loss and banishment from an innocent, unconscious paradise?

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(Foucault, Michel, trans. Macey, David, “*Society Must Be Defended*,” *Lectures at the College de France, 1975-76*, Picador, New York, 2003, p. 71).

<sup>153</sup> King James Bible, Genesis, 3:7.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid, 3:22; 3:23.

The Biblical story provides a dark analogy to the eugenic mission, an ominous connotation to the advent of Darwinism that was entirely ignored (or willfully overlooked) by eugenicists. While the Bible suggests that knowledge forces one to *fall* from Eden (or nature), the eugenicist exchanged the preposition “below” for the preposition “above.” That is, eugenicists imagined not a banishment or forced exile, but a “transcendence”—the attainment of a place *above* nature in a newly acquired position of control. “We can,” Caleb Saleeby attests, “*transcend* [Nature] by mercifully forbidding it to reproduce its defect.”<sup>155</sup> Frequently alluding to the “wasteful processes of Nature,”<sup>156</sup> and developing a trope of Nature as inadequate, the eugenicists could, from their new transcendent position, make moral judgments upon the quality of “Nature’s” creations. Accordingly they developed an affinity for infanticide: “If Nature erred in her intentions, this art was at hand to rectify her mistakes. Infanticide saved the Greeks from the problems of heredity.”<sup>157</sup> A . P. Roper champions infanticide as an “art”!—And within a work that was named the Arnold Prize Essay for 1913! Again, they rejoice that “the time has now come,” in Harold Laski’s words, “when man can consciously undertake the duties that have heretofore been performed by nature.”<sup>158</sup> He continues, giving testimony to the eugenicist’s new implicitly divine vocation:

We are no longer leaving the world to that divinity that shapes  
our ends despite our efforts to rough-hew them to our own

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<sup>155</sup> Saleeby, 1914, p. 151. Emphasis added.

<sup>156</sup> Roper, *Ancient Eugenics*, 1913, p. 5. The concept of nature as inadequate or imperfect does not originate with the eugenicists. Gracian remarked in 1647, “Nature seldom gives us the very best; for that we must have recourse to art.” And Pascal, in 1670, “Nature has some perfections, to show that she is the image of God; and some defects to show that she is only His image” (Gracian, *The Art of Worldly Wisdom*, xii; Pascal, *Pensees*, xxiv). However, the eugenicists considerably expanded upon this idea by imagining themselves capable of rectifying nature’s mistakes.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>158</sup> Laski, 1910, p. 202.

will... We have practically supplanted Nature; we are no longer content to let her go her own way; nor do we put a blind confidence in her.<sup>159</sup>

This assertive passage replaces the verb “transcend” with “supplant,” but conveys the same idea. The “world,” Laski asserts, no longer needs to be left to “*that* divinity,” but can now be controlled by a new one; eugenics, Laski implies, can become the divine ruler of a new order. Similarly, the eugenicist Montague Crackanthorpe asserts that natural selection can be replaced by “purposive selection.”<sup>160</sup> Challenging the doctrine that “we are all puppets and automata, wire-pulled by circumstances over which we have no sort of control,”<sup>161</sup> he implicitly presumes that man can become, so to speak, the puppet master. The examples can be multiplied at will.

The pretension of having arrived in a position above nature by means of scientific advancement was the eugenicist’s justification for the ideal of rational genetic management of the population. While the memory of eugenics is bound up with Nazism, draconian programs of “social hygiene,” and the chilling prospect of authoritarian political control, eugenics, as it existed in early twentieth-century Britain, was a movement that claimed to work in the service of humanity, and the literature of the British eugenicists evinces a sincere desire for the creation of an improved and more peaceful world.

Having established the connection between eugenics and an implicitly divine or mythical transcendence of nature, the conflict between the peaceful aspirations of the eugenics movement and the political violence inherent in the eugenic ideal of controlling the reproductive rates of different social groups should now begin to be

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid, p. 192.

<sup>160</sup> Crackanthorpe, 1907, p. 7.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid, p. 4.

addressed. It is not surprising that the eugenists did not advocate violence; however, the degree to which they deplored it is significant. Moreover, in accordance with their hopes that eugenics could be a “harbinger of peace,”<sup>162</sup> the eugenists were nearly united against the idea of modern warfare, despite the prevalence of militarist ideologies that existed in Europe at the time.<sup>163</sup> While there was a debate amongst eugenists over the eugenic status of war—whether it was good or bad for the “race”—most held that it was dysgenic or produced negative racial effects. Eugenics was therefore highly amenable to pacifism, which allied with an intellectual movement of the same era, a doctrine which historian Paul Crook has termed “peace biology.”

*iv.*

*Natural Rationality and Rational Control of Nature*

In Paul Crook’s 1994 work *Darwinism, War and History*, the unifying thesis is that peace biology has been underrepresented in historical literature. Instead, Crook asserts, historians tend to focus on the contemporaneous school of militarism, a doctrine that held war to be a “biological necessity,” and which united a diversity of scholars from General Bernhardt, Treitschke, and arguably Nietzsche, to Homer Lea, Sir Arthur Keith, and Teddy Roosevelt. Peace biologists, by contrast, denied that “the survival of the fittest” and “the struggle for existence” implied a biological justification for war. They found in Darwin’s holistic ecology a validation for a politics of cooperation, peace, and mutual aid. Despite Darwin’s evocation of the

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<sup>162</sup> Anonymous editorial, “Eugenics: A Harbinger of Peace,” *Eugenics Review*, vol. I, (1909), p. 5.

<sup>163</sup> It might be added that, on a less humanitarian level, eugenics was theoretically at odds with war because the chaos inherent in military conflict would impede the eugenic ideal of rational genetic planning (See Crook, p. 174).

“war of nature,”<sup>164</sup> they emphasized that even (or especially) in the Darwinian view of nature, biological organisms and ecosystems are interdependent, co-adaptive, and complex. This cooperationist emphasis served as a guideline to political thinking, and therefore peace biology conceived of politics as the functioning of human beings within a system that exists within the framework of nature, guided by preexisting and discernable natural laws. However, because the eugenic myth is based upon the transcendence of nature, envisioning a political order that exists outside of or in opposition to natural laws, the juxtaposition of peace biology and eugenics helps to flesh out the peculiar character of the latter and unmasks some of the ambiguities within the peace discourse as a whole.

While peace biology and eugenics coincided in condemning militarism, they are separated by a fundamental intellectual distinction. Peace biology was part of the liberal peace vision epitomized by Comte’s historical stages that had brought mankind from the spiritual and metaphysical to the rationalistic and pacifistic era. Therefore peace biology imagined and relied on a natural process of cultural evolution through which, in the end, peace would supposedly prevail.<sup>165</sup> This view was alien to eugenics for a significant reason, which is bound up with the implicit logic of the eugenic myth. Eugenics did not place its trust in a natural teleology; seen from within the eugenic paradigm, nature, and by extension, human nature, did not contain or actuate a higher process of (cultural) evolution that would autonomously carry mankind to its desired historical destination. On the contrary, eugenicists viewed

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<sup>164</sup> Darwin, 1859, p. 459.

<sup>165</sup> Crook, 1994, p. 175.

nature as stagnant and prone to error. The Oxford philosopher, and staunch defender of eugenics, F. C. S. Schiller, therefore maintains that

It is futile to hug the illusion that man improves automatically and to shut one's eyes to the evidence that he is still (alas!) essentially the same as he was at the dawn of history, as credulous, as passionate, as unthinking, as ferocious, as stupid as ever.<sup>166</sup>

Schiller denies, albeit with regret, that culture, or cultural evolution, has had any affect on human character. The argument that man does not “improve automatically” and is still “as stupid as ever” suggests an implicit denial of teleology. What mankind thinks and creates, especially by virtue of self-consciousness, are then not a product of the teleological process embedded in nature; his achievements, for eugenicists, are not to be attributed to nature, but rather, they constitute, perhaps, the makings of mankind's godlike prosthesis.

It is worthwhile to restate this in reference to the work of the widely influential philosopher Immanuel Kant. His 1795 essay “Perpetual Peace” posited a natural mechanism that functions within man which Kant called his “unsocial sociability.” According to Kant, because man detests his peers but cannot succeed unless he places himself in their midst, he will eventually create a “cosmopolitan” political order in which a lasting peace will prevail. Because the mechanism that will naturally conduct mankind to perpetual peace is itself natural, cosmopolitanism will allegedly come into being by mandate of nature. Rationality, too, is a natural capacity that will assist in the creation of this peaceful endpoint in history. Eugenists, however, will make use of the same tool, that is, rationality, but conceive of it not as nature's

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<sup>166</sup> Schiller, 1915, p. 295.

gift that drives mankind toward her preconceived end, but rather as the *human* faculty that makes possible the circumvention and control of what is natural.

Thus, while peace biology and peace eugenics both condemned war, the former did so because war was allegedly unnatural, and, like Kant, used observations of nature as its evidence or theoretical foundation—it sought to justify an ideology with an appeal to nature. The eugenists, on the other hand, condemned war because it is dysgenic. They were not concerned with “what is natural” because, by means of an epistemological innovation, they had allegedly risen above nature and could shape it to fit their desired ends. In other words, for peace biology human rationality was evidence for nature’s desire for peace, while for eugenics rationality was the means by which mankind could frustrate nature’s desires.

The eugenists can be distinguished from theorists such as Herbert Spencer and John Fiske for the same reason. These intellectuals were interested in studying nature in order to predict what the future would consist of. Their theories exist on the same level as those of Kant and even Marx, espousing predictive fantasies about what is naturally inevitable. While for Kant the future was cosmopolitanism and for Marx it was communism, both might be thought of as modern prophets who tried to discern a process in nature that is conducting mankind towards a final state of affairs. The eugenists, then, might be thought of as the receivers of prophecy—those who, knowing to where nature is driving, believe it possible to control the future by rationally affecting the process. This is a theme that will be returned to next chapter.



*Closing Section: The View from the Mythical Position:*

*The Eugenic Philosophy of History*

That peace biology and eugenics could coincide politically does not refute that they were philosophically distinct. It should be mentioned that peace biology and peace eugenics found overlapped in socialist eugenics, a surprisingly large, albeit amorphous group that has not been adequately accounted for by historical literature. Socialist eugenics, which will be discussed in more detail later on, made sense insofar as it rested upon the totalitarianism embedded in eugenic ideas, but tended to confuse the distinction mentioned above, remaining unclear regarding man's position with respect to nature. The purely eugenic position was based upon the mythical idea of transcending nature, and is therefore better understood as a philosophical rather than a political movement. As such, its political implications were open to interpretation, which explains why eugenics was so politically heterogeneous.

It can be surprising for historians to encounter the variety of political ideologies that were shown to be congruent with eugenics. Not only was eugenics part of meliorism and liberalism, it was also “symptomatic of the emergence of a new ‘Radical Right’ in British politics.”<sup>167</sup> The membership of Colonel C. H. Melville and the pacifist G. G. Coulton demonstrates that military personnel and pacifists alike were accommodated within the EES; similarly the liberal Havelock Ellis and the

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<sup>167</sup> Searle, 1976, p. 2.

conservative D. S. Jordan could be united under its pan-political banner. Caleb Saleeby discusses the indeterminist relationship between eugenics and politics:

The eugenist cannot be a partisan. He is for the utmost of the highest life, wherever found, however obtainable; and if the true eugenist is asked whether he is an aristocrat or democrat, anti-socialist or socialist, monarchist or republican, conservative or radical, he can only reply that being a eugenist he is much too busy to be any of these other things—except that he is conservative in his attitude towards healthy stocks of mankind, and radical in his proposals regarding diseased ones.<sup>168</sup>

Saleeby forcefully attests to the nonpartisan position of the “true eugenist.” His or her vocation transcends political bias and approaches a religious calling. This is not to say that eugenics is purely philosophical or apolitical—surely philosophy and politics and mutually relevant—but because eugenics does not make particular political demands, its doctrine of political control being justifiably appropriated by a variety of political persuasions, this suggests, rather, that eugenics does not exist on the level of political thinking, but instead, in support of this thesis, on the level of mythology or, as I will contend below, philosophy of history.

The mythical moment in which the eugenist transcends nature places him in a new position from which he is forced to view history in a fundamentally new way. This assertion recalls the definition of eugenics as a philosophy of history put forth in the first chapter. Marx praised Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* because, while the abstract materialism of most science excludes history and progress, Darwin’s materialism allowed for historical change.<sup>169</sup> Marx saw an implicit scheme of history

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<sup>168</sup> Saleeby, 1914, p. 40

<sup>169</sup> Himmelfarb, 1959, p. 399-400.

present in Darwin's work—the movement from lower to “higher animals.”<sup>170</sup> While this might be contested with the argument that Darwin only sought to explain the biological mechanism by which organisms can change over time, and did not intend for the words “lower” and “higher” to imply a moral hierarchy. The eugenists, however, like Marx, took literally Darwin's metaphor of “lower” and “higher” animals, or rather, imputed a moral significance to the Darwinian process whereby organisms increase in complexity. While in the Marxian view of history economics is the vehicle for progress, technocratic manipulation of the gene pool is the vehicle for progress within the eugenic philosophy of history. The key distinction, however, is that for Marxists, progress is a teleological process, an indelible attribute of the material conditions of society; for eugenists, on the other hand, progress must be masterminded by society, or perhaps, the statesman who has transcended nature and can therefore exert his will over it.

Like Marxism, the eugenic philosophy of history is preoccupied with class. History, for the eugenists, was written in the class structure. In broad terms, eugenics imagined that the history of humanity is understood by means of the biological ascension of man as he progressed from the brute savage to the civilized cosmopolite. Of course, there had been intermediary stages of biological advancement, and just as Darwin asserted that simpler forms such as protozoa and worms coexist with more complex forms such as mammals and angiosperms, the “lower” forms of man still exist and cohabit the modern state with their more advanced counterparts. Eugenists frequently mention the “human scale” in which different races can be hierarchically

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<sup>170</sup> Darwin, 1859, p. 459.

placed.<sup>171</sup> Insofar as the eugenists could conceive of classes as composing different races, with the “fitter classes”<sup>172</sup> coexisting with the less fit and unfit ones, eugenists implicitly viewed the class structure as a recapitulation of human evolution. That is, the social hierarchy, in their view, corresponds linearly to the evolutionary story of human biological advancement.

The eugenists never stated explicitly that the class structure represents a recapitulation of human evolution, but their view of history often equated imperial prowess, the accumulation of wealth, and “civilized” Western customs with evolutionary development. The “lower strata of society” did not embody any of these ideals, and therefore seemed to represent the modern day inheritors of the ancient, underdeveloped germ plasm of the past. With sound but appalling logic the eugenists homogenized the social classes into the conglomerated representations of specific biological types: “it is better in some matters to treat whole classes according to their average merits rather than be frightened into complete inaction by the existence of inevitable exceptions.”<sup>173</sup> In a similar vein, eugenist E. B. Poulton made exhortations for “the scientific classification... of our population.”<sup>174</sup> This views evince a faith that classes can be conceived as discrete racial units. As a corollary, the eugenic philosophy of history suggests that a class hierarchy is not a necessary facet of society; instead the lower classes, in this view, represent the lamentable continued existence of biological vestiges. Discussing the “bronze” or lowest class of individuals in Plato’s *Republic*, A. P. Roper maintains that “in no long period of time

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<sup>171</sup> Saleeby, p. 142.

<sup>172</sup> Laski, 1910, p. 201.

<sup>173</sup> Darwin, 1917, pp. 7-8.

<sup>174</sup> Poulton, 1916, p. 49.

this class would have suffered total extinction.”<sup>175</sup> Remarkably, they imagined that the disappearance of an entire class would not alter the relative positions of the classes located “above” them—in the absence of bronze, the silver and gold would persist. Thus the eugenic paradigm constructs the “pauper class” as a socially deviant race which commits by its very existence a crime against historical progress.<sup>176</sup>

Michel Foucault has put forth a similar thesis. He traces what he calls the “historico-biological” discourse that began in the late sixteenth century, discerning a rhetorical position that implies “the splitting of a single race into a superrace and a subrace. To put it in a different way, it is the reappearance, within a single race, of the past of that race.”<sup>177</sup> The eugenists, I argue, certainly did imagine this reappearance of the past, and viewed history within the context of competing races, but the important caveat is that they explicitly attempted not to speak from the perspectival position of one race competing with another. Foucault demonstrates that as history is conceived in the terms of race struggle, the notion of war provides “a grid for understanding historical processes.”<sup>178</sup> The eugenists saw history in terms of this “grid,” but their rhetoric demonstrates that they thought they could stand outside of it. According to this analysis, the eugenists believed they could transcend nature—this belief, I will argue in the next chapter, also entailed the transcendence of this Foucaultian “grid.”

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<sup>175</sup> Roper, 1913, p. 44.

<sup>176</sup> It is of interest to consider this view in relation to Freudian psychoanalysis. For Freud, not only for the individual, but also on the scale of population, earlier states of existence eternally threaten to reemerge. Civilization itself is plagued and defined by the stages through which it developed, the Oedipus complex being the most memorable example. The notion of the past coexisting with the present only within the biological substance of the lower classes presents the possibility of circumventing the Freudian problem—if the “pauper” classes can be “bred out,” then the past will cease to exist and no longer threaten the collective psyche of the present.

<sup>177</sup> Foucault, 2003, p. 61.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 239.

The eugenicist, according to this analysis, does see history as a “historico-biological” race struggle, but he only comes to posit history in this way after the moment of mythical transcendence—and through this transcendence, according to myth, he also rises above the race struggle itself. Perhaps no single eugenicist candidly describes the eugenic paradigm in this way, but eugenic literature as a whole evinces this mythical arrangement. Put another way, if natural existence consists of race struggle, then self-consciousness, a means for transcending nature, allows one to analyze this struggle from above and thereby control it, pacify it, and make it more humane: “what nature does blindly, slowly, ruthlessly,” Galton avers, “man may do providently, quickly, and kindly.”<sup>179</sup> Because the eugenicist, in this mythological interpretation, stood above of nature, he could, by the magic of science, improve mankind without being a partisan to one race or another. As Harold Laski states,

No Eugenicist claims to have faculties in any degree superior to those of the ordinary man. He has no wish actively to experiment on human society. On the contrary, he realizes that the ceaseless flow of human energy provides him with more than sufficient material for his purpose.<sup>180</sup>

According to Laski, the eugenicist is not “superior” to the ordinary man; he merely desires to make use of the “sufficient material” that will allow him to bring about a higher stage of civilization. Foucault’s critique, however, does not seem diminished by Laski’s claim. If war presents a theoretical grid for understanding society, it seems impossible not to think of the eugenicists as those who sought to wage this war against specific groups or “races.”

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<sup>179</sup> Galton, 1904, p. 5.

<sup>180</sup> Laski, 1910, p. 194.

Nevertheless, it must be maintained that it was precisely Foucault's war "grid" that the eugenisists thought they were escaping. In other words, eugenics is in battle against this grid—against war as a condition of existence. In war, as in nature, it is not usually the human being who decides who wins, or which race survives and which does not—the issue, one might say, is settled by fate. If the eugenists could transcend nature, then perhaps fate would be in their hands—indeed, they constructed a discourse around an implicit mythical belief that nature had been transcended. However, the moment in which war becomes immanent in society and asserts its hegemony over the function of politics, the mythical transcendence of eugenics is exposed as fantasy. Eugenists thought they had left nature; but war, her undying avenger, threatens to assure them that they most emphatically have not.

## III

**Nature, War, and ‘The War of Nature’***The Threat to Eugenic Transcendence*

*What a struggle between the several kinds of trees must here have gone on during long centuries, each annually scattering its seeds by the thousand; what war between insect and insect – between insects, snails, and other animals with birds and beasts of prey – all striving to increase, and all feeding on each other or on the trees or their seeds and seedlings, or on the other plants which first clothed the ground and thus checked the growth of the trees!*

*...Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.*

--Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*

**H**istory, wrote William James in 1910, “is a bath of blood.”<sup>181</sup> Thomas Hobbes would have agreed, composing, centuries earlier, a violent portrayal of the “life of man” in nature: “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.”<sup>182</sup> The strength of these assertions, however, belies their partisan status: both are made in opposition to an optimistic view that holds violence as an aberration of nature. The question becomes, is “nature” peaceful or warlike? To hold either one of these views is also, to a large extent, to betray a similar assumption with respect to human nature. The question shifts and expands: is “man” ultimately good or

<sup>181</sup> William James, *Writings, 1902 – 1910*, “The Moral Equivalent of War,” p. 1282.

<sup>182</sup> Hobbes, 1985, p. 186.



ultimately evil? Pacifistic by nature or violent to his core? Is history, by extension, a “bath of blood,” saturated by violence that will never relent, or, as Kant would have it, the redemptive story of a march towards perpetual peace? Unsure whether to be sanguine or emphasize the sanguinary, Western philosophy has always wrestled with these seemingly dichotomous questions; as Pliny the Elder stated in the year c. 79, “it is hard to make out whether [nature] is a kind parent or a harsh stepmother to man.”<sup>183</sup>

Certainly, there is no dichotomy. Nature is neither “a kind parent” nor a “harsh stepmother,” both of which are anthropomorphisms which impute human intentionality onto an impersonal concept. Moreover, nature is many things at once, both violent and peaceful, “harsh” and “kind”—why must there necessarily be a choice between one characterization or the other? While the answer to this question is unclear, it is undeniable that many philosophers have picked sides, and by designating nature as either peaceful or warlike, they smuggle in a corresponding assumption with respect to “man” because he himself is animated by human nature—his nature is derived from nature itself. Therefore to choose between Pliny’s anthropomorphisms of nature is also to choose between two anthropological assumptions: “man” is either pacifistic and good, or he is violent and evil.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, VII; excerpted in Mencken, 1962, p. 836.

<sup>184</sup> The discussion of this dichotomy has been largely influenced by Carl Schmitt’s 1932 work *The Concept of the Political* (1932). Schmitt is partisan to the view of nature as warlike, while he criticizes the opposing pacifistic outlook. As an example of the latter, he mentions the “aristocratic society in France before the Revolution of 1789,” which “sentimentalized ‘man who is by nature good.’” This example itself is meant to serve as a censure against the optimist view: “it is incredible to see the security and unsuspectingness with which these privileged spoke of the goodness, mildness, and innocence of the people when 1793 was already upon them—*spectacle ridicule et terrible*.” Schmitt seems to suggest that the Revolution was in part caused by the French aristocracy’s lack of suspicion towards the masses. (Schmitt, 1932, p. 68)

Does eugenics pick sides in this debate? And if so, which one? In the last chapter it was argued that eugenics was based upon a particular mythology in which transcending nature is a key element. It is crucial, then, to decide if eugenics has a position with respect to this question—determining what might be called the eugenicist's anthropological presupposition will help delineate what exactly, in transcending nature, it was that the eugenicists thought they were leaving behind.

This final chapter consists of three sections. The first section presents the assumptions held by eugenicists regarding nature, claiming that for eugenicists, war and nature are inseparable, and then seeks to provide the mythological interpretation of eugenics in condensed form. The second section begins by drawing from Michel Foucault's work on the indissociable relationship between war and politics, and then culminates in a description of the eugenic utopia as the political system which transcends this relationship—a mythical society in which politics are not based upon warlike power relations. Finally, the third section analyzes the literature published by eugenicists on the topic of the racial effects of war during World War I in order to substantiate the argument that eugenics is based upon an implicit myth that imagines the eugenicist as having transcended nature.

*Visions of Nature and Dreams of Transcendence*

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i.

*“Kind Parent” or Harsh Stepmother”?*

Despite their optimism, the eugenists were partial to the more negative anthropomorphism in Pliny’s dichotomy; as a whole, eugenics assumed a warlike, “harsh stepmother” version of nature. The claim that eugenics imagines a Hobbesian view of nature is not upheld with difficult, since the eugenists were greatly influenced by Hobbesian thinkers, especially Herbert Spencer, and at times cited Hobbes as an authority.<sup>185</sup> Perhaps the most persuasive evidence for this contention is that eugenics arose out of Darwinism, and it was Darwin, appearing as the impartial naturalist, who used the phrase the “war of nature”<sup>186</sup> as a poetic flourish that combined the notions of “the struggle for existence” and “the survival of the fittest” into a single metaphor. Thus, Darwin not only conflated war and nature, he bolstered this Hobbesian view with his own scientific authority. Lastly, the assumption of a close relationship between war and nature accorded with the intellectual spirit of the time. Historian R. N. Stromberg constructs the idea of a “war *Zietgeist*” that prevailed in the years leading up to WWI; the “enthusiastic approval... to the war of 1914” is, in Stromberg’s view, “one of history’s better kept secrets.”<sup>187</sup> The parade of intellectuals mentioned by Stromberg in support of his argument—Freud, Nietzsche, Weber, Durkheim, Henri Bergson, H. G. Wells, and Santayana, to name only a few—were

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<sup>185</sup> For example, Roper, 1913, p. 1.

<sup>186</sup> Darwin, 1859, p. 459.

<sup>187</sup> Stromberg, 1973, p. 112; p. 109.

not eugenists (with Wells a sole exception) but generated an intellectual climate that was conducive to an understanding of war as natural.<sup>188</sup>

Another argument supporting the claim that eugenics associates nature with war can be extrapolated from the oppositional relationship between eugenics and individualistic liberalism. Liberalism is the ideology which contests the Hobbesian interpretation of nature. Stemming from the assumption that man is “good,” liberalism claims that only the individual has the right to decide whether or not he will sacrifice himself for a larger ideal; in other words, liberalism limits the extent to which the state is entitled to interfere with private life. Eugenics is hostile to this view because the exercise of eugenics is largely predicated on the state’s ability to claim jurisdiction over the personal decisions of its citizens. Harold Laski rationalizes the need for this jurisdiction with a basic eugenic argument:

The opposition of whom eugenists have to face... assert that marriage is a purely private affair, and that the State has no right of interference. Eugenists maintain that such a view is anti-social, and productive of infinite harm. Whatever action is fraught with national consequences rightly comes within the cognisance of the State.<sup>189</sup>

If liberalism rationalizes the state’s inability to interfere with private affairs on the basis of the assumption “that man is good,” this passage, in which Laski makes the implicit claim that the state may “rightly” invade the private sphere, strongly suggests that eugenics is based upon the opposite assumption from liberalism, the view that

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<sup>188</sup> Paul Crook, in his work *Darwinism, War and History*, argues that before and during WWI there was a robust pacifist discourse that has been largely neglected by historians. While Crook does not say against whom he is arguing, it is likely that Stromberg is one of his principal targets.

<sup>189</sup> Laski, 1910, p. 202.

nature is warlike or that “man is evil.” Indeed, it is “man’s” evilness that justifies the eugenic task of “racial purification.”<sup>190</sup>

It may seem counterintuitive that the eugenists assumed nature to be warlike prior to 1914 given the relatively peaceful conditions that had prevailed in Britain for a number of decades (despite foreign wars), but the eugenists held that civilization had effectively masked man’s inherently pugnacious character. The outbreak of war in modern times, according to Galton, reveals man’s underlying “barbarous” tendencies:

In the excitement of a pillaged town the English soldier is just as brutal as the savage. Gentle manners seem, under those circumstances, to have been a mere gloss thrown by education over a barbarous nature.<sup>191</sup>

That we have masked barbarity with the “gloss” of civilization still implies the framework of a Hobbesian view. Galton continues:

We are still barbarians in our nature, and we show it in a thousand ways. The children who dabble and dig in the dirt have inherited the instincts of untold generations of barbarian forefathers, who dug with their nails for a large fraction of their lives.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Some eugenists, it must be admitted, described themselves as liberals, and even opposed the a conception of nature as inherently warlike. For example, Havelock Ellis, in his 1917 work, *Essays in War-Time*, states flatly, “war has no part... in what we call ‘Nature’” (Ellis, 1917, p. 18). The presence of liberals in the EES, however, does not necessarily negate the current argument, because it was the result of certain common traits shared by eugenics and liberalism, such as the advocacy of social reform and a general desire to ameliorate the conditions of society. That is, the liberal eugenists constituted only a few notable exceptions; eugenics, in general, was built around a conception of nature as warlike.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

Galton appeals to an imagined antiquity to bolster his view of man as a congenital “barbarian” and he uses a pseudo-evolutionary justification to refute the potential argument that extended times of peace and the customs of civilization have altered mankind’s fundamental disposition. F. C. S. Schiller agrees, lamenting that “[man] is still (alas!) essentially the same as he was at the dawn of history, as credulous, as passionate, as unthinking, as ferocious, as stupid as ever.”<sup>193</sup> Galton and Schiller provide a train of characterizations that develop a particularly warlike, even evil picture of human nature and thereby evince their adherence to a Hobbesian outlook.

Lastly, the claim that the eugenists associated nature with war rests upon the link between eugenics and theology. One can infer that because eugenics allied itself with religious groups and even articulated its goals in religious terms, eugenics is implicitly theological; and theology itself, or at least the concept of theology that would have been in currency for eugenists, is predicated on the idea that “man” is evil or in need of redemption.<sup>194</sup> In other words, the doctrine of original sin suggests that human nature contains a certain wickedness, and Galton brought the project of eugenics into agreement with this notion, stating that “the whole moral nature of man is tainted with sin, which prevents him from doing the things he knows to be right.”<sup>195</sup> That “man,” by his “moral nature,” is unable to do that which “he knows to be right,” is concomitant with asserting that he is wicked, evil, and prone to violence. This tendency to violence extrapolated onto the scale of the population would logically result in a condition of war. Therefore, by its association with theology, eugenics envisions a warlike, “harsh stepmother” version of nature.

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<sup>193</sup> Schiller, 1915, p. 295. This citation was also used in the previous chapter.

<sup>194</sup> Schmitt, p. 64.

<sup>195</sup> Galton, 1865; excerpted in Mazumdar, 2007, p. 99.

The claim that the eugenists held the assumption that nature is warlike has been supported with a number of arguments: the eugenists cited from Hobbes, they opposed liberalism, they portrayed “man” as a barbarous, “unthinking,” and ferocious, and they conformed to the theological notion that humans are born with original sin, or that nature is tainted with evil. Consequently, it is safe to assume that within the eugenic paradigm, the distinction between nature and war breaks down. The two become unified into a singular concept, which can be referred to with Darwin’s phrase the “war of nature.” Within this mythological analysis of eugenics, this term is crucially important; it constitutes both the anthropomorphized entity “Nature,” or the “harsh stepmother,” as well as the space, the “state of nature,” in which this entity is the dominating, uncontestable authority. Furthermore, the “war of nature” also connotes for eugenists the biological process out of which human beings arose, and therefore human nature bears the stamp of war in the form of a propensity for violence. Having described the elements of this term, the eugenic myth can be fully constructed.

*ii.*

*Eugenics as Myth*

The construction of the myth of eugenics should begin by referring back to the relationship between eugenics and theology. According to theological doctrine, “man” must seek redemption or purification in the form of conversion or confession because when he is born, his “moral nature” is “tainted with sin.” In other words, the Christian is exhorted to cleanse him or herself of sin, to essentially rise above his or her original nature in a spiritual sense—to become more divine. The eugenic myth

consists of a similar arrangement. Eugenics posits the “war of nature” as a wicked space of suffering, cruelty, and violence, but similar to theological principles, it holds the conviction that this condition can be transcended through a sort of revelation—a moment of self-consciousness brought by Darwinism. Once the human being recognizes through Darwinism that he or she is within nature, transcendence becomes possible. However, unlike Christian conversion, in the eugenic myth this revelation does not bring about redemption, because for eugenics, original sin is biologically transfixed; the transcendent figure who has risen above the “war of nature” is nonetheless derived from nature, biologically marked by its wickedness. Rather, redemption becomes a historical possibility, since, having risen to self-consciousness, the eugenicist can study biological laws in order to direct the course of human evolution and change human nature itself. The eugenicist can shape human nature, for in the hands of the eugenicists, Galton asserts, the biological “structure of future generations” is “almost as plastic as clay.”<sup>196</sup>

Thus, the “war of nature” represents the space beneath the eugenicist in which man exists prior to his Darwinian revelation—a space in which man is as naïve as Adam and Eve before eating that transgressive apple. In other words, it symbolizes the natural, violent territory dominated by the authority of the anthropomorphic entity “Nature,” who controls the course of evolution. According to this mythology of eugenics, as long as man exists within this space, he cannot exercise the redemptive power of eugenics, he is unconscious to its very possibility, and therefore becomes dreadfully vulnerable to the catastrophe of unwitting degeneration. In other words, to

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<sup>196</sup> Galton, 1865; excerpted in Mazumdar, 2007, p. 81.



be in the “war of nature” is to lose the potential for biological redemption. War, moreover, often seems to be something inescapable, an element of humanness that cannot be transcended. Thus, war, the symbolic embodiment of nature, is anathema to eugenics, serves as its foil, and poses a threat to the mythic transcendence upon which its legitimacy is based.

*iii.*

*Darwinian Politics and Biological Prophecy*

In the following subsection the mythological conception of eugenics just put forward will be rearticulated through a discussion of the eugenic political ideal drawing from a few excerpts from eugenic literature. Transitioning back to the questions that began this chapter, deciding whether or not “man” is essentially violent is a political question—it forces one to consider the basic properties of the human being, the particular agent around whom political structures are built and whose actions they seek to influence. Accordingly, the argument that the eugenists derived their conception of nature from Darwin’s notion of “the war of nature” leaves a peculiar tension regarding approaches to politics. Darwin’s position was certainly that nature, of which man is a part, is inherently warlike, but that “the war of nature” produces “forms most beautiful and most wonderful.”<sup>197</sup> War, and the suffering that comes with it, is then not a political problem to be “dealt” with or managed; it is rather an essential element of the economy of nature—suffering, Darwin suggests, is an ineluctable part of life.<sup>198</sup> The political structure that takes Darwin seriously therefore cannot realistically imagine its goal to be the complete elimination of

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<sup>197</sup> See the excerpts at the beginning of this chapter.

<sup>198</sup> This interpretation of Darwin is derived from Philips, *Darwin’s Worms*.

suffering, and social Darwinism justified a doctrine of extreme laissez faire for exactly these reasons—social inequality, it contended, was natural.

Unlike the social Darwinists, however, eugenicists did not reconcile themselves to the inevitability of suffering, but rather sought to challenge the very conditions of “natural” existence. J. F. Tocher, in an article called “The Necessity for a National Eugenic Survey,” published in the *Eugenics Review* in 1910, describes the eugenicist as one who looks to a time when “individual units are fitter and happier, on an average, than they are today—so fit, indeed, that disease shall be rare and so happy that unmerited suffering shall be quite unknown.”<sup>199</sup> To call a human being an “individual unit” is one of the oddities of the eugenic discourse,<sup>200</sup> but this is not the most striking aspect of the excerpt. More notably, Tocher envisions the complete extirpation of “unmerited suffering” as a political possibility. If indeed the eugenic vision was borne from the Darwinian assumption that nature, war, and suffering are inexorably joined,

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<sup>199</sup> Tocher, 1910, p. 125.

<sup>200</sup> In connection with the eugenicist’s conception of the individual as a “unit,” it is relevant to cite Michel Foucault, who has historicized the process in which the human being became conceptualized as a “unit,” or in his terms, a “subject” or “elementary nucleus.” It is worthwhile to include this provocative passage:

*Power is exercised through networks, and individuals do not simply circulate in those networks; they are in a position to both submit to and exercise this power. They are never the inert or consenting targets of power; they are always its relays. In other words, power passes through individuals. It is not applied to them... It is therefore, I think, a mistake to think of the individual as a sort of elementary nucleus, a primitive atom or some multiple, inert matter to which power is applied, or which is struck by a power that subordinates or destroys individuals. In actual fact, one of the first effects of power is that it allows bodies, gestures, discourse, and desires to be identified and constituted as something individual. The individual is not, in other words, power’s opposite number; the individual is one of power’s first effects. The individual is in fact a power-effect, and at the same time, and to the extent that he is a power-effect, the individual is a relay: power passes through the individuals it has constituted. (Foucault, 1976, pp. 29-30)*

Foucault argues that the individual subject does not exist prior to the exercise of power, but rather, “apparatuses” or “operators” of “domination” are directed towards human beings, and “manufactures” them into “subjects.” In other words, it is the “power relationship itself” which “determines the elements to which it is applied” (Ibid, p. 45).

how can Tocher possibly foresee the complete elimination of suffering? The answer proposed here is that eugenics envisions the possibility of transcending nature; indeed, Tocher's expectation of a utopian tomorrow supports this interpretation because only from outside of the "war of nature" would the elimination of suffering become possible. But how do the eugenisists imagine this utopia could be realized?

Tocher indicates that technological science provides the means for attaining the "distant goal" of a society without suffering, and in doing so, he exposes a conception of technological-scientific power as an essentially mythical force:

If that still far distant goal be ever reached by mankind, eugenic thinkers agree that it must be reached by the reasoned action of the leaders of our race and of those in power, after facts tending to circumvent our object have been disclosed by a searching analysis of data, and after the laws governing the establishment and continuance of a more physically and mentally healthy human breed have been definitely ascertained.<sup>201</sup>

This short excerpt drips with the self-satisfaction of science. Once the "facts" have been "disclosed by a searching analysis of data," once the "laws" have been "definitely ascertained," "those in power" should have no trouble, Tocher imagines, in forging a eugenic utopia. Thus, biological science is posed as the tool that engenders the utopia, the redemptive force that allows the eugenisist to circumvent the indelibility of suffering. It is, again, the technological or epistemological innovations that make possible the transcendence from the realm of nature to which suffering is endemic.

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

Major Leonard Darwin also imbues a mythical and transcendent capacity to the power of science as he equates “biological research” with “powers of prophecy:”

It is worse than folly, so it seems to me, not to utilize such laws as may be derived from a study of living things in order to promote the progress of our race. This is the lesson of eugenics... for eugenics consists in making all the use we can of the powers of prophecy conferred upon us by biological research with the object of promoting the welfare of mankind in the future.<sup>202</sup>

Major Darwin more soberly makes his injunction to “utilize” biological research in the name of the “progress of our race” rather than the elimination of “unmerited suffering.” Ostensibly less utopian, Major Darwin’s excerpt belies an even greater conceit than Tocher’s. Darwin suggests that, by a logical cause and effect, “biological research” bequeaths “powers of prophecy” to the researcher. Both excerpts reveal the magical or divine quality that adhered to the idea of technological advancement—Tocher imagines that it will magically erase suffering, while Darwin imputes to it the power of precognition.

To speak candidly, the conflation of biological science and prophecy provides a coherent analogy for the entire mythological analysis of eugenics. It might be put in general terms that when one is told a prophecy or given foreknowledge of an event, the ability to alter or preemptively undo the event becomes manifest, while at the same time, the notion of fate represents the event’s inescapability. For example, in the Greek story of Oedipus, the King and Queen of Thebes were told by an oracle that if they were to have a son, he would kill his father and marry his mother. When their

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<sup>202</sup> Darwin, 1926, p. 4.

son was conceived they attempted to alter their destinies through infanticide, but, alas, their fate was inescapable.<sup>203</sup>

In a strictly analogical sense, the central myth of eugenics can be structured within a similar arrangement, involving the interaction between the four key elements present in every dilemma of foreknowledge: a prophet, a recipient of prophecy, a potentially new future, and the old inescapable destiny, or fate. In the eugenic myth, Darwin is the prophet, while the eugenicist is the recipient of the prophecy. With this biological prophecy, the eugenicist change his destiny, his new future being the eugenic utopia in which the “war of nature” along with suffering, violence, and wickedness, no longer exist. Finally, war represents fate—the specter of inescapability that forecloses the ability to alter the future and exposes the prospect of a new utopian future as a delusive fantasy.

While this analogy accurately illustrates the interactions between the key elements of the eugenic myth, the eugenicist’s story itself is better understood in spatial terms. That is, through biological self-consciousness, a moment of revelation akin to eating from the Tree of Knowledge, the eugenicist imagines himself transcending the space constituted by the “war of nature,” or escaping from the authority of Nature as an anthropomorphic entity. From above the “war of nature,” the eugenicist can direct the course of human biological evolution, whereas within nature, he is incapable of doing so because Nature’s warlike authority overpowers his own. In this formulation, war still functions similarly to fate, but exactly how war threatens the eugenic transcendence will be fully articulated in the following section.

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<sup>203</sup> Bulfinch, 1855, p. 114-5.

iv.

*“The War of Nature” vs. National Warfare*

One might already raise the objection that the notion of war is being too loosely defined. The “war of nature” does not adequately describe, for example, World War I. We might grant a distinction: the “war of nature,” on one hand, and the more conventional idea of military conflict between nations on the other. For the eugenicists this distinction is clear. Galton defined eugenics as “the study of agencies under social control that may improve or impair the racial qualities of future generations,”<sup>204</sup> and accordingly, eugenicists developed a definition of war as an “agency,” or “social agency.” The use of this jargon was an attempt to redefine war in supposedly scientific terms—to separate it from any associations not pertaining to its material or racial effects. As the eugenicist Theodore Chambers asserts, gesturing to Galton, “war is shown to be an agency—under social control—which tends to impair the racial qualities of future generations physically and mentally.”<sup>205</sup> The dichotomy, then, consists of these two terms: war as a “social agency,” and the “war of nature.”

From the standpoint of eugenics, the difference between the two definitions of war might be articulated in terms of duration: the “war of nature” is eternally present, constituting a condition of existence with no temporal beginning or end, while war as a “social agency,” that is, military war, breaks out in specific historical moments. In other words, military war constitutes a break from normal political activity, it is,

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<sup>204</sup> Cited by Chambers, 1914, p. 217.

<sup>205</sup> Chambers, 1914, p. 289.

according to the eugenic definition, a sudden cataclysm rather than a constant condition of political existence.

However, there is a degree to which the distinction between these two definitions of war can be broken down, and, interestingly, it corresponds to the breakdown of the more familiar distinction between war and peace. A number of theorists have pointed out the fluidity between war and peacetime politics: the Prussian theoretician of war, Carl von Clausewitz, gave the aphorism that “war is the continuation of politics by other means;” Leonard Lewin, in the anonymously published *Report from Iron Mountain*, asserted (albeit ironically) that “war itself is the basic social system;”<sup>206</sup> and finally, Foucault inverted Clausewitz’s proposition, arguing that “politics is the continuation of war by other means.”<sup>207</sup> War, according to Foucault, is “the motor behind institutions and order”<sup>208</sup> and provides a “grid for understanding historical processes.”<sup>209</sup> In other words, there can be no clear distinction between politics and war, both consisting of power relations, the exercise of force, oppression, domination, victimization, etc. According to Foucault, it seems, there is no such thing as political peace because war is never discontinued, but only codified into a political system; human society consists of one singular “permanent” war.<sup>210</sup>

But how does this break down the distinction between war as “social agency” and the “war of nature”? It would be helpful to reiterate their definitions: the latter is Darwin’s epithet for the primeval struggle of nature, an eternal war that is perpetually

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<sup>206</sup> Lewin, 1967, p. 29.

<sup>207</sup> Foucault, 1976, p. 15. (Reiterated more moderately on p. 46)

<sup>208</sup> Ibid, p. 50.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid, p. 239.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

waged in nature, while the former is meant as a momentary outbreak of violence that effects the race, a sudden break from normalcy. However, if politics becomes indistinguishable from war, then this “momentary outbreak” is not a break from normalcy at all, but rather a moment within a larger, ongoing war. In other words, if politics and war converge, no war can be defined as a discrete “social agency,” because all wars and all political institutions are mere instances within the same eternal war, the “war of nature.”

The final point to make in this section is that while eugenics makes a clear distinction between the “war of nature” and war as a “social agency,” as a corollary, the moment when the two definitions collapse into one is precisely the moment in which the eugenic transcendence is exposed as a mere fantasy—when the “war of nature” undermines the eugenicist’s hope for historical redemption. This is because when these two definitions converge, (to reiterate briefly) military war ceases to exist as a discrete “agency” unto itself and becomes rather the manifestation of the “war of nature.” As a result, peacetime politics, too, becomes another, albeit less overt, manifestation of this same eternal “war of nature.” That is, the initial collapse of the two definitions of war leads to the depolarization of the more familiar binarism of war and politics—they both become, following Foucault, the “continuation” of the other “by other means.” As a result, and this is the crucial point to uphold, the “war of nature” becomes the ultimate arbiter of all political activity, warlike or not, pervading every institution, constituting the basis of all political logic—becoming inescapable. As a consequence, the definition of military war as a “social agency,” eugenic jargon which only makes sense when war can be gazed down upon from the transcendent



position above the “war of nature,” becomes absolute nonsense because this “position above” ceases to be attainable. The idea of peaceful politics loses all cogency, and no political order, not even that of the eugenicist, can evade or rise above the “war of nature.” Summarily, if war and peace are indistinguishable, the eugenicist’s mythical fantasy of rising above nature is exposed as mere myth.

Nevertheless, eugenics implicitly rests upon a faith that not only can one rise above nature, but also that, because of this transcendence, a society can be created in which the logic of war no longer dictates political practices. To substantiate this claim both the eugenic ideas concerning the function of politics and the eugenic literature on war which became especially robust during WWI must be analyzed and assessed with respect to this interpretation. First, drawing from Foucault and the Nazi political theorist Carl Schmitt, the relationship between eugenic politics and the war of nature will be analyzed. Using these writings I will argue that eugenics imagined a political practice that transcends the “grid” of war. In the third and final section of this chapter the eugenic literature on WWI, war as a dysgenic “social agency,” will be analyzed, further articulating the eugenic myth of transcendence, but then concluding with the interpretation that even in attempting to codify war in eugenic terms, the eugenicists expose their anxiety that war might elude their ostensibly scientific definitions. That is, while the eugenicists condemn war for impairing the race, their war literature betrays a more basal fear that war is not merely dysgenic—it also represents the space in which eugenics becomes impossible, and the inescapable authority of Nature that threatens to ruin the eugenicist’s dream of biological redemption.

## 2

*State Eugenics: Technical Miracles and Utopian Practices*

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*i.**Foucault on Eugenics*

Between January and March of 1976, Michel Foucault delivered a series of lectures entitled “Society Must Be Defended” at the Collège de France in which he traces the emergence in the early seventeenth century of a new understanding of war as the permanent basis of all institutions of political power. There is a close relationship between eugenics and Foucault’s use of war as an interpretive tool for understanding and historicizing Western politics. Consequently, it will be helpful to trace the development of Foucault’s argument in order to detect the overlaps and tensions between his analysis of what he calls the “discourse of race struggle”<sup>211</sup> and the analysis of eugenics, or the delineation of an implicit eugenic mythology, which is currently being pursued in this paper.

According to Foucault’s hypothesis, political systems are a “continuation” or perpetuation of the conditions brought about by the practice of war, that is, a codification of the relations between victor and vanquished in legal terms. It will be useful to quote him at length:

Within this ‘civil peace,’ these political struggles, these clashes over or with power, these modifications of relations of force—the shifting balance, the reversals—in a political system, all these things must be interpreted as a continuation of war. And they are interpreted as so many episodes, fragmentations, and

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<sup>211</sup> Foucault, p. 81, and *passim*.

displacements of the war itself. We are always writing the history of the same war, even when we are writing the history of peace and its institutions.<sup>212</sup>

In Foucault's terms, the role of political power is to "reinscribe," "reproduce," and "sanction" the power relations brought about by the "disequilibrium of forces manifested in war."<sup>213</sup> In other words, "rumbling away" beneath political power is a "silent,"<sup>214</sup> "secret,"<sup>215</sup> "primitive and permanent"<sup>216</sup> war that consists of and reinforces the power relations between social groups. To a large extent, this argument serves as a sort of corrodent against political legitimacy; it seeks to expose theories of sovereignty or political right as retroactive justifications for the relations of power and oppression inherent in society. In other words, the discourse of "political right... serves as a vehicle for and implements... relations of domination."<sup>217</sup> A discourse of political right therefore seeks to establish a fictive difference between war and peaceful politics; however, according to Foucault, there is no qualitative difference—war and peace are only different forms or perpetuations of the same permanent war.

The next step in Foucault's argument is to show that this understanding of war as the basis for all political activity originates with a specific discourse which he describes at length. Foucault calls it a "partisan" and "historico-political" discourse that identifies oppositions between groups existing in the same society such as races or classes and inevitably speaks on behalf of a specific race or class rather than another. In his words, "it was racial binarism that led the West to see for the first time

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<sup>212</sup> Ibid, p. 16.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid, p. 17.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid, p. 51.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid, p. 47.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid, p. 27.

that it was possible to analyze political power as war.”<sup>218</sup> Before the rise of this “historico-political” discourse of “race struggle” or “race war,” a fundamentally different, what he calls “philosophico-juridical” discourse had, “ever since Greek philosophy,” worked within the assumption of a “pacified universality”<sup>219</sup> and defined the position of the philosopher as an impartial commentator located above the conflicts operative in society. After the sixteenth century, coinciding with the rise of scientific rationalism and also, more importantly, state monopolization of violence,<sup>220</sup> this pacified discourse was “being seriously called into question or, quite simply, cynically ignored.”<sup>221</sup> By contrast, the new historico-political discourse “makes war the basis of social relations.”<sup>222</sup> Foucault paraphrases the implicit tenets of this discourse, a discourse which, he claims, “is, essentially... saying this:

...political power does not begin when the war ends... War obviously presided over the birth of States: right, peace, and laws were born in the blood and mud of battles... This does not, however, mean that society, the law, and the State are like armistices that put an end to wars, or that they are the products of definitive victories. Law is not pacification, for beneath the law, war continues to rage in all the mechanisms of power, even the most regular. War is the motor behind institutions and order. In the smallest of its cogs, peace is waging a secret war... We are therefore at war with one another; a battlefield runs through the whole of society... There is no such thing as a neutral subject. We are all inevitably someone’s adversary.<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid, pp. 18-9

<sup>219</sup> Ibid, p. 53.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid, p. 49, also see Weber, “Politics as a Vocation.”

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid, p. 48.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid, pp. 50-1.

This new “perspectival”<sup>224</sup> discourse of silent war shaped the language and thinking of post-sixteenth-century intellectual movements including the ideas of the “racist biologists and eugenicists of the late nineteenth century.”<sup>225</sup> The speakers of this discourse, he argues, theorized not from a position of universalism or pacifism, but from a partisan place positioned rhetorically in opposition to an imagined group of others. Thus, presupposed in this discourse are a number of oppositions that exist permanently within society and which collectively constitute the perpetual war that is waged beneath and throughout orders of ostensible peace.<sup>226</sup>

However, if this discourse viewed society as a continuation of war, how could it justify itself? By what legitimacy did it exercise power and wage war against its adversaries? It did not appeal to sovereignty or divine right, but scientific truth. Consequently, Foucault asserts, this discourse “established a basic link between relations of force and relations of truth.”<sup>227</sup> It inevitably appeals to “the truth,” but not the “universal truth of the philosopher,” rather “a truth that can be deployed from a combat position, from the perspective of the sought-for victory and ultimately, so to speak, of the survival of the speaking subject himself.”<sup>228</sup> In Foucault’s view, this partisanship of truth is inherent in the logic of science; certain “power-effects,” he claims, are “characteristic of any discourse that is regarded as scientific,”<sup>229</sup> or, in other words, there is an “aspiration to power that is inherent in the claim to being a

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<sup>224</sup> Ibid, p. 52.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid, p. 50.

<sup>226</sup> It is left sort of ambiguous whether Foucault is proposing that war can be used in general terms as a conceptual tool for analyzing the exercise of political power at any time and in any society, or if he is saying that because this discourse began to think in terms of war, political power was codified within the discursive practice of a theory of permanent war, which only then justifies the use of the concept of war as an interpretive tool for analyzing political power.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid, p. 52.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid, p. 52.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid, p. 9.

science.”<sup>230</sup> Consequently, scientific “truth” functions “exclusively as a weapon that is used to win an exclusively partisan victory,”<sup>231</sup> and therefore this truth is the basis upon which this discourse justified its power.

Initially, this discourse posited a racial binary consisting of two groups or “races”<sup>232</sup> at war with each other; however, in the nineteenth century, the basic “theory of races” or “theory of permanent struggle and race struggle” was no longer seen as a binary or antagonism; it was “recasted” within “the theme of racial confrontations in terms of the theory of evolutionism and the struggle for existence” which contains not a binary or single antagonism, but one “true race” from which certain groups or individuals deviated. At this point, the discourse formulates “biologico-social racism;”<sup>233</sup> and, Foucault asserts,

it will become the discourse of a battle that has to be waged not between races, but by a race that is portrayed as the one true race, the race that holds power and is entitled to define the norm, and against those who deviate from that norm, against those who pose a threat to the biological heritage. At this point, we have all those biological-racist discourse of degeneracy, but also all those institutions within the social body which make the discourse of race struggle function as a principle of exclusion and segregation and, ultimately, as a way of normalizing society.<sup>234</sup>

In this passage, Foucault draws a distinction between a binary of race war and a concept of society as a single race within which there are deviants who must be purged for the sake of purification. Both the race binary and the schematic of the “one

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<sup>230</sup> Ibid, p. 10.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid, p. 57.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid, p. 60.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid, p. 61.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid.

true race” posit warlike relations in society, but they are structurally distinct. As the discourse shifted from the former to the latter, a symmetrical war between large groups became an asymmetrical war waged between the purifier and the deviant.

With this distinction, it becomes clear that the British eugenics movement falls within the scope of Foucault’s analysis. Not only is this made obvious when Foucault mentions “those biological-racist discourses of degeneracy;” he also asserts that out of this war discourse arose “the internal racism of permanent purification,”<sup>235</sup> thereby explicitly invoking the rhetoric of British eugenicists who frequently justified their cause in the name of “racial purity.” Moreover, the eugenicists can be identified as speakers of Foucault’s war discourse because they perceived a close link between war and political institutions. For example, the eugenicist and prominent psychologist William McDougall declares,

The instinct of pugnacity has played a part second to none in the evolution of social organisation. It has been operative in the emotion of revenge and in moral indignation which have led to the growth and maintenance of every system of criminal law and every code of punishment.<sup>236</sup>

McDougall’s assertion that the “instinct of pugnacity” is at work in the “evolution of social organisation” implicates the eugenicists as speakers of Foucault’s discourse. Indeed, it seems that the idea of a “silent war” or permanent racial struggle “rumbling away” beneath and within political systems was basic to their thinking. Thus, this “silent war,” or “race struggle,” seems to correspond to the Darwinian struggle for existence, and it therefore seems undeniable that the “permanent war” Foucault

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<sup>235</sup> Ibid. p. 62.

<sup>236</sup> Cited by Chambers, 1914, p. 272.

speaks of refers to the same “war of nature” that has been described earlier in this chapter.<sup>237</sup> In summary, the eugenists were precisely those who spoke Foucault’s “race war” discourse and waged war against deviancy “as a way of normalizing society.”

It is necessary to pause here and return to the mythological analysis of eugenics. While it has been maintained that the eugenists saw themselves as having mythically transcended the “war of nature”—that war itself is anathema to the eugenic cause—Foucault’s argument seems to suggest the exact opposite. In Foucault’s analysis, war is not anathema to eugenics; it is, rather, the conceptual basis of its political logic and the very mechanism of its operation. Indeed, it is obvious that Foucault would include the British eugenists as speakers and propagators of the “race war” discourse insofar as they indicted the existence of the “unfit” from the implicit position of the “fit.”<sup>238</sup> Foucault’s theory suggests that this interpretation of the eugenic myth needs to be discarded.

However, a post-Foucaultian analysis is necessary in order to articulate more precisely the relationship between eugenics and Foucault’s “historico-political” discourse of race war. The silent, primitive, and permanent war Foucault mentions is

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<sup>237</sup> It is worthwhile to linger on the internal composition of the Darwinian struggle for existence for the sake of clarity. Darwin’s *Origin of Species* was subtitled “Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life,” and it posits the concept of race that was used by eugenists and to which Foucault refers with his term “race war.” However, while entire races compete with each other on the large scale, Darwin also identifies competition within single races which is the primary mechanism of species transmutation. In Britain, the competition that took place within the single “British race” was understood in terms of class. Eugenists held that when the “superior stocks” (read middle and upper classes) reproduce their kind, the British race as a whole improves. The war of nature, it is important to maintain, consists of both the inter-race conflicts (for eugenics, this was imperialism) and also the intra-race conflicts, which is what eugenics is more immediately concerned with, that is, a struggle between classes.

<sup>238</sup> While most historians maintain that the eugenists imagined themselves as the “fit” because they were middle class, it is at least worthy of mention that in my research, I have found no explicit statements made by eugenists in which they maintain that they are themselves compose the “fittest” stocks of the race; rather, they allege to be speaking on their behalf.



indeed the same “war of nature” described earlier, and the eugenic discourse is decidedly not intending to wage this war; rather, it contains an implicit myth which holds that they have transcended it. Mention of this implicit transcendence is entirely absent in Foucault’s analysis—that this absence constitutes a crucial omission that obscures a deeper understanding of eugenics is the claim that will be pursued in the following pages.

While it is undeniable that the eugenists understood the previous development of society within the framework of the “race war” discourse that Foucault identifies, Foucault does not point out that the rhetoric of the eugenists implicitly asserts a faith in the ability to surmount the warlike conditions of society; their discourse itself, moreover, contains the hubris that they speak on behalf of humanity rather than “the one true race,” and thereby seeks to transcend the partisanship which Foucault imputes to it. It is not surprising that Foucault’s characterization of this discourse cannot include all the nuances of the eugenic paradigm, since, for Foucault, the discourse of race war includes various multivalent theories spanning multiple countries. However, as he generalizes and describes the position of the overall “speaker” of this discourse, he passes over and neglects the essential elements that differentiate eugenics from other political or philosophical theories within the larger discourse of “race struggle:”

The role of the person who is speaking [the historico-political discourse] is... not the role of the legislator or the philosopher who belongs to neither side, a figure of peace and armistices who occupies the position dreamed of by Solon and that Kant was still dreaming of. Establishing oneself between the adversaries, in the center and above them, imposing one

general law on all and founding a reconciliatory order: that is precisely what this is not about.<sup>239</sup>

Foucault, in his usual clear and incisive tone, differentiates the universal “position” of the classical philosopher from the partisan, adversarial locus of the speaker of the new discourse of permanent war. However, this paper has persistently argued and used evidence to show that the eugenicist imagines himself as having “transcended”<sup>240</sup> nature, working on behalf of all of humanity, and precisely hoping, despite Foucault, to be “a figure of peace and armistices” who exists not within the war of nature, but outside and above it. Whether or not eugenics really achieved this transcendent position constitutes the ominous ambiguity of its implicit mythology, and is the larger question that this thesis will address; however, it cannot be neglected or omitted that British eugenics justified itself precisely by means of claiming to inhabit this transcendent and non-partisan position.

Returning to Foucault’s account of the relationship between scientific “truth” and relations of “force” provides another opportunity to make the point that Foucault’s discourse does not adequately theorize eugenics, since it was not merely a scientific “truth” that eugenics appealed to—they possessed at the same time a prophetic, spiritual, and revelatory truth. Foucault states that “relations of power... are indissociable from a discourse of truth;”<sup>241</sup> this truth is, in other words, the justification for the power that operates in society and the force with which the “permanent war” is waged; however, the eugenicists intended to use the force flowing

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<sup>239</sup> Ibid, p. 52.

<sup>240</sup> Saleeby, p. 151.

<sup>241</sup> Foucault, p. 24.

from their truths to wage, not a silent or permanent war, but rather a “Holy War.”<sup>242</sup> Lastly, as Foucault talks about truth “deployed from a combat position,” used “as a weapon,” or a “truth-weapon,”<sup>243</sup> one might at the same time recall the words of D. S. Jordan when, quoted last chapter, he asserts that understanding the laws of heredity entrusts man with a “magician’s wand.”<sup>244</sup> The tension between these two characterizations of knowledge, either as “truth-weapon” or as “magician’s wand,” not only constitutes the gap between Foucault’s analysis and the actual rhetoric of those he analyzes—it also evinces the particular character of the eugenic mythology in its fetishizing of its own brand of truth as essentially magical or spiritual.

The claim that eugenic “truth” is of a more spiritual or religious character than Foucault’s characterization of truth “as a weapon” lets on can be more fully substantiated by returning to the ideas of the founder of eugenics, Francis Galton. In a lecture entitled “Eugenics: Its Definition, Scope, and Aims,” delivered to the Sociological Society in 1904, Galton reveals his ambition that eugenics should become a “religious tenet of the future.” After eugenics has been “made familiar as an academic question” and “recognized as a subject whose practical development deserves serious consideration...

It must be introduced into the national conscience, like a new religion. It has, indeed, strong claims to become an orthodox religious tenet of the future, for eugenics co-operates with the workings of nature by securing that humanity shall be represented by the fittest races. What nature does blindly, slowly, and ruthlessly, man may do providently, quickly, and kindly... I see no impossibility in eugenics becoming a

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<sup>242</sup> Pearson and Elderton, 1925, p. 4.

<sup>243</sup> Foucault, p. 54.

<sup>244</sup> Jordan, 1913, p. 198.

religious dogma among mankind, but its details must first be worked out sedulously in the study.<sup>245</sup>

Galton suggests that nature and the eugenists share a collaborative relationship because both work in the interests of the “fittest races” and human biological progress. However, he reveals a qualitative difference in the mechanisms with which the two achieve their goal: nature is “ruthless” while the eugenist is “provident” and “kind.” One might interpret Galton’s implication: what nature does by means of war, the eugenist may do by means of religion, and to transfer from the authority of Nature to the authority of the eugenist, eugenics must become religious orthodoxy. Indeed, eugenics is a “religious dogma” which Galton hopes will pervade the entirety of society. If one considers the role of the quintessential religious space in Western society—the church—it is undeniable that it has always represented a space in which violence does not exist—a space of asylum in which soldiers lay down their arms, violence is prohibited, and war is discontinued. Galton’s wish that eugenics would become a *religious* practice which governs all social relations within the polity suggests that the “truly eugenic society” exists within a completely pacified space. In other words, contrary to Foucault’s analysis, eugenics does not merely identify a “silent” war within society or believe that a “race war” or the “war of nature” has always structured politics—it seeks to pose as the final discontinuation of this war; that is, it seeks to transcend nature, the violent space in which this war is perpetually brewing, and reconstitute society in the mythical or spiritual space located above it.

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<sup>245</sup> Galton, 1904, pp. 5-6.

This is the optimistic climax in the eugenic myth, the moment in which war as “fate” can be defeated.

However, Foucault should not be completely discarded, for his work helps explain one way in which war represents fate because it demonstrates that eugenics arose out of a discourse of war, and therefore, even though the eugenicists claim to have transcended war, a warlike logic is part of their discursive inheritance. That is, the presence of war is indelibly embedded in their language, permeating the very discourse with which they attempt to transcend it. Thus, war threatens eugenics from within. In this instance, it becomes inescapable not as an external foe, but as an ineradicable internal characteristic. As a result, as the eugenicists declare that their goal is non-violent because it is inherently divine or religious, the discourse in which they make this declaration bears the stamp of violence, poisoning the possibility that their utopian goal can become reality.

*ii.*

*Carl Schmitt on Technological Power*

For the time being, however, it is worthwhile to explore how exactly the British eugenicists intended to create a non-violent political system of eugenics that would not only end Foucault’s “permanent war” but also purify the race. The goal of the eugenic society would be historical redemption through racial purification and biological progress; however, for Darwin, the “war of nature” itself is the mechanism that produces progress—how, then, did eugenicists expect to accelerate racial evolution

while at the same time reject or leave behind war of any kind? Galton would reply that although the eugenicist and nature “cooperate,” working within the same natural laws for the same goal, nature, again, is “ruthless,” while the eugenicist is “provident” and “kind.”<sup>246</sup> In other words, the eugenicists transmute the warlike mechanism of the “struggle for existence” into a pacifistic, humanistic, and religious force—an alteration in which the transcendence of nature is implicit. This interpretation will be substantiated with eugenic literature, but first, it can be given a theoretical basis through an analysis of the work of Carl Schmitt.

A German jurist and the political theorist of the Nazis, Carl Schmitt published a work in 1929 called *The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticalizations* that further developed his concept of “the political” as well as his critique of liberalism. His close affiliation with the Nazi party serves as a justification for drawing from his work, since the eugenicists have been invariably accused of providing the conceptual basis for the Nazi Final Solution.<sup>247</sup> The specifics of Schmitt’s political theory are not relevant for this argument; however, Schmitt’s discussion of technological progress bolsters this paper’s mythological interpretation of eugenics.

Schmitt helps to substantiate the claim that the eugenicists believed themselves capable of catalyzing biological progress through the technological application of Darwinian principles without generating or reproducing violence. Asserting that technology gave rise to its own cult of “religiosity,” Schmitt shows that the power of

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<sup>246</sup> Galton, 1904, pp. 6.

<sup>247</sup> Black, 2003, p. xvii. However, Black acknowledges that Galtonian eugenics, with an emphasis on “good matrimonial choices,” was recast into the American eugenic paradigm, which focused on “draconian preventive measures designed to delete millions of potential citizens.” Though American eugenics grew out of British eugenics, it was the former that foreshadowed Nazism. (Ibid, p. 21)

technology is bathed in spiritual significance, and can contain a “magical” rather than violent quality:

Already in the nineteenth century technical progress proceeded at such an astonishing rate, even as did social and economic situations as a consequence, that all moral, political, social, and economic situations were affected. Given the overpowering suggestion of ever new and surprising inventions and achievements, there arose a religion of technical progress which promised all other problems would be solved by technological progress. This belief was self-evident to the great masses of the industrialized countries. They skipped all intermediary stages typical of the thinking of intellectual vanguards and turned the belief in miracles and an afterlife—a religion without intermediary stages—into a religion of technical miracles, human achievements, and the domination of nature. A magical religiosity became an equally magical technicity. The twentieth century began as the age not only of technology but of a religious belief in technology.<sup>248</sup>

In a somewhat iconoclastic tone, Schmitt identifies a “religious belief in technology” that very much resembles Freud’s caricature of “man” as “prosthetic God.” Indeed, Schmitt intuits the relationship between the performance of “technical miracles” and the notion of “dominating nature.” Implicit in this “domination” is a theoretical position outside of nature, a transcendence which actuates the transformation of technical knowledge from the scientist’s “truth-weapon” to what the eugenicist calls the “magician’s wand.” Thus, the element of divinity contained within technical knowledge, in spatial terms, allows the eugenicist to transcend the violent territory of the “war of nature,” and resituate himself in the mythical space above it.

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<sup>248</sup> Schmitt, 1929, p. 85.

While Schmitt therefore provides a theoretical basis for the non-violent utilization of technological power, the eugenists have their own logic to justify the alleged non-violence of eugenic policies, which revolves around the concept of voluntarism. The following section, which consists of four subsections (lettered a, b, c, and d), will draw from eugenic literature to develop the interpretation of the eugenic utopia as a state that has transcended nature.

*iii.*

*Freedom to Self-Castrate:*

*Eugenic Politics and the Voluntary Principle*

a) The Dysgenics of Political Domination

While the eugenists never say in mythological terms that they have transcended nature and that, therefore, the social and political relations within the eugenic state will not be governed by a logic of war, this claim is supported by their nearly universal aversion to the use of force as the means for the implementation of eugenic policies. They are opposed to the use of political force, first of all, because they argue that it is degenerative or dysgenic. Curiously, they often pose the argument that “political domination” is in itself an agent of dysgenics as if it were the lesson of historical wisdom. F. C. S. Schiller states that “history so often shows that ruling peoples die out, while their slaves and subjects survive, that a profound doubt is cast on the biological value of political domination.”<sup>249</sup> David Starr Jordan, the President

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<sup>249</sup> Schiller, *Eugenics Review*, vol. VIII, p. 170.



of Stanford University, upholds the same allegedly historical argument that the excess of political power is a negative racial influence: “by the rise in absolute power, as a sort of historical barometer, we may mark the decline in the breed of people.”<sup>250</sup>

Eugenics, therefore, cannot be the product of an absolutist regime, since absolutism itself is dysgenic. Similarly, Jordan concludes, as the “Spirit of Freedom little by little [gives] way to the Spirit of Domination... *Vir* gave places to *Homo*,” or, in other words, the “strong man” becomes a mere “human.”<sup>251</sup> The eugenicist, therefore, must advocate “self-governing,” and not “tyranny.”<sup>252</sup> This is Jordan’s enigmatic way of dissociating the practice of eugenics from a political apparatus of force and domination.

Although Jordan lectured at the Eugenics Education Society and published in the *Eugenics Review*, he did not speak on behalf of most British eugenicists (he was, after all, an American); however, his writings are especially germane in that he

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<sup>250</sup> Jordan, 1910, p. 99. While it is not necessarily pertinent to the current argument, Both Schiller’s and Jordan’s claims that political domination is dysgenic can be interpreted as the reworking of history into the eugenicist’s own philosophy of history. In other words, as they reflect on the political decline of autocratic nations, they think with eugenic logic and imagine that the impetus behind the collapse of power must necessarily lie with biology. In other words, they make the deduction that national prestige or eminence is a function of biological or “racial” quality; and since tyrannical regimes decline, they must be bad for the race. Jordan, especially, takes pleasure in didactically expounding a biological interpretation of historical vicissitudes as if he were giving an elementary lesson:

*The rise and fall of races of men in history... is conditioned on such elements as determine the rise and fall of a breed of cattle or of a strain of horses. As progress in blood is conditioned on normal selection or the choice of the best for parenthood, so racial decline is conditional on reversal of selection, the choice of the worst for survival. (Ibid p. 96)*

This passage suggests that a political body’s rise to historical prominence is based upon the peculiar notion of “progress in blood.” In other words, relative biological “quality” is what explains which nations conquer and which are vanquished; “progress in blood” heightens the national “breed,” while “reversal of selection” degrades it. D. S. Jordan, one of the most vociferous opponents of war among eugenicists, held obstinately to the argument that political domination leads to war, and that war unfailingly degrades, weakens, and effeminates the race. In support of this point, he makes this curious remark which I cannot resist including: “it is written that the little finger of Constantine was thicker than the loins of Augustus.” (Ibid, p. 99) How exactly this bolsters his argument, I cannot say.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid, p. 97; p. 100.

<sup>252</sup> Jordan, 1913, p. 200.

equates the exercise of political power with the practice of war, since they both reinforce each other and degrade the biological virility of a population. He asserts that “the spirit of domination, the spirit of glory, the spirit of war” directly entails the “final survival of subserviency, of cowardice, and of sterility.”<sup>253</sup> When men rise to power, he claims, the result is “aggression, suppression, plunder, struggle, glory, and all that goes with the pomp and circumstance of war;”<sup>254</sup> at this point, it seems, the national breed will deteriorate and the nation itself will collapse. As an example of this phenomenon, Jordan points to Rome:

The fall of Rome was not due to luxury, effeminacy, corruption, the wickedness of Nero and Caligula, the weakness of the train of Constantine’s worthless descendants. It was fixed at Philippi, when the spirit of domination was victorious over the spirit of freedom. It was fixed still earlier, in the rise of consuls and triumvirates and the fall of the simple, sturdy, self-sufficient race who would brook no arbitrary ruler.<sup>255</sup>

While D. S. Jordan, generally speaking, was not characteristic of most eugenicists, his distaste for arbitrary rule and his emphasis on “freedom” rather than “domination” were welcome talking points within the ranks of the EES. But without domination or an absolute ruler, what might the eugenic state actually look like?

#### b) The Connection Between Eugenics and Socialism

While most eugenicists, for good reasons, were hostile to the following claim, socialist eugenicists made a persuasive argument that the ideal eugenic state is coterminous with ideal socialist society. This contention rises from the assertion that

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<sup>253</sup> Ibid, p. 103.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid, pp. 97-8.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid, p. 98.

eugenics operates, as a eugenicist editorial writer puts it, by means of a “spirit of chivalry...

Further, this same spirit, once it has permeated the community, will tend to break down the barriers between the different classes of society, for admirable men and women—admirable, that is, in point of civic and racial worth—are to be found in what are sometimes called the lower strata, whilst, on the other hand, we often find in the higher strata stocks already on the down-grade, but capable of being refreshed and re-invigorated by union with the stocks beneath them. The reciprocal recognition of values—the consciousness of the fitness of oneself, and of the fitness of others—will... help in the end to harmonise elements at present at war with each other, and to effect a general diffusion both of honourable labour and of well-grounded happiness.<sup>256</sup>

Testifying to the non-violence implicit in eugenics, the writer of this excerpt optimistically alludes to the termination of the silent “war” operative in society which would ensue once the spirit of eugenics is sufficiently disseminated. The logic of socialism is implicit—once the classes are homogenized, the hitherto permanent class war will be pacified. While there is no mention of socialism here, the author seems to have borrowed from the socialist’s handbook as he champions the “break down” of social barriers and the “diffusion” of “honourable labour.”

In volume II of the *Eugenics Review*, the eugenicist S. Herbert published an article called “Eugenics and Socialism” in which the union of these two doctrines is brought to a climax. He begins his argument with a concession of modesty regarding the basic inability to safely assess the “biological quality” or “civic worth” of an individual’s germ plasm:

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<sup>256</sup> Anon., editorial in the *Eugenics Review*, vol. II, 1910, p. 92

So far we have no safe criterion by which to judge the natural capability of any given set of individuals. Our present-day conditions are so glaringly unequal, the accidental factors of social influences are so obvious, that in order to arrive at a sound basis for eugenic valuation we should first of all have to eliminate the disturbing elements of social inequality. And this is just what Socialism stands for.<sup>257</sup>

The establishment of socialism, therefore, is the political development that must be achieved prior to the large-scale practice of eugenics because it minimizes the extent to which “social inequality” skews the biological appraisal of individual “civic worth.” In other words, a socialist system is a necessary precondition for eugenics because it equalizes society and therefore makes genetic differences more recognizable.

While this contention is surprisingly convincing, it is generally disregarded by most eugenicists because they hold that social position is itself a function of “civic worth.” In other words, eugenicists maintain that social inequality is not arbitrarily imposed, but rather corresponds to genetic inequality. Evinced a rather naïve faith in the efficacy of British meritocracy, they aver that one’s location in the social hierarchy serves as a barometer of racial quality. In Major Leonard Darwin’s words,

The whole social system... including free and assisted secondary education, and the wide competition for innumerable well-paid posts thus opened to all possessing sufficient ability, must inevitably have the effect of sorting out those possessing exceptional natural gifts into the richer strata of society to a more or less considerable extent.<sup>258</sup>

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<sup>257</sup> Herbert, 1910, p. 119.

<sup>258</sup> Darwin, 1915, p. 102.

Major Darwin, the acting President of the EES, implicitly rejects the eugenic expediency of socialism because “social inequality,” he seems to contend, does not undermine judgments of “civic worth;” rather, due to the circumstance of “wide competition,” it provides these judgments with a reliable measuring stick.

Finally, there is an underlying issue that separates eugenics from socialism: the former, by definition, must transcend nature, while the latter, with an equal degree of necessity, must not. Although both systems culminate in the establishment of a utopia in which their political programs operate in idealized form, the historical processes which guide each to their ultimate destinations are distinct.<sup>259</sup> The ideology of socialism posits a historical teleology; that is, it imputes an intentionality to nature which will autonomously direct mankind towards the final redemptive stage. This teleology is, by definition, inherent within the mechanisms of historical change—that is, it constitutes a natural force. The socialist, therefore, needs only to place his or her faith in nature’s plan, for it is nature itself which (allegedly) renders socialism inevitable. Eugenics, however, does not posit a natural teleology which autonomously guides history; rather, the eugenicist himself has the power to coax the course of history in whatever direction he desires by controlling human evolution through “selective breeding.” The eugenicist therefore does not place his faith in nature, but rather his own ability to scientifically understand and manipulate natural biological laws. Thus, while the socialist remains within nature, the eugenicist implicitly transcends it. In other words, the socialist state still operates within the space of the “war of nature,” while the eugenic utopia can only be brought into being from outside of this same

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<sup>259</sup> Galton wrote a novel about the eugenic utopia: “Kantsaywhere”

space. This implicit spatial difference, therefore, suggests that socialism reproduces natural violence despite the abolishment of the class hierarchy, while eugenics functions non-violently; it transcends the space in which violence and politics are indissociable.

The spatial difference with respect to nature is the implicit logic underlying the eugenicist Montague Crackanthorpe's ability to censure socialism for infringing on "private proprietary rights"<sup>260</sup> while maintaining that eugenics is not guilty of the same infringement. The explicit justification for this argument is that socialism would use legislation to force its ideas upon its citizens, while eugenics would operate through a religious and social code, or what Crackanthorpe calls the "Voluntary Principle." This is the idea that eugenics need not be legislated, since "social undesirables" can be convinced to voluntarily limit their offspring or, in graver cases, submit to sterilization. Summarily, while there appears to be a significant theoretical overlap between eugenics and socialism, socialism exists within nature, while eugenics does not. Therefore, it can be concluded that the socialist state is not what the eugenicists think of when they imagine the pacifistic eugenic utopia that will propel the "race" to new biological heights. What, then, does the eugenic utopia look like?

### c) Voluntarism and the Eugenic Utopia

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<sup>260</sup> Crackanthorpe, 1907, p. 12.

As already mentioned, the eugenic utopia is akin to a religious space, but a more expanded characterization should be put forth. In full, the eugenic utopia is a political arena in which (to list its key facets): Nature, the “harsh stepmother,” no longer induces “unmerited suffering” for her authority has been transcended; political relations have been stripped of any connotations of violence or domination; eugenic principles permeate the social consciousness, operating by means of “voluntarism” rather than legislative coercion; and the result: biology perfected—“a galaxy of genius.”<sup>261</sup> This caricature of the eugenic utopia may seem overstated, but it is, nonetheless, the picture that emerges from an analysis of their literature—it is the climactic moment of the eugenic myth. It should be emphasized that voluntarism is the mechanism which allegedly provides a means for implementing eugenic policies without also exercising political domination. In terms of this mythological analysis, therefore, voluntarism is crucial, because the eugenic utopia can presume to have transcended the “war of nature” only once “political domination,” itself the continuation of war, has been eradicated from the political arena.

In outlining the eugenic utopia, it must first be demonstrated that the eugenicists trusted that eugenic principles could operate in society purely on a voluntary basis. They do not champion voluntarism in the mythological terms just employed, (i.e. because voluntarism eliminates the necessity of political domination and therefore facilitates the transcendence of the “war of nature”) rather, they insist on it mostly for practical reasons. However, the mythical aspect of a flight from nature maintains an implicit presence in their language. The first eugenicist who should be cited in relation

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<sup>261</sup> Galton, 1865, p. 89.

to voluntarism is Havelock Ellis, who, in this article entitled “The Sterilisation of the Unfit,” does not advocate voluntarism outright; rather, he provides a peculiar anecdote which might have led others to believe in its efficacy:

In the Swiss Cantonal Asylum... there were not long since four persons... who, though mentally slightly abnormal or defective, were not strictly insane, and the medical authorities wished to discharge them. The first was a young women of 25, epileptic, and liable to attacks of insanity; she had had two children, who were epileptic idiots and a charge on the community. [Because of these persons]... four more or less defective children already had to be provided for; if liberation [from the asylum] took place the number could not fail to be increased... Sterilisation by castration offered a solution which was eagerly accepted by all parties, not merely by the authorities but by the patients themselves and their relations; the two men indeed demanded it, and one (the third case) even threatened to perform it on himself.<sup>262</sup>

Though it is related with the utmost nonchalance, Ellis’s story is utterly astonishing; could it have really convinced other eugenisists that voluntarism might effectively function to enforce eugenic principles? Could they have sincerely believed that so-called “epileptics,” “idiots,” and “defectives” would enthusiastically submit to castration for the sake of improving the racial quality of future generations? Perhaps they were not all so naïve (or diabolical) as this, but virtually every eugenist would have agreed with Major Darwin’s euphemistic reformulation of this logic: “our best hope lies, not in compulsion, but in voluntary effort, and all should be urged to join the fray.”<sup>263</sup>

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<sup>262</sup> Ellis, 1909, p. 203.

<sup>263</sup> Darwin, 1915, p. 106.



Since all eugenicists agreed that the practice of British eugenics was in its infant stages, they were not obliged to do more than merely proclaim their “hope” that “voluntary effort” might prove sufficient for the grand eugenic feats of the future; however, it is precisely this choice of championing voluntarism rather than political force as the actuator of eugenics that reveals the structure of the eugenic mythology—implicit in this choice, it must be reiterated, is the desire to transcend the “war of nature.” While A. P. Roper, in *Ancient Eugenics*, justifies the preference for voluntarism or a “sense of duty” over violence or “compulsion” with a seemingly different argument, the essence of the mythology is still discernable:

But compulsion, or guidance, however veiled, is foredoomed to failure in the case of an institution which can only rest on inclination or an innate sense of duty. Moreover, “custom is lord of all,” and custom can only be modified gradually and in the course of centuries: it is only the thinnest surface layer with which the legislator can tamper. No social reform or political progress can be effected by the arbitrary creation of institutions to which there are no answering ideas: external coercion with no correspondent reaction can achieve no permanent good. The basis of law is subjective. Modern Eugenists have recognized that, if there is to be Eugenics by Act of Parliament, the Eugenic ideal must first be absorbed into the conscience of the nation.<sup>264</sup>

Those who recoil upon hearing the word “eugenics” might be surprised to read this passage; Roper appears to make the relatively blameless argument that eugenic policies should not be coercively imposed on an unwilling populace. If the practice of eugenics will succeed, he argues, it cannot rely on “compulsion;” rather, it must

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<sup>264</sup> Roper, 1913, p. 47.

emanate from “custom,” “inclination,” and an “innate sense of duty”—that is, from motivations that are more resilient, enduring, and culturally sanctioned than laws enforced by “external coercion.” Indeed, if “the basis of law is subjective,” how can one expect the larger community to accept its legitimacy? Without this legitimacy, Roper implies, there can be “no permanent good.” Thus, it seems to be for practical reasons that Roper insists eugenics be “absorbed” into the “national conscience,” for if it appears merely “arbitrary,” it simply will not be effective. But is there, perhaps, another principle besides pragmatism functioning within this argument?

The implicit, but more forceful logic operating in Roper’s passage is a rejection of evil and the space of nature in which evil is one of man’s indelible attributes. This is evident within Roper’s use of the word “arbitrary.” Many philosophers have observed that there is, indeed, an arbitrary quality inherent to evil or immorality. Roper’s rejection of the “arbitrary” therefore does not only evince a concern for pragmatism; it also constitutes a denunciation of nature—the space of the arbitrary insofar as it is also the space in which man is born with sin and tainted with evil. Philosopher J. N. Findlay paraphrases Hegel:

Pure morality inheres only in a divine legislator, who pluralizes duty. But nothing can pluralize duty if our moral insight does not do so. Not even a holy being can sanctify what is not intrinsically holy. Nor can an arbitrary being be holy.<sup>265</sup>

Roper’s passage seems to lie in direct alignment with this Hegelian logic. Eugenics, in Roper’s estimation, is a “moral” duty, worthy of being “pluralized,” and must therefore derive from “a divine legislator.” Roper rejects the arbitrary, not merely

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<sup>265</sup> Hegel, p. 572.

because it is impractical, but due to the unholiness of the “arbitrary being”—the “arbitrary being,” in other words, is unsuited for the moral and holy task of exercising eugenics. Thus, implicit in Roper’s argument that eugenics must operate through moral and social sanction rather than arbitrary imposition is a faith in the holiness of eugenics, and a corresponding desire to transcend the natural space to which arbitrariness and evil are endemic. Roper therefore supports the interpretation that the eugenic utopia is a religious and transcendent space.

Crackanthorpe, in his treatment of the “voluntary principle,” provides the most persuasive grounds for claiming that eugenics operates externally from nature by explicitly associating voluntarism with a religious practice. His “voluntary principle,” the unifying theme of his 1907 work *Population and Progress*, is overloaded with spiritual quality. The cultivation of the “voluntary principle” entails “working in unison with the Divine Spirit,”<sup>266</sup> and it promises to reduce the promiscuity of the unfit through an emphasis on the “sacramental” quality of marriage.<sup>267</sup> Moreover, Crackanthorpe avers that the voluntary principle can be absorbed into the social consciousness because it rises from a moral and divine basis: it “should commend itself,” he asserts, because it rests on “a twofold foundation—(1) on a divinely appointed arrangement of nature; (2) on a habit of wise obedience, springing from a fine sense of social duty.”<sup>268</sup> Thus, its primary goal of persuading the “lower strata of society” to check their fertility does not require legislative coercion or the threat of violence; “Why,” Crackanthorpe asks rhetorically, “impose by law that very limitation of numbers which can at present be secured by

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<sup>266</sup> Crackanthorpe, 1907, p. 12.

<sup>267</sup> Crackanthorpe, 1907, p. 13.

<sup>268</sup> Crackanthorpe, 1907, pp. 46-7.

enlightened, altruistic individualism”<sup>269</sup> In other words, it is a “sublime principle of individual liberty” which will create a “strong public opinion” that will check the “weaker and less desirable classes.”<sup>270</sup> This is palpably paradoxical: the eugenicist denies a human being’s right to procreate, and then expects him to sterilize himself due to a “sublime principle of individual liberty.” However, from within this paradox the mythical fantasy emerges. If the “voluntary principal” is absorbed by the social consciousness, accepted as an “orthodox religious tenet,”<sup>271</sup> then the need for external coercion would melt away—the goal of eugenics would be internalized by every member of society as a personal duty. In other words, the urge for “race betterment” would implant itself, to credit Freud, like a eugenic super ego, engendering the self-purification of the “race” through personal duty (or guilt) rather than political domination. Consequently, the mythical fantasy of historical redemption would be realized.

The final point to make regarding voluntarism and the practice of eugenic politics should return to the contention that both are implicitly constructed upon the mythical idea of transcending the “war of nature.” According to Galton, “the improvement of the breed of mankind is no insuperable difficulty... if everybody were to agree on the improvement of the race of man being a matter of very utmost importance.”<sup>272</sup> However, he regrets, “[man] has not yet risen to the conviction that it

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<sup>269</sup> Crackanthorpe, 1907, p. 79. In glaring contradiction, Crackanthorpe proposes that Britain enact some of the laws banning marriage licenses to “epileptic, imbecilic, and feebleminded” individuals that were ratified in the United States, because, he argues, they could assist in fomenting “strong public opinion... [and] public opinion being stronger than any law, the voluntary principle would, in time, render this new law superfluous,” a curiously self-defeating logic. (pp. 94-5).

<sup>270</sup> Crackanthorpe, 1907, p. 85.

<sup>271</sup> Galton, 1904, pp. 5-6.

<sup>272</sup> Galton, 1865, p. 91.

is his religious duty to [improve the race] deliberately and systematically.”<sup>273</sup> It can be contended that implicit in the use of the verb “rise” is the notion of rising from the “war of nature,” or issuing forth from the “struggle for existence.” While this may appear to be a dubious interpretation if based solely upon Galton’s use of the verb “rise,” eugenists at times were relatively explicit on this issue, and drew a qualitative distinction between the warlike “struggle for existence” and the more transcendent mechanism for eugenic progress. S. Herbert makes this type of statement in a passage that is especially useful for perceiving the contours of the eugenic myth:

Now man, distinguished from the lower brute creation by his self-consciousness and foresight, is able, if not to alter the law of natural selection, yet so to direct its action as to make it subservient to his own social needs. He can so conduct his affairs—indeed has done this to a large degree—as to eliminate more and more the worst features of the battle of life, lifting the struggle for existence on to the higher, more moral and intellectual plane of, what may be called the ‘struggle for excellence.’ ...Indeed, the grand ideal of the Eugenist himself is to create a moral atmosphere, new ethical conditions, such as would prevent the undesirables from finding mates and leaving progeny.<sup>274</sup>

If the eugenist can bring about this “moral atmosphere,” the violent, warlike aspects of the “struggle for existence” will be replaced by the ethical, non-violent relations of, what Herbert calls, the “struggle for excellence.” On this “higher, more moral and intellectual” (and, one might add, divine) “plane” of social activity, eugenics is practiced entirely by means of voluntarism, a non-violent principle supported by the “ethical conditions” of society. In other words, once eugenics has been elevated to the

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<sup>273</sup> Crackanthorpe, 1907, p. 86.

<sup>274</sup> Herbert, 1910, p. 122.

position of “religious dogma,” the political arena itself will be lifted out of the primordial “struggle for existence”—it will transcend the “war of nature.”

d) Voluntarism and Disciplinary Power: The Inescapability of Fate

In this final subsection, the darker element of the eugenic myth, the threat that the “war of nature” poses to the eugenic dream of historical redemption, must be articulated. This will require, once again, a Foucaultian analysis. Specifically, Foucault provides a persuasive counterargument against the claim that voluntarism negates the warlike relations of society.

While the eugenicists conceived of the “voluntary principle” as a means for implementing eugenic policies without relying on legislation or a coercive political system, Foucault argues that even the social customs which lie outside of the political or juridical discourse function as forms of power and coercion. Thus, even a society’s basic codes of conduct and discipline reproduce warlike relations. Furthermore, although these codes of “disciplinary power” are “nonsovereign” and are “foreign to the form of sovereignty,”<sup>275</sup> they are the primary “mode in which power is actually exercised.”<sup>276</sup> Foucault traces the exercise of “disciplinary power” from the nineteenth century up until the present:

From the nineteenth century until the present day, we have then in modern societies, on the one hand, a legislation, a discourse, and an organization of public right articulated around the principle of the sovereignty of the social body and the delegation of individual sovereignty to the State; and we also have a tight grid of disciplinary coercions that actually

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<sup>275</sup> Foucault, 1976, p. 36.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid, p. 37.

guarantees the cohesion of that social body. Now that grid cannot in any way be transcribed in right, even though the two necessarily go together. A right of sovereignty and a mechanics of discipline. It is, I think, between these two limits that power is exercised. The two limits are, however, of such a kind and so heterogeneous that we can never reduce one to the other. In modern societies, power is exercised through, on the basis of, and in the very play of the heterogeneity between a public right of sovereignty and a polymorphous mechanics of discipline.<sup>277</sup>

In this sweeping characterization of the exercise of power in Western societies, Foucault demonstrates that “nonsovereign” forms of power still represent episodes of conflict which perpetuate what he has called the permanent war “rumbling away” beneath orders of peace.

It becomes more clear that the eugenic “voluntary principle” represents a form of “disciplinary power” as Foucault describes the discourse which justifies discipline and codifies its operation within society:

Disciplines in fact have their own discourse... The discourse of discipline is about a rule: not a juridical rule derived from sovereignty, but a discourse about a natural rule, or in other words a norm. Disciplines will define not a code of law, but a code of normalization, and they will necessarily refer to a theoretical horizon that is not the edifice of law, but the field of human sciences. And the jurisprudence of these disciplines will be that of a clinical knowledge.<sup>278</sup>

Foucault characterizes discipline as a form of power that rises from discourses of science and “natural rules.” Thus, this passage directly implicates the eugenic “voluntary principle” as a form of disciplinary power because the eugenicists justify it

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<sup>277</sup> Ibid.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid, p. 38.

on the basis of its congruence with, in Crackanthorpe's words, "an arrangement of nature."<sup>279</sup> Therefore, in codifying eugenic principles in voluntary terms, the eugenicists do not transcend warlike relations of power, rather they recast their methods of violent domination within a separate, but no less coercive, discourse.

While Foucault's analysis of disciplinary discourses does not mention the use of religious arguments, which, it must be remembered, provided the main justifications for the eugenic "voluntary principle," even if discipline is codified in spiritual or religious terms, an element of violence remains. The eugenicists might counter Foucault's argument, protesting that the "voluntary principle" is not merely based upon the sciences or natural laws, but rather the intentions of the "Divine Spirit."<sup>280</sup> Indeed, it is the divinity of the eugenic cause that actuates the transcendence of the eugenic state from the violent space of the "war of nature." Eugenic discipline, that is, would not be externally imposed, but would spring from internal religious sentiments. This recalls the description of the voluntary principle in Freudian terms—it would be akin to a eugenic super ego that would operate through instinctual repression. However, this internal, psychical oppression of the super ego itself entails a large degree of mental violence. Thus, even the religious codification of eugenic discipline, upon which transcendence is based, fails to completely eliminate violent power relations, and therefore suggests that the "war of nature" has not been transcended.

Nevertheless, the eugenic discourse rests its legitimacy on a faith that this transcendence is possible—that political domination can be eliminated and that a

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<sup>279</sup> Crackanthorpe, 1907, pp. 46-7.

<sup>280</sup> Crackanthorpe, 1907, p. 12.



eugenic utopia can be created above the “war of nature” and without violent coercion. However, the eugenisists were not anticipating the establishment of this transcendent, utopian state within the near future. As Major Darwin attests, “it is of little use now constructing Utopias, which will vanish before us like will-o’-the wisps; though,” he continues, “with increasing knowledge, a time may come when it will be possible to erect such ideal structures with safety.”<sup>281</sup> Composing this in 1913, Darwin could be relatively hopeful about the future, although shortly thereafter, a situation emerged that would threaten his optimism—“the horror,” writes an unnamed eugenist in 1914, of “the greatest [war] the world has ever known.”<sup>282</sup> Nonetheless, during the “Great War,” the eugenists held fast to their utopian ideal; but even as they contemplated it and constructed a discourse around it, enshrouding it in both scientific jargon and lyrical prose, World War I littered Europe with scenes of bloodshed—indeed, they might have enshrouded their utopian vision within an optimistic discourse for its own protection, like a mother who bundles her infant child in cold weather.

### 3

#### *Eugenics and World War I: Affirmations of Transcendence*

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##### *i.*

##### *Introduction*

Before WWI, the subject of war was not an especially popular topic among eugenic writers. Between 1907, when the *Eugenics Review* was initially published,

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<sup>281</sup> Darwin, 1913, p. 5.

<sup>282</sup> Editorial, 1914, p. 197.

and 1913, only three articles appeared explicitly analyzing war from a eugenic perspective, two of which were written by D. S. Jordan. Not surprisingly, after the outbreak of war, this number skyrocketed; between 1914 and 1920, an equivalent time span, the *Eugenics Review* published more than thirty articles, reviews, and editorials mentioning “war” in the title.

According to the eugenic myth, it is worth reiterating, the eugenicist has transcended the state of nature, and from this newly acquired position he can control mankind’s biological future and change nature itself. However, the “war of nature,” at the same time, threatens to constitute a condition that cannot be transcended. As such, it embodies fate—the harsh reality that will negate the eugenicist’s plans to direct the future course of history.

It has been previously argued that military warfare, for eugenicists, did not represent the “war of nature” because they defined it as a “social agency.” WWI was squeezed into this definition, and implicit in this drive to define war eugenically was the need to maintain that this war was not the manifestation of nature on the grand scale. In other words, to think in terms of “social agencies” is to transcend nature—insistence on this definition itself is a rhetorical strategy to reinforce the claim to transcendence. After all, the word “agency” is itself a term that implies control, and in the eugenic context, this control is posed in opposition to the control of Nature. If, on the contrary, WWI was the manifestation of nature, the “harsh stepmother” at her worst, then fate would have already won, for this would unify war and politics within the singular logic of the “war of nature.” The two would become, as they have in

Foucaultian theory, nearly indistinguishable, and war would be the eternal, indelible attribute of all political activity—Nature, not the eugenicist, would be in control.

However, the ability to transcend the “war of nature,” to employ non-violent politics, is the precondition required by the eugenic utopia—the very foundation upon which the eugenic myth is built. Thus, the conception of war as “social agency” is crucial for its survival, and this is why, as will be demonstrated, the insistence upon this particular conception of war is the chief element which unifies and courses through all the eugenic war literature. While many eugenicists disagreed over the eugenic efficiency of war, and there was much that distinguished their treatments of the subject, they universally maintained the implicit definition of war as a “social agency.” While clinging to this definition, the eugenicist can indeed imagine himself above nature, looking down through a eugenic lens. From this position, no “social agency,” including war, can existentially threaten his plans—they can only improve or impair the “race.” But in insisting so vehemently upon this definition, they reveal their anxiety that war might actually be more than a mere “social agency” they can gaze down upon from the vantage they have obtained through biological self-consciousness—it might be the very embodiment of their unconscious, natural selves: the violent, evil remnant of nature that indelibly dwells inside every human being. At the time, there was a robust school of militarists that sought to justify war for exactly these reasons.

## ii.

*Transcending the Militarism-Pacifism Debate*

All the eugenists were vociferously opposed to militarism, but not because they adhered to pacifism; both positions, they might contend, justify political ideologies based upon what they hold to be “natural,” while the eugenist rises above this debate, shaping nature according to his will. Both doctrines, nonetheless, attracted numerous partisans, although eugenists only seldom discussed the literature of pacifists such as Norman Angell. Eugenists were unified, however, against militarism, which was not confined to the warmongering literature of General Friedrich von Bernhardi: “for the militarist point of view,” notes Theodore Chambers, “we might quote profusely from both German and Anglo-Saxon writers... Mahan, Lea, and Roosevelt in America, equally with Moltke, Treitschke and Bernhardi in Germany,”<sup>283</sup> all of whom held war to be a “biological necessity.” The American eugenist David Starr Jordan reviles militarism; he calls it “Pan-Germanism,” a “lying philosophy” of “contemptuous ignorance.”<sup>284</sup> Equally harsh, a eugenist editorial writer lambasts the militarist doctrine: “the war philosophy of the Prussian school is a reversion to savagery, a reactionary policy doomed to failure through its utter want of accord with modern conditions.”<sup>285</sup> The argument in the second half of the sentence is that militarism is foolish because in “modern conditions” war is dysgenic. However, both the eugenists and the militarists saw nature as warlike, therefore the editorialist’s condemnation of militarism as “a reversion to savagery” partly implies that this

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<sup>283</sup> Chambers, 1914, p. 276.

<sup>284</sup> Jordan, 1914, p. xix-xx.

<sup>285</sup> Editorial, “Eugenics and the War,” *Eugenics Review*, vol. VI, p. 197.

savage condition can be transcended. F. C. S. Schiller makes a more nuanced claim, providing what is most likely the prevailing view of eugenists: “both the militarist and the pacifist may appeal to science, and find perhaps that the verdict of history goes against both.”<sup>286</sup> The eugenist, it seems, does not extrapolate from history the “essence” of nature and then justify his claims by arguing that they are congruent with this essence. Instead, he places himself above nature, positing an ideal to which nature should approach and assessing prevalent social conditions to see if they are conducive to that end.

*iii.*

*The Eugenics of Primitive Warfare*

With modern war a notable exception, the eugenists did not typically differ regarding which social agencies they held to be beneficial and which they rebuked as dysgenic. One issue upon which there was universal agreement was the “racial efficiency” of primitive or ancient wars. “There can be no doubt,” writes Major Darwin,

That the methods by which our primitive human ancestors settled their disputes were similar to those now employed by savages in war... In times gone by the death-rate from war was... higher amongst the feeble in mind and body than that amongst those more highly endowed with manly qualities; and the selective effects thus arising were enhanced by the great fighters seizing many wives.<sup>287</sup>

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<sup>286</sup> Schiller, *Eugenics Review*, vol. VIII, p. 169.

<sup>287</sup> Darwin, 1915, pp. 92-3.

Many writers in the *Eugenics Review* echo this logic. D. S. Jordan, for example, romanticizes ancient war: “in earlier times men fought directly with each other. There was a certain glory in fighting. The man who was victorious was stronger than the man who was not.”<sup>288</sup> However, the argument that “primitive war had... a beneficial evolutionary effect,” was always posed as a caveat to the assertion that “civilization has greatly reduced the selective effects of war.”<sup>289</sup> In another example an editorialist writes, “war was one form of the struggle for existence which promoted the survival of the fittest and thus had created a tendency to racial improvement... [but] it must be generally conceded that war itself, under modern conditions of mechanics and mobility, is almost entirely dysgenic.”<sup>290</sup> Likewise, Theodore Chambers asserts that “in a distant age... the race was to the swift and the battle to the strong, but... modern conditions render war almost entirely a process of reversed selection.”<sup>291</sup> Havelock Ellis agrees,<sup>292</sup> as does J. A. Lindsay, who notes that “war with the simpler weapons of former ages is not comparable to war waged with all the formidable and sinister panoply of modern science.”<sup>293</sup> To conclude this survey of citations, Major Darwin can be given the last word: “primitive warfare was terrible though in some ways beneficial, whilst modern war is more terrible and utterly and entirely harmful.”<sup>294</sup> While all the eugenicists would grant some racial benefit to primitive warfare, these examples should not be taken to mean that the argument that modern war is dysgenic enjoyed uncontested consensus.

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<sup>288</sup> Jordan, 1913, p. 213.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid.

<sup>290</sup> Editorial, “Eugenics and the War,” *Eugenics Review*, vol. VI, p. 196.

<sup>291</sup> Chambers, 1914, p. 283.

<sup>292</sup> Ellis, 1917, p. 27.

<sup>293</sup> Lindsay, 1918, p. 133.

<sup>294</sup> Darwin, 1915, p. 95.

While the racial effects of war were a topic for debate, all the eugenicists agreed that, dysgenic or not, World War I would have a significant effect upon the collective germ plasm, because war with Germany, a “terribly dangerous foe,”<sup>295</sup> would certainly claim many lives. Major Darwin felt that Germany was epitomized by “her love of power over other nations, her preoccupation in warlike matters in times of peace, and her determination to win at all costs, moral or material.”<sup>296</sup> Poulton’s portrayal is not dissimilar: “Germany of deliberate intent proposes to wage the most effective kind of war that the human mind can conceive of, namely a combination of the highest scientific organisation with pure barbarism.”<sup>297</sup> It seems that Germany was not merely a fearfully diabolical enemy; as a nation it represented the anathema of the eugenic mythology—the complete submission to and embrace of the unconscious evil and warlike essence of nature. Indeed, the dream of a eugenic utopia hung in the balance of war, since WWI would drastically modify the course of human history: “we are,” Poulton avers, “unquestionably witnessing the most stupendously interesting step of human evolution that has occurred since that which differentiated man from the anthropoid.”<sup>298</sup> The eugenicists did not universally maintain that this would be a backwards step; however, they tended to argue that WWI would be dysgenic. The following section, again divided into lettered subsections, presents their arguments regarding war’s dysgenic effects.

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<sup>295</sup> Ibid, p. 94.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid.

<sup>297</sup> Poulton, 1916, p. 36.

<sup>298</sup> Poulton, 1916, p. 36.

*iv.*

*On the “Dysgenics of War”*

a) Introduction

Again, there was some debate over the racial effects of war, but the majority of eugenicists insisted that World War I would prove dysgenic, and in doing so, they often betrayed their implicit mythical hubris—a position above nature from which they could view society biologically and make this assessment. War would cause, E. B. Poulton laments, an “unnecessary waste of human material.”<sup>299</sup> It is not human lives, one should note, but biological units, pieces of physical “material,” which Poulton regrets losing. In this conception of “man” as “material,” a discursive commonplace for eugenicists, the mythology is already implicit: the eugenicist has transmuted or risen from simple man to surveyor of human biology; he exists not for the present moment, rather he surveys nature’s current material composition in order to guide her, from above, towards a better future; he is, at last, the extra-natural agent of historical salvation.

b) Chambers, Jordan, Darwin, and the Eugenicist as Interplanetary Visitor

The following section will seek to develop and validate this interpretation through an analysis of the language used by eugenicists to put forward the claim that war is dysgenic. Theodore Chambers, David Starr Jordan, Major Leonard Darwin, J. A. Lindsay, and Edward B. Poulton are the primary eugenic writers whose literature

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<sup>299</sup> Poulton, 1916, p. 38.



will be analyzed for these purposes.<sup>300</sup> The appropriate starting place is with Theodore Chambers' article entitled "Eugenics and the War" in which he puts forward the definition of war as a "social agency." The essayist begins by recalling the precise meaning of Galtonian eugenics: "the study of agencies under social control that may improve or impair the racial qualities of future generations." He then queries to what extent "the condition of war can be said to be under social control."<sup>301</sup> After wrestling with this question, he finally concludes that "in wartime,

...a condition is produced which is not conducive to the perpetuation of the best of the race. War is shown to be an agency—under social control—which tends to impair the racial qualities of future generations physically and mentally.<sup>302</sup>

This is the thoroughly eugenic definition of war that implicitly runs through all the subsequent arguments made by eugenists pertaining to its racial effects. The eugenists construct war not as a "biological necessity" or the "continuation of politics by other means," but as a mere "social agency" that "tends to impair the race." Such "agencies," by definition, do not possess moral or philosophical characters of their own. They cannot be deemed morally sound or unsound in any platonic sense, but can only be judged on the basis of whether or not they are "conducive to the perpetuation of the best of the race." Ideally, morals would eventually conform to eugenic principles, and accordingly, eugenists often condemned as immoral any custom that

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<sup>300</sup> The articles of these writers have been chosen as the primary texts for analysis because their authors published multiple articles in the *Eugenics Review* and can therefore be considered to represent the majority views of eugenists as a whole. While British eugenics was heterogeneous and there were other writers on the fringes of eugenics who supported the argument that war is dysgenic, this project seeks to construct and analyze the central myth of the eugenic discourse, and therefore, it will draw only from writers who can be considered to lie at the heart of the movement.

<sup>301</sup> Chambers, 1914, p. 217.

<sup>302</sup> Chambers, 1914, p. 289.

seemed dysgenic. In regards to war, D. S. Jordan played this role enthusiastically, proving himself to be war's most vociferous moral detractor.

David Starr Jordan was not only the first eugenicist to make the argument that war is dysgenic, he also clung to this point with more zeal than any other contributor to the subject. He reiterated ad nauseam his thesis that “the effect of war on nations is to spoil the breed”<sup>303</sup> in many books, including *The Blood of the Nation* (1901) and *War and the Breed* (1915),<sup>304</sup> as well as articles, such as “War and Manhood” and “The Eugenics of War,” which appeared in the *Eugenics Review*.<sup>305</sup> Jordan owns that he only rehashes a point made by Charles Darwin,<sup>306</sup> but he argues that war is dysgenic with his own distinctive literary style:

‘The best ye breed’ is war’s insatiable call. Send your best, your fittest your most courageous, your youths of patriotism and your men of loyal worth, send them all and breed your next generation from war’s unfit remainder. Do that, as Scotland has done it, and what says your biology? Like father like son. Like seed like harvest. You cannot breed a Clydesdale from a cayuse, neither can the weakling remnant of a warlike nation breed a new generation of heroes for a new generation’s wars.<sup>307</sup>

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<sup>303</sup> Jordan, 1913, p. 197.

<sup>304</sup> Jordan, like Caleb Saleeby, was a bit of an outcast from the ranks of the EES. It is therefore worthy of mention that the epigraph to this work is from Saleeby. It reads, “since individuals pass away, parenthood is the supreme factor in the destiny of nations.”

<sup>305</sup> While he was not a *British* eugenicist, D. S. Jordan is included in this analysis because his work was frequently published in the *Eugenics Review*.

<sup>306</sup> In his 1871 work *The Descent of Man*, Darwin tersely summarized the entire case for the dysgenics of war argument: “In every country in which a large standing army is kept up, the finest young men are taken by the conscription or are enlisted. They are thus exposed to early death during war or are often tempted into vice, and are prevented from marrying during the prime of life. On the other hand the shorter and feebler men, with poor constitutions, are left at home, and consequently have a much better chance of marrying and propagating their kind” (Darwin, 1871, p. 160). Jordan cites this passage frequently.

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 210.

Excessively proverbial, Jordan's oratorical style is unmistakable. He not only indicted war for "obliterating" a nation's "most virile elements,"<sup>308</sup> he also argued that it impoverished intellectual life, stating, "we do not know how many potential Shakespeares, Newtons, Miltons, Cromwells, Wordsorths, and Tennysons belong to the great roll of the slain unnumbered, whose potential fathers fell on the thousand battlefields of Europe."<sup>309</sup> That these intellectuals were largely middle-class did not escape eugenicists' perception. Indeed, the eugenicists were guilty of somewhat fetishizing the middle class, maintaining, in Chambers' words, that "apart from the loss of life entailed on the battle-field," it is in the "injury of the war to this class... that the real injury to the nation lies."<sup>310</sup> This was, perhaps, the most persuasive argument for the eugenic condemnation of war.

In "The Eugenics of War," Jordan careens through history to confirm his view, narrating the war-induced demise of every belligerent nation from Korea to Italy. The former, long ago, "was more civilised than Japan, a people with a fine artistic sense... But," he notes sadly,

within Korea for centuries there was continuous strife. Each victorious faction cut off the heads of prominent rivals, and this reversal of selection had much to do with the utter failure of Korea as a nation. The cause of its utter collapse... lies largely in the fact of such reversal.<sup>311</sup>

These sweeping generalizations were highly typical in Jordan's writing. However, in the case of France, he is slightly more nuanced. In the "wars of Napoleon," he

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<sup>308</sup> Jordan, 1915, see "Prefatory Note" and *passim*.

<sup>309</sup> Jordan, 1913, p. 203.

<sup>310</sup> Chambers, 1914, p. 283.

<sup>311</sup> Jordan, 1913, p. 203.

remarks, “four millions of young men fell.” He argues that “these men represent a potential development in their descendants perhaps nearly as great as that which has come from the descendants of those who were survivors,”<sup>312</sup> and Laski corroborates: “the wars of Napoleon and his code have had a disastrous effect on the physique of the French nation.”<sup>313</sup> In the American Civil War, the effect was the same, both “North and South, the nation was impoverished by the loss... The men that died in ‘the weary time’ had better stuff in them than the father of the average man of to-day.”<sup>314</sup> In the case of England, “we find an efficient cause of the poverty and weakness in the London slums, and in the hopelessness of the poor throughout England.”<sup>315</sup> “Why,” Jordan asks rhetorically, “is it that three or four—some say eleven—millions of Englishman are unable to earn a decent living, or any living at all, in England to-day? ...The answer lies in the reversed selection of war.”<sup>316</sup>

As Jordan reiterates his argument, becoming increasingly dramatic, one begins to discern the eugenic myth lurking within his lyrical prose. Writing proverbially about the “blood that stained the river” and the “piles of skulls” strewn across the countryside, he reminds the reader not to think of the lost lives themselves, but the “blood” that is either “spent or saved.”<sup>317</sup> Similarly, after recounting the story of a “great battle” that took place in Novara of Northern Italy, Jordan asserts,

the significance of such events lies not in the fate of kings, nor does it lie in the fate of the men, nor yet in the waste of their

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<sup>312</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 204.

<sup>313</sup> Laski supports this assertion, suggesting that the reportedly small stature of Frenchmen is causally linked to war’s dysgenic effects. (Laski, 1910, p. 201)

<sup>314</sup> Jordan 1913, p. 211.

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 207.

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 205.

lives, nor even in the sorrows of those who loved them. It is found in the effect upon the race.<sup>318</sup>

One should not, Jordan implies, measure the horror of war by its immediate moral effects, but by the racial damage it will inflict on the future. But why reiterate this argument with so many examples? Why traverse through such a large expanse of military history to so forcibly hammer this point? It may seem that Jordan merely wants to make a well supported argument, but the deeper reason is didactic: the compounding of examples functions as practice for thinking eugenically. Each subsequent illustration makes the same exhortation: consider war not in the present, but in its future racial effects; do not position yourself within history as its victim, but rise above history so that you can perceive the means to control it. By so vehemently repeating his charge that one think in eugenics, war becomes merely a didactic tool for the eugenic cause, a catalyst for the spread of biological self-consciousness. Thus, it appears that “war” itself does not frighten Jordan, nor are its dysgenic effects his primary concern. Rather, his preoccupation is the maintenance of the eugenicist’s self-conscious, transcendent lens; his real fear is unconscious thought itself.<sup>319</sup>

This fear of unconsciousness is the darker side of the mythology of eugenics, whereas the brighter side is the sincere belief that through self-consciousness, the “war of nature” can be transcended and history can be controlled; but although this

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<sup>318</sup> Ibid, p. 204.

<sup>319</sup> It merits mention that Jordan’s 1915 work *War and the Breed* received a scathing critique written by G. G. Coulton which appeared in the *Eugenics Review*. Coulton opens his review writing, “it is almost incredible that this volume should have been published by a biological student and the principal of a university: the book stands as a warning against partisanship in science” (Coulton, 1915, p. 287). Coulton deplors the degree to which Jordan fails to perceive any of war’s eugenic effects, stating that Jordan wages a “campaign against everything which he lumps together under the vague title of ‘militarism’” (ibid, p. 288). We might grant Coulton a basis for critique: “by what extraordinary process of muddle has Dr. Jordan got it into his head that the universities of Paris and Oxford were founded ‘twelve hundred years ago’?” (Coulton, 1915, p. 291).

mythology, despite the former argument, may still seem hard to detect in Jordan's work, an analysis of Major Darwin's essay, "Eugenics During and After the War," provides a better, perhaps the best, opportunity to evince its existence. The spectacular prescience of Darwin's opening sentences sparks more than a small degree of amusement:

All of us must have at times experienced a feeling of surprise when reading about the views held by apparently wise and thoughtful persons in days gone by, and yet how seldom has this sensation been accompanied by a frank recognition of the fact that many of our opinions are certain to be rejected with like contempt by our descendants. A vague feeling that we may be mistaken in accepting even widely-held views on social matters shows itself, no doubt, at times in spasmodic efforts to see things as they really are...<sup>320</sup>

Coming from the pen of a eugenicist, this statement evokes a great deal of irony. Darwin's laudable self-awareness is matched only by his eugenic utopianism. This opening remark is meant to convince his readers that he is particularly aware of his own prejudices and especially sane in his judgments. Implicit in Darwin's feat of self-reflexivity is the following claim: to demonstrate a knowledge in the transience of one's own beliefs is surely the cornerstone of objectivity. Indeed, Darwin will need his readers to trust in his ability to think objectively, because the comment above is only the preamble to a peculiar thought experiment which presumes its author's possession of the purest objectivity imaginable: Darwin informs his readers what "a visitor from another planet" would think of modern war. He writes,

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<sup>320</sup> Darwin, 1915, p. 91.

Though it is extremely doubtful whether, by bringing such an imaginary witness into the case, we do anything towards getting rid of any of the prejudices dwelling in our minds, yet it may perhaps be worth while trying to realise how a stranger to this earth would regard our present methods of warfare... Our visitor would perhaps note that our military systems seem to be devised with the object of ensuring that all who are definitely defective in mind or body shall be as far as possible exempt from all risk of being shot at, whilst those who are especially strong, courageous or patriotic shall be placed in positions of great danger. Men with these noble qualities, he would see, are being singled out for destruction, whilst the unfit are being kept at home to become the fathers of families; and, as no one denies that like tends to beget like, would not this appear like a deliberate attempt to deteriorate the natural qualities of coming generations?<sup>321</sup>

Like the preamble before it, this passage is wonderfully ironic. As he places himself in the position of this immaculately objective “imaginary witness,” Darwin succeeds only in restating exactly, almost word for word, the prevailing opinion of eugenicists regarding the “racial effects” of modern war. Thus, the eugenicist is equated with a figure who does not merely reside in a zone of objectivity, nor even speak from the transcendent space above nature, but rather hails down from the cosmos. This passage is an avowal that to be a eugenicist is to view nature from above, and it gives the clearest testimony of all to the argument that a myth of transcendence lies at the heart of the eugenic discourse. According to this myth, the eugenicist has transcended the “war of nature” and thereby expunged himself of original sin. Thus, it is not war, the dysgenic “agency,” which can bring him back down, but rather the realization that the

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<sup>321</sup> Ibid, pp. 91-2.

“war of nature” remains inside him; that he is indelibly tainted by natural belligerence and is still as “barbaric,” as evil, as his ancestors.

In the rest of his article, Darwin considers the more specific effects of war and shifts to the question of what “eugenists ought to advocate in view of this anticipated damage to the racial qualities of future generations.”<sup>322</sup> One such effect is the “exceptional excess of women” caused by the high fatality of soldiers. Accordingly, Darwin is forced to consider the “racial effects of promiscuity.”<sup>323</sup> He concludes that promiscuity “would tend to cultivate in the race the undesirable qualities prevalent amongst those who refuse to follow customary moral rules, or, in other words, to be dysgenic.”<sup>324</sup> Another consideration is the crucial importance to, perhaps, proselytize others into the ranks of the eugenics movement:

We must keep insisting on the fact that enduring racial deterioration must be included together with misery, waste, and hindrance to moral, social and scientific progress in the list of war’s evils. No feeling of excitement or exaltation must ever be allowed to blind us to the realities of the situation, because our best hope lies in making these realities patent to all.<sup>325</sup>

To grapple with the “racial deterioration” resultant from war, Darwin implies, is to grasp the “realities of the situation.” This logic makes the implicit argument that the eugenic perspective, more than any other, conforms to reality. Moreover, in asserting that “our best hope lies in making these realities patent to all,” Darwin shows his desire that all of society should come to possess this hyper-real eugenic consciousness. Thus, the mythical eugenic ideal emerges: a society in which everyone has “risen” to

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<sup>322</sup> Darwin, 1915, p. 95

<sup>323</sup> Ibid, p. 101.

<sup>324</sup> Ibid, p. 102.

<sup>325</sup> Darwin, 1915, p. 95.



eugenic consciousness, imbibing it as if it were religious dogma. That is, once the “realities” are made “patent to all,” a eugenic despot would be superfluous—every individual, the entire state itself, would transcend the “war of nature.”

### c) The “Evil” of Military Volunteerism

One of the basic arguments within the “dysgenics of war” discourse was that any nation whose military is composed of volunteers will necessarily suffer from acute degeneration. An editorial writer sums up the argument:

The British Empire, by reason of maintaining her army on a voluntary basis, must inevitably suffer racially more than other nations... In countries with universal compulsory service the reduction in effective males will be spread over the entire population; good and bad will alike be reduced. In this country the types which are physically and mentally superior will volunteer for active service. Those of the strongest character, possessing most love of adventure, the greatest initiative, the keenest and the fittest will lay themselves out to be reduced in numbers... The cream of the race will be taken and the skimmed milk will be left. Although the system may give victory and national prestige, the racial effect must be injurious. It may even be disastrous.<sup>326</sup>

This condemnation of voluntary military systems was repeated with only slight variations. In *War's Aftermath*, D. S. Jordan's short study of the “racial consequences” of the American Civil War, one of the “preliminary assumptions” which “served as a scaffolding” for the project was that “the volunteers represented a better human element than the conscripts; since these went first to the war... they

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<sup>326</sup> Editorial, p. 197.

suffered the greatest loss.”<sup>327</sup> An anonymous piece published in the *ER*, called “Compulsory Military Service,” states that the “evil of war... is obviously at its worst where a voluntary military system prevails.”<sup>328</sup> E. B. Poulton makes a similar argument,<sup>329</sup> and Major Darwin uses identical language: “the evil consequences which must now be anticipated from all wars will be at their very worst where a system of voluntary service prevails.”<sup>330</sup> The condemnation of military volunteerism as “evil” is another example of the eugenic drive to make morals conform to eugenic principles.

#### d) Miscellaneous Dysgenics

As the war continued, the “dysgenics of war” discourse shifted towards more practical and specific concerns. For example, an editorialist notes that war hampers reform, lamenting in 1915 that “the war must inevitably prove disastrous as regards the aims and hopes of eugenists; for many social reforms, almost within sight a few months ago, will be postponed probably for years.”<sup>331</sup> J. A. Lindsay, writing in 1918, no longer argued in abstract terms that war would eliminate the “best and bravest,” but could draw from more concrete examples such as the loss of university men: “Poets, writers, artists, thinkers and statesmen—the Intelligentsia of the Nations—have fallen in large numbers. The universities have in some cases been practically emptied.”<sup>332</sup> Also, rehashing Darwin’s point, he noted the disproportion between

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<sup>327</sup> Jordan, 1914, p. 12.

<sup>328</sup> Anonymous, “Compulsory Military Service,” *Eugenics Review*, vol. VII, p. 201.

<sup>329</sup> Poulton, 1916, p. 37.

<sup>330</sup> Darwin, 1915, p. 95.

<sup>331</sup> Anonymous note, “Eugenics and War,” 1915, p. 131.

<sup>332</sup> Lindsay, 1918, p. 135.

males and females, declaring that “there will be three million more women than men in these islands in the not distant future.”<sup>333</sup> A brief note in the *ER* from 1917 called “The Effects of War on Crime” observed that war has caused an increase in juvenile delinquency, and there has also “been an appalling increase of ‘pilfering’ both [at the front] and at home, revealing a general lessening of regard for honesty.”<sup>334</sup> All of these observations were put forward as causes that would degrade the biological quality of future generations. Examples such as these demonstrate the breadth of eugenic thought—eugenists wanted to conceive of all aspects of society in terms of their racial effects, for their myth entails a new position with respect to all social phenomena. Having discussed the arguments put forward by eugenists to show that war is dysgenic, the claims on the opposing side of the debate can now be addressed.

v.

#### *War's Racial Benefits*

Although many of the following arguments regarding war's eugenic effects appear as caveats in articles that conclude in a condemnation of war, they show that eugenists attempted to display a scientific or non-partisanship attitude towards war. They intended to judge war solely as a “social agency,” that is, not morally or philosophically, but on the basis of its racial effects alone. Consequently, the

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<sup>333</sup> Lindsay, 1918, p. 135.

<sup>334</sup> Author's initials, N. A., “The Effects of War on Crime,” 1917, p. 368.

eugenists did not deplore all aspects of military conflict. For example, they were happy to concede that the preparation for war may be racially beneficial. According to Chambers, peacetime military training

...sets a high physical standard and it trains to that standard. It increases the moral [sic] of the nation and may give survival value to certain desirable characteristics... We may also remember that to be prepared for war is one of the most effectual means of preserving peace and thus promoting the welfare of the race.<sup>335</sup>

While this argument has the feel of an afterthought, it is corroborated by Major Darwin, who also perceives some racial benefit from war preparedness:

Military training certainly makes men more strong and healthy for the time being, and probably permanently; and though, according to modern scientific views, no beneficial racial effects will thus be directly produced, yet their physical fitness will make them both more attractive to the other sex and more useful as bread-winners.<sup>336</sup>

While a positive attitude towards military training was near universal, the issue of volunteerism and its supposed “evil” generated more controversy. It is quite surprising that of all the eugenists who held that voluntary military service is the basis of its dysgenic effects, D. S. Jordan is the first to hedge this assumption. In *War's Aftermath*, he used the “very complete records of the military companies from Rockbridge County” which

...showed who were the volunteers, who the conscripts, and who had deserted.... it was thus possible to compare the

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<sup>335</sup> Chambers, 1914, p. 282.

<sup>336</sup> Darwin, 1915, p. 96.

descendants of certain selected volunteers with those of conscripts, and both with those of deserters. However, it was soon discovered that our assumption was too sweeping; as a class the volunteers were not notably superior to the conscripts.<sup>337</sup>

Jordan points out various reasons why volunteers were not necessarily superior to conscripts. For example, he notes that

...there was a very considerable body of good men who were opposed to war as a settlement of political questions, who were not in sympathy with the Southern cause, or at any rate saw nothing in the contest which appealed to them to the extent of making them willing to risk their lives. These men did not volunteer, and at last they became 'conscripts.'<sup>338</sup>

It is, of course, this sort of observation, which gestures to the multiplicity of factors that influence individual decision making, the heterogeneity of social groups, and the near ridiculousness of trying to predict social behavior, that exposes not only the impracticality but absurdity of eugenics. While in this passage Jordan reassesses his initial assumption when confronted with the multivalent nature of social reality, this is a highly unusual display of prudence; eugenics, one might say, is the science of sweeping assumptions. Accordingly, Major Darwin makes a similar argument to Jordan, questioning the alleged superiority of volunteer soldiers, but does so with a broad generalization: "it is the men out of work who enlist in greatest numbers and," compounding one assumption on another, "they are inferior on the whole to the men in work."<sup>339</sup> Insofar as volunteer soldiers are not the "best and bravest," but rather a

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<sup>337</sup> Jordan, 1914, pp. 13-4.

<sup>338</sup> Jordan, 1914, p. 15.

<sup>339</sup> Darwin, 1915, p. 97.

gang of loafers, war can, Darwin implies, perform the eugenic task of disposing of them.

Speculations regarding war's beneficial racial effects, similar to those concerning its dysgenics, became increasingly specific as the war matured. J. A. Lindsay noted in 1918 that the "marriage-rate for the quarter ending September 30<sup>th</sup>, 1915," was "the highest ever recorded for England and Wales."<sup>340</sup> This agreeably moral accomplishment also entails the racial benefit of decreased promiscuity and therefore fewer undesirable babies. As Lindsay sums up approvingly, "war tends to depress the birth-rate."<sup>341</sup> In addition, he notes that war rouses interest in education,<sup>342</sup> and he makes the peculiar observation that war is a "mental tonic" because it has caused a "decline of insanity" as well as an abatement in the "rate of suicide."<sup>343</sup> In light of this vast variety of racial effects rising from the practice of war, Chambers concludes,

The truth of the matter, is probably to be found, as usual, between the extreme opinions. It is probably true to say that every case must be considered on its merits, that the eugenic and dysgenic effects of war are infinitely varied according to circumstances.<sup>344</sup>

After time to reflect on the war's impact, Major Darwin also places his trust in the wisdom of a more moderate view. He seems to have apprehended the basic inadequacy of making broad assumptions regarding the "racial effects of war," when,

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<sup>340</sup> Lindsay, 1918, p. 136.

<sup>341</sup> Lindsay, 1918, p. 137.

<sup>342</sup> Lindsay, 1918, p. 143.

<sup>343</sup> Lindsay, 1918, pp. 142-3.

<sup>344</sup> Chambers, 1914, p. 197.

in 1926, he blandly asserts, admitting a sizeable degree of ignorance, that they “are sometimes eugenic, and sometimes dysgenic...”<sup>345</sup>

Thus, it seems the eugenists are looking to develop a particular understanding of war that estimates its value only in the “scientific” terms of its racial effects. Recalling H. G. Wells’ “New Republicanism,” this conception does away with philosophical arguments and considers war while confronting the “reality” that history is a “tissue and succession of births.” Accordingly, war represents nothing more than a “social agency” which diminishes human “material.” The eugenic mythology is implicit in this conception, which seeks to view social phenomena from above. Only this view, what they hold to be the scientist’s unbiased perspective, can offer a valid appraisal of war, while all others, they assure themselves, have absolutely nothing of interest to say on the matter. Is war good or bad? Only the eugenicist, it seems, is qualified to reply, for

the discussion of this question on philosophical and academic grounds is possibly as foolish and as futile as Nero’s musical efforts while Rome burnt. The horror of a great war—the greatest the world has ever known—is upon us, and the eugenic and dysgenic effects of war are about to be put to the supreme test of actual experience. All we can now do is to put forward every endeavor to mitigate the racial injury to the utmost of our power.<sup>346</sup>

This editorial writer in the 1914 *Eugenics Review* discards as “foolish” and “futile” the philosophical and academic perspectives on war, implicitly claiming that the “eugenic and dysgenic effects of war” are the only parameters through which one can

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<sup>345</sup> Darwin, 1926, p. 499.

<sup>346</sup> Editorial, p. 197.

understand what war is in “reality.” This, too, is central to the myth that inspires eugenis—theirs is the only view that really matters, for they are perched above nature, while everyone else scurries about blindly within it. They wished, of course, that all of society would convert to the transcendent eugenic perspective, but since this was unlikely to occur in the near future, for the time being, the mitigation of the racial injury of war became the eugenis’ own self-allotted responsibility, and a top priority of the EES.

vi.

*Measures for Mitigation*

Despite the few eugenic benefits of war, the official eugenic stance held that, in aggregate, “war under modern conditions contains a great number of dysgenic influences. Let us therefore,” Chambers concludes, “look to these and see to what extent we may mitigate these influences by the application of a constructive eugenic policy...”<sup>347</sup> The following section presents some of the measures that the eugenis recommended pertaining to “how the evil effects of war can be minimised.”<sup>348</sup>

Numerous measures were advocated, such as Major Darwin’s suggestion that soldiers only be “kept with the colours for short periods,” along with a law that would “prevent wounded men from again fighting in the same campaign,”<sup>349</sup> both of which would raise the likelihood of soldiers’ genes being passed on. The vast majority of

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<sup>347</sup> Chambers, 1914, p. 283.

<sup>348</sup> Darwin, 1915, p. 96.

<sup>349</sup> Darwin, 1915, p. 96; p. 97.



ideas were in this vein, concerning incentives for combatants to marry.<sup>350</sup> As Major Darwin asserts,

The aim of the eugenicist should be to see that every encouragement is given to the combatants to settle down to a married life, in order to promote the reappearance of their manly qualities in the coming generations.<sup>351</sup>

It would also be eugenically prudent to provide for the families of soldiers that were left behind; “the wives and children of those who have gone to the front,” writes an editorialist, “should be well cared for and encouraged to maintain the advantage already gained in the struggle for existence.”<sup>352</sup> A humorous figure of speech, this idea of an “advantage already gained in the struggle for existence” is eugenic jargon meaning, simply, that this family is above average in “fitness.” Major Darwin also proposes that the government provide to the families of war veterans “an additional allowance for each living child.”<sup>353</sup> The lecture in which Darwin makes this suggestion is followed by a transcribed discussion, and all the participating eugenicists heartily agree with this idea.<sup>354</sup> It is later formulated into an official stance taken by the EES, which reads, “pensions should be increased substantially for every child.”<sup>355</sup>

The eugenicists also proposed various measures that, not directly eugenic, would promote the overall welfare of veterans so that they might more easily transition back into family life and, as a result, become more desirable spouses.

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<sup>350</sup> This is advocated in numerous articles, but discussed at length in Chambers’ “Eugenics and the War,” (Chambers, 1914, p. 283).

<sup>351</sup> Darwin, 1915, p. 96.

<sup>352</sup> Editorial, p. 198.

<sup>353</sup> Darwin, 1915, p. 98.

<sup>354</sup> Darwin, 1917, p. 15, and *passim*.

<sup>355</sup> Editorial, “Compulsory Military Service,” 1915, p. 206.

Because, they reasoned, “idleness is apt to lead to discontent and drink,”<sup>356</sup> the eugenists wanted to speedily put veterans back to work; however, if too many veterans sought work simultaneously, the surplus of labor might cause a “lowering of wages.”<sup>357</sup> Consequently, the eugenists formed a body called the “Professional Classes War Relief Council,” which sought to promote the economic wellbeing of veterans, as well as safeguard the interests of the middle class generally. In bureaucratic language, an editorialist describes this council, which is to be

composed of the representatives and secretaries of the principal professional institutions and of representatives of the various societies organizing relief... there will [therefore] be available a body eminently suited to co-ordinate efforts to relieve any distress which may arise within the middle classes. This council... [will also provide] certain centralised forms of assistance in the direction of temporary employment, hospitality, education, maternity aid and the like.<sup>358</sup>

Not long after the outbreak of war, the Professional Classes War Relief Council persuaded J. Pierpoint Morgan to make available his two houses at 13 and 14 Princes Gate, which were equipped and staffed as maternity nursing homes for the wives of officers to ensure the wellbeing of their “valuable offspring.” In the first two years of its operation “some 242 children of former doctors, lawyers, university teachers and other race heroes were born” at Princes Gate.<sup>359</sup> While the Council wanted to provide relief for veterans, they certainly did not desire to help veterans suffering “from ill-health which would have occurred under home conditions.” As Darwin noted with

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<sup>356</sup> Darwin, 1917, p. 8.

<sup>357</sup> Chambers, discussant in Darwin, 1917, p. 13.

<sup>358</sup> Editorial, p. 201.

<sup>359</sup> [http://www.galtoninstitute.org.uk/Newsletters/GINL9509/social\\_context.htm](http://www.galtoninstitute.org.uk/Newsletters/GINL9509/social_context.htm).

disapproval, “a large number of consumptives are, I am told, on the books of the Statutory Committees.”<sup>360</sup> Thus, they sought not to provide aid for veterans generally, but only for those veterans whose germ plasms they deemed fit for “hereditary transmission.”<sup>361</sup> Most frequently, however, the hopes they articulated regarding policy towards war veterans were entirely agreeable, even by today’s standards:

What we desire is that our fighting men shall not be placed at any disadvantage in comparison with their neighbours in regard to parenthood... [they] should be compensated so as to place them, if possible, in as good a position for marriage and home life as if they had not fought.<sup>362</sup>

The idea of the draconian eugenicist, breeding and sterilizing human beings as if they were cattle, is squarely contested by this excerpt. Advocating that veterans not be “placed at any disadvantage” resulting from their military service is unobjectionable.

However, some of the older, more distasteful goals of the eugenicists were also reiterated in the context of WWI, being infused with the increased urgency of wartime. Major Darwin declares,

The war makes it more than ever necessary boldly to face the difficult problem of checking the alarmingly rapid rate of multiplication of those whose large families are merely an indication of their utter incapacity to take thought for the future; and, if we have not courage enough to make the

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<sup>360</sup> Darwin, 1917, p. 7.

<sup>361</sup> Ibid. As an interesting aside, this term “hereditary transmission” recalls one of Galton’s early ideas. He proposed that individuals who passed certain tests proving their biological fitness should be given the honorary title of “VHT,” or “Valid for Hereditary Transmission.” There would be no law forcing sterilization upon those without this title, rather it would provide a means for disseminating eugenic considerations throughout the populace. (Soloway, 15.)

<sup>362</sup> Darwin, 1917, p. 4.

necessary reforms, national degradation is likely to be our well-deserved national punishment.<sup>363</sup>

These types of statements are those best remembered by contemporary scholars—the sweeping, prejudiced indictments of the “less prudential classes” for “multiplying” too quickly, coupled with an exhortation to “boldly” face the task of “checking” their increasing numbers. These frightful portions of the British eugenic discourse, rightfully implicated as the seeds of Nazi thought, were, nevertheless, often qualified or tempered by the eugenicists who articulated them. Darwin, for example, modifies his call for “bold” and “necessary reforms,” by assuring his readers that the primary method of

endeavoring to promote racial progress consists in making an appeal to the moral and national sentiments of the people, an appeal which ought to be especially effective in times of national emergency.<sup>364</sup>

This excerpt should remind the reader of the character of the eugenic utopia described in a previous section—it was decidedly not draconian. Eugenicists envisioned a state in which “racial progress” would be attained without a coercive political system, since each individual would live according to eugenic principles as if it were a religious duty—eugenics would operate through the “moral and national sentiments of the people.” Thus, proselytizing, or the dissemination of eugenic principles was basic to this final goal so that eugenics could some day become, in Galton’s words, an “orthodox religious tenet.” In addition, “spreading a knowledge of eugenics” might also be beneficial for mitigating the dysgenics of war. An anonymous eugenicist writes,

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<sup>363</sup> Darwin, 1915, p. 105.

<sup>364</sup> Ibid.

It... behoves [sic] those who have the interests of the race at heart to do all in their power to continue to spread a knowledge of eugenics, in order that those social readjustments that must follow war may be calculated to follow the lines desired, and also that facts and figures now available may be collected and tabulated for future service.<sup>365</sup>

While, on the surface, this passage is merely about mitigating war's dysgenic effects, suggesting that postwar policy and, vaguely put, "social readjustments" can be undertaken in a particularly eugenic way, it also provides an opportunity to return to the mythological analysis of eugenics.

The function of all "social agencies," not only war, may be made more eugenic through the two measures mentioned in the above passage: the "spread" of eugenic "knowledge" and the tabulation of "facts and figures." In fact, the concepts underlying these two activities, when put together, comprise the entire structure of the eugenic myth. "Facts and figures" represent the scientific element, while the "spread" of "knowledge" stands for proselytizing; together, brought to a climax, they constitute the technico-religious utopia in which eugenics, as both a science and "religious dogma," pervades the entire society and drives it towards the biological perfection of its subjects.

Every measure advocated by the eugenists for the mitigation of war's dysgenic effects, from incentives for soldiers to marry and beget children, reforms on the terms of military service, and economic protections for the middle class, to the simple spread of eugenic knowledge, constitute attempts to exert control on the biological future of the race. Thus the emphasis placed by eugenists on mitigation, in

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<sup>365</sup> Anonymous, 1915, p. 131.

a mythological interpretation, reveals their self-understanding as agents of historical redemption. At their most sanguine, the eugenists hold that not even war can obstruct their goal; it is, after all, a “social agency”—that which is under the control of society.

*vii.*

*War as Reversion*

This survey through the eugenic discourse on the topic of war has demonstrated that the eugenists were not militarists nor pacifists, but instead sought an attitude of moral impartiality towards war while at the same time considered how to mitigate its deleterious racial effects. Why were they impartial? How might one grapple with this stance in order to gain a greater understanding of the British eugenics movement itself? This thesis has sought to construct a mythology of eugenics—an analysis of the myth of transcendence that implicitly animates the eugenic discourse—which might provide an answer to these questions.

At the heart of the militarism-pacifism debate is a conflict of views regarding what is natural, which brings us back to the question that began this chapter—which is more “natural,” peace or war? When one looks into nature, what appear to be its most salient characteristics: conflict, war, and violent antagonism or rather cooperation, peace, symbiosis, and interdependence? The eugenists, it has been argued, viewed nature as warlike, but why, then, not side with von Bernhardt and the militarists and support WWI as a “biological necessity”? The answer to this question is precisely because at the heart of their movement was a myth about transcending “nature” which has never before been fully articulated in historical literature. This myth tells the eugenists that through understanding Darwinism, an idea that both

endowed them with self-consciousness and represented a potentially limitless, and therefore godlike, technological power, they had transcended the state of nature, cleansed themselves of its warlike character, and acquired the capacity to control nature and direct its future course of development. This is why they have no need to assert that nature is either violent or nonviolent—what nature “is” does not in any way dictate their plans for the future. And this is why their emphasis is constantly on mitigation—it is through these “eugenic measures” that their control begins to be exercised.

However, contained within the eugenic myth itself is the dark possibility that this transcendence is wholly chimerical. This survey of the eugenic literature on WWI should therefore conclude with the quotations that seem to evince this vague anxiety—the fear that war is something beyond a “social agency.” Despite Major Darwin’s implicit claim that the eugenicist views the world similarly to a “visitor from another planet” and has therefore transcended the “war of nature,” the following excerpts connote the possibility that war has the capacity to pull him back down, or rather, threaten to expose his transcendent position and his power for control as mere delusions. They suggest that war is precisely that which can never be left behind, the very essence of a nature which can never be fully transcended.

The first suggestion that war eludes definition as a “social agency” arises from the eugenicists’ recurrent depiction of war as form of reversion. Many eugenicists assert with trepidation that “in time of war there is a rapid reversion to a more primitive civilization.”<sup>366</sup> This theme is developed by an unnamed eugenicist who maintains that

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<sup>366</sup> Editorial, p. 199.

“if nothing is done to assist these families over the difficulties of the war period, the standard of culture and civilization obtained by generations of struggle will inevitably be lost.”<sup>367</sup> Elaborating on this point, Poulton writes that war somehow entails “carrying the world backwards to lower and more brutal ideals, favouring the success and increase of lower and more brutal types of man.”<sup>368</sup> Thus the eugenicists evince a vague sense of reversion that accompanies the practice of war. That is, war is not merely an “agency” hindering racial improvement, but rather a qualitative return to a “more primitive civilization.”

This reversion, consequently, goes beyond fluctuations in race quality because it has an aggregate effect on the more immaterial character of society; the reversion is not merely biological, but spiritual. Major Darwin asserts that “because the arts of peace are becoming more and more the sources of our noblest aspirations... success in war is surely becoming less and less a test of human worth.”<sup>369</sup> This is not a particularly eugenic-minded statement, but within the context of eugenics, it suggests that war constitutes an altogether different arena of merit, not the realm ennobled by “arts of peace,” but a darker space of violence and aggression. Thus, again, war begins to break loose from the category of “social agencies” because it is not merely dysgenic; it is the incarnation of a previous, less enlightened, age.

Thus, to be engaged in war is to undergo a reversion into nature, but war might also demonstrate that no one, not even the eugenicist, has ever actually left. As Chambers puts it, “war tears off the decent garments of custom and leaves the soul

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<sup>367</sup> Editorial, p. 200.

<sup>368</sup> Poulton, 1916, p. 37.

<sup>369</sup> Darwin, 1915, p. 94.



naked.”<sup>370</sup> The metaphorical function of war, it seems, is to strip away custom and undress man to his barest self. Therefore, eugenics, which is portrayed as a “religious duty,” man’s highest spiritual custom, is threatened with annihilation. In other words, the eugenicist as Freud’s “prosthetic god,” cloaked in the “magician’s” robe of technological omnipotence, must fear that if war “tears off” the “decent garments of custom,” his magical robe, too, will be stripped. Naked and impotent, the eugenicist would no longer be able to claim the perspective of a “visitor from another planet.” His moment of transcendence would be exposed as a fictional fantasy, a prosthetic imitation of that which it purported to be.

Therefore, war does not merely impair the race, but represents the eugenicist’s mythical antithesis. “There is no greater revealer,” testifies Chambers, “of the heart of man.”<sup>371</sup> Thus, by exposing this “heart,” revealing the eugenicist’s nude, instinctual self, war demonstrates that he still bears the stamp of nature, or that a violent nature is still inside him, and silencing his claims to the contrary, that he himself resides within nature. Thus, to counteract nature, or alter the future of nature through the “prophecy” provided by biological science, is merely a vain attempt to erase that which is indelible or counteract fate. Conveniently, this interpretation of war as fate does not need to stray far from eugenic literature; Chambers says openly that war represents “the inevitability of conflict... the hand of fate.”<sup>372</sup> Later in his article, Chambers rejects this metaphorical construction, defining war in his conclusion as a “social agency,” but his acknowledgement of this metaphor is crucial; it shows that the

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<sup>370</sup> Chambers, p. 273.

<sup>371</sup> Chambers, Theodore, “Eugenics and the War,” *Eugenics Review*, vol. VI, (1914), p. 273.

<sup>372</sup> Chambers, 1914, p. 271.

eugenists were cognizant of this threatening meaning of war even as they tried to conceive of it as something benign.

It is unclear whether the eugenists should be condemned for falling for the myth of transcending nature. In this interpretation, the eugenists were only guilty of dreaming of a utopia that would exist outside of nature and leave the condition of war behind. There is nothing ugly about this utopian vision, a state in which there would be a limitless capacity for the biological perfection of human beings. However, the idea of leaving nature, becoming supernatural, does seem illusory. We might let General von Bernhardi, as a sort of nemesis to the eugenicist, have the final say:

There is a certain beautiful dream of nations living in peace side by side, voluntarily imposing restraints upon themselves and recognizing their obligation to have regard for the just needs and wishes of other states. It is a dream in which the peoples which are morally and intellectually the strongest will be in a position to assert themselves as the arbiters of culture, even though such a thing is impossible without a more or less autocratic authority, which is incompatible with equal rights.

But it is none the less a dream only. As long as men remain men, force in its widest sense will determine the political and cultural importance of states. In the last resort it is the foundation of all intellectual and moral progress.<sup>373</sup>

Bernhardi does not use eugenic language, but it seems clear that he speaks of a “dream” that is reminiscent of the eugenic utopia. For the eugenicist, to “voluntarily” self-impose “restraints” means that the state authority ceases to be coercive, but Bernhardi challenges this logic—even those who are “morally and intellectually the strongest,” and, we should add, even those who profess to be spiritually transcendent

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<sup>373</sup> von Bernhardi, p. xix.

or religiously ordained, cannot become the “arbiters of culture” without an “autocratic authority.” The eugenist might contest that if the entire state became a religious space, the necessity for a central eugenic authority would melt away, obedience would spring from “moral sentiments” rather than structural coercion, and non-violent racial progress would ensue. However, again, this is fantasy; a condition of war seems to be mankind’s unalterable fate. “As long as men remain,” testifies Bernhardi, “force in its widest sense” is the “foundation of... progress;” it is that which permeates and underlies all political activity. British eugenics, then, clung to a myth in which force, political power, war, and oppression no longer adhered to what it means to be human.

## C O N C L U S I O N

*On "Horizontal" Transcendence*

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*Nature goes her own way, and all that to us seems an exception is really according to order.*<sup>374</sup>

–Johann Wolfgang von Goethe,  
*Conversations with Eckermann*, Dec. 9, 1824

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**T**he myth that asserts a human ability to transcend nature is not confined to eugenic thought—the story itself is personal. To put this in its simplest terms, the issue boils down to the conflict between determinism and the aspiration for *self*-determination. What control do we have over ourselves, over our futures, over who it is we would like to become? Can the aspects of ourselves that give us grief, that plague us, be left behind, overcome, or transcended? Or do we have no control over our lives? Are our efforts, no matter how promising they seem, totally wholly ineffectual? This thesis has presented the eugenic myth of transcending nature as a delusion. In the end, it is an idea that can never be realized, a hope which sprung from a moment of hubris—the eugenicist's attempt to exert his own control over the future could never become more than a vain, futile effort. In this conclusion I hope to

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<sup>374</sup> Goethe, Johann Wolfgang, von, *Conversations with Eckermann*, M. Walter Dunne, New York, London, 1901, p. 82.

further articulate why nature can never be transcended, but I will also try to suggest that a degree of self-determination is attainable.

*i.*

*The Inner Eugenicist*

When Harold Laski justifies his hope that eugenics may be able to achieve its goal of perfecting the biological quality of the race, he does so with an appeal to the scientific knowledge of the workings of evolution that was increasing at the time. He proclaims with satisfaction, “we are beginning really to understand the mysterious workings of heredity, and to realise how the chain that links father to son is forged.”<sup>375</sup> This acquired “understanding,” this disclosure of the “mysterious,” provides the new mental disposition that allows the race to be improved—that lets the son, so to speak, transcend the father. Of course, eugenics was not about improving the child with respect to the parent. The eugenicists planned to manipulate human evolution on the scale of the population—the son would not transcend the father; rather, they hoped, the descendants would transcend the ancestors. But to what extent can these two urges for improvement be separated? Both derive from a dissatisfaction with the present coupled with a desire to make the future better; both consider the “chain” of inheritance and search for ways for that chain to be broken. Can it really be denied that the personal will to overcome one’s genetic inheritance was the basic desire that animated the British eugenics movement?

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<sup>375</sup> Laski, 1910, p. 193.

To speak candidly, this connection is what has led me to write this thesis. I wanted to write about eugenics because it serves as a historical example of a group of individuals who believed that, through a form of knowledge, a self-consciousness about who and what they were, they could overcome themselves and become something better. This will for self-improvement through heightened understanding is the implicit topic of this thesis, and in my conclusion, I will grope for an answer to the question of whether this will must always be frustrated, or whether it can attain some form of satisfaction.

*ii.*

*Nature Takes Her "Revenge"*

The eugenisists admitted that their knowledge of heredity was elementary at best. While they understood Mendel's laws, they had no conception of how environmental stimuli affect gene expression, or that certain genetic disorders are linked to important evolutionary benefits. Was it only *premature* for the eugenisists to have proclaimed control over heredity and transcendence from nature? Can we now, with our rapid advancements in scientific and medical genetics, finally fulfill the mythical eugenic fantasy? I will present two arguments that suggest this question should be answered in the negative.

The first argument, the less persuasive of the two, derives from a theological position, and holds that the attempt to substitute a higher ideal for the conditions of nature fails to recognize that nature already constitutes the highest ideal imaginable. A book written in 1905 by Thomas Carson makes this argument. A massive tome of over five-hundred pages of philosophy and theology, this work, entitled *Man's*

*Responsibility, or How and Why, the Almighty Introduced Evil Upon the Earth*, was written entirely outside of the eugenic discourse but seems to comment on it directly:

As soon as man begins to tamper with his own nature, the nature the Almighty has thought fitting for him, and seeks to defeat its purposes, or to become something different, his fate is sealed... Nature will neither be cheated nor deceived, without taking instant revenge... We can form no ideal for ourselves, so high as the ideal of the Almighty, who has considered the matter carefully, and settled it for us, to the end of time... I advocate the principle... that any departure from nature, is to [man] personally a mistake.<sup>376</sup>

Carson's argument, which Montague Crackanthorpe derides as an "entertaining combination of arrogance and absurdity,"<sup>377</sup> holds that it is a "mistake" to attempt a "departure from nature." In other words, nature, the anthropomorphic being, will not allow herself to be transcended or transformed by human agents—anyone who attempts to do so will exact her "revenge." This is an archaic position which I do not intend to pose as the basis of my argument. However, a more salvageable element of Carson's passage is the notion that the conditions in which human beings exist already constitute an "ideal" which no human fantasy can justifiably exceed. Carson's implication, with which I am in agreement, is that by posing the eugenic utopia as a higher alternative to this ideal, the eugenicists fail to recognize the inexorable link between suffering and happiness. Carson asserts that "the greatest of our joys often arise from the greatest of our sorrows,"<sup>378</sup> and therefore, the eugenic utopia which

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<sup>376</sup> Carson, Thomas, *Man's Responsibility, or How and Why, the Almighty Introduced Evil Upon the Earth*, New York, London, 1905, (pp. 303-4).

<sup>377</sup> Crackanthorpe, 1907, p. 71.

<sup>378</sup> Carson, 1905, p. 305.

hopes to eliminate “sorrow” or suffering<sup>379</sup> would, in doing so, undermine the basis for happiness. This is the first reason why the eugenic fantasy of transcending nature is not only unattainable, but also wrongheaded.

The second, and in my view, more persuasive argument against attempting to fulfill the eugenic myth rests upon the inadequacy of politics to bring about a better stage of history or a more perfected society. Even if a government were erected that intended to realize eugenic principles, the mode by which it would operate, namely politics, would not be sufficient for the tasks which it hoped to accomplish. In this regard, it will be useful to cite Adam Philips, author of a brief work entitled *Darwin’s Worms*:

To be alive, [Darwin and Freud] tell us, let alone conscious, is to be subject to certain unavoidable pressures, is to be ineluctably involved in conflict. And they both seem to want us to believe that while political systems may modify our suffering, they can never significantly diminish it. To be in nature – and now there is nowhere else to be – demands, they imply, a more realistic acknowledgement of the limits of politics, of what we can do to improve our condition.<sup>380</sup>

The eugenic myth holds that while consciousness is situated within this “ineluctable” conflict, self-consciousness provides the ability to transcend it. However, despite their aversion to political domination,<sup>381</sup> the eugenists could not have denied that politics is the only tool available for state governance. A “realistic acknowledgement of the limits of politics” would force the eugenists to discard their fantasy and recognize that a utopian state is not politically possible.

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<sup>379</sup> Tocher, 1910, p. 125. See Chap. 3, sec. 1, sub. *iii*.

<sup>380</sup> Philips, 2000, p. 4.

<sup>381</sup> Schiller, *Eugenics Review*, vol. VIII, p. 170. See chap. 3, sec. 2, sub. *iii*.



If I can be excused for bringing into the discussion an intellectual who is not necessarily relevant in eugenics historiography, Max Weber helps uphold the argument that politics is not an adequate tool for achieving our goals. In Weber's view, all political action ultimately suffers from its inevitable futility:

It is entirely true and a fundamental fact of all history... that the ultimate product of political activity frequently, indeed, as a matter of course, fails utterly to do justice to its original purpose and may even be a travesty of it.<sup>382</sup>

It seems that somewhere between the mythical hopes of the eugenicists and Weber's views on politics a certain faith has been lost. The eugenicists hold fast to the promise of science to provide rational explanations for the world, explanations which can then be applied to social problems, while Weber seems to have come to grips with the paradoxes of rational action. For Weber, all action, no matter how ethically or morally justified, undermines itself. For this reason, any attempt to fulfill the eugenic myth by forming a utopia of biological perfection will always be frustrated by the basic inadequacy of "political activity... to do justice to its original purpose." A eugenic utopia, though a laudable dream, is simply not politically practicable. And as Weber ends his sentence, can we not think of Nazism insofar as "political activity," rather than doing "justice to its original purpose," Weber laments, "may even be a travesty of it"?

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<sup>382</sup> Weber, Max, "Politics as a Vocation," New York, p. 78.

## iii.

*Nature and the Inexplicability of Evil: A Brief Digression*

This thesis has attached a near endless stream of connotations to the word nature. In the Darwinian sense, it is warlike, violent, and antagonistic; in the eugenists' imperialistic sense, it is barbarous, primitive, and uncivilized; in the theological sense, it is immoral, tainted with sin, and evil; and in a final, less developed sense, it embodies chaos, the unknowable, and the inexplicable. If I may once again be excused for drawing from a scholar outside the scope of my subject, British literary critic Terry Eagleton helps tie these connotations together: "the less sense it makes, the more evil it is."<sup>383</sup> If nature is that which does not make sense, or is evil because it eludes sensibility, Darwinian natural selection represented to the eugenists a rational system that could render nature sensible, that could expunge evil from nature by making it conform to rational desires. The eugenic fantasy hoped not only to transcend nature but also to manipulate evolution so that human nature could be perfected. Human nature could then be cleansed of its primordial evil—the human condition would finally make sense.

The eugenic myth, then, is about a battle against inexplicability; the eugenists sought to challenge the inexplicable evil of nature. Though nature, allegedly, is warlike and evil, refusing to be understood, the eugenists wanted to impose a rational scheme that would transform human nature from an evil disposition into a benevolent way of being. After all, the desire to convert human nature from evil to benevolence does seem to be rationality justified; the problem, however, is that this is not a

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<sup>383</sup> I will use Eagleton in greater depth below. <http://www.newstatesman.com/ideas/2010/04/evil-social-essay-human-case>

politically practical goal. Are we therefore doomed to remain as sinful, absurd beings without any hope of redemption? While it seems wrong to imagine that we can transcend nature or alter it so that it conforms to our wishes, there are reasons for being optimistic—some form of transcendence is possible.

*iv.*

*Horizontal Transcendence*

It is important for me to admit that the mythological interpretation of eugenics that I have attempted to construct is overly simplistic. While I do think that the myth provides an original and nuanced understanding of British eugenics, I must concede that many eugenists were astute intellectuals, capable of making subtle distinctions that would challenge the degree to which my mythological analysis is really applicable. Moreover, I have constructed this myth even in the face of the knowledge that all of the relevant terms—nature, war, science, technology, transcendence, self-consciousness, etc.—can be understood in drastically different ways from how I have construed them. I would therefore like to reiterate that the eugenic myth I have described constitutes what might be called a hermeneutic structure, with each piece being interpreted in such a way that the image fits together.

The simplicity of the eugenic myth as I have constructed it, I think, lies in the overemphasis of the spatial distinction between nature and the transcendent space above nature. In this myth, the old philosophical problem of determinism vs. free will is spatially divided so that determinism corresponds to nature while free will only becomes possible outside of nature. Since the final lesson seems to be that one can

never leave nature, or that transcendence from nature is pure myth, the implication of my thesis is that determinism is inescapable. Even the moments when we, like the eugenists, think that we have escaped determinism, those very moments, it seems, are themselves determined.<sup>384</sup> Suffering, evil, and “unavoidable pressures” are endemic to nature and, as my thesis suggests, this condition cannot be transcended. I would like, however, to reiterate my self-criticism: this arrangement is too simple. Some form of redemption is possible without transcending our own nature, and to make this point, I will again quote from Eagleton.

To state it frankly, a degree of redemption, a smidgeon of self-determination is possible. According to Eagleton, it does not require that one conquer the laws of determinism in order to rise above them, but rather undergo a “traumatic” process of “breaking down and remaking.” I will quote Eagleton at length:

The modern age has witnessed what one might call a transition from the soul to the psyche. Or, if one prefers, from theology to psychoanalysis. There are many senses in which the latter is a stand-in for the former. Both are narratives of human desire - though for religious faith that desire can finally be consummated in the kingdom of God, whereas for psychoanalysis it must remain tragically unappeased. In this sense, psychoanalysis is the science of human discontent. But so, too, is theology. With Freud, repression and neurosis play the role of what Christians have traditionally known as original sin. In each case, human beings are seen as born in sickness. But they are thereby not beyond redemption. Happiness is not beyond our grasp; it is just that it requires of us a traumatic breaking down and remaking, for which the Christian term is conversion. Both sets of belief investigate phenomena which

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<sup>384</sup> Refer to this conclusion’s epigraph.

finally outstrip the bounds of human knowledge, whether you call this the enigmatic unconscious or an unfathomable God.

Eagleton maintains that for both psychoanalysis and theology (which would include the eugenic view<sup>385</sup>) “human beings are seen as born in sickness.” The eugenic myth proposes that to erase this sickly stamp of natural birth, nature must first be transcended and then biologically transformed. However, the redemption from sickness that Eagleton speaks of provides a more realistic alternative. It involves a “traumatic breaking down and remaking” that does not imply an exodus from nature but rather an engagement with the unknowable that is also part of nature—we can transcend ourselves, but we do not need to leave nature to do so.

Eagleton maintains that “many things – art and language, for example – are more than just a reflex of their social circumstances,” or in other words, they are not strictly determined, “but this is not to say that they drop from the skies.” Eagleton continues,

The same is true of human beings in general. If there is no necessary conflict between the historical and the transcendent, it is because history itself is a process of self-transcendence. The historical animal is one who is constantly able to go beyond itself. There are, so to speak, "horizontal" forms of transcendence as well as "vertical" ones. Why should we always think of the latter?

In other words, that something is not entirely a product of determinism, that it does not come from a purely determined realm, does not mean that it is necessarily supernatural or that it “drops from the skies.” Transcendence is not a fantasy, or a mythical

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<sup>385</sup> See chap. 3, sec. 1, sub. *i*.

escape from determinism; it is, simply put, a “process.” Nor is there only one kind of transcendence, for “there are, so to speak, ‘horizontal’ forms of transcendence as well as ‘vertical’ ones.” While the myth I have posed as the implicit idea structure underlying the eugenics movement does presume that transcendence is exclusively vertical, I think Eagleton’s notion of “horizontal” transcendence is apt. Determinism is not inescapable—there are various ways through which we can justifiably hope to achieve transcendence or self-determination.

Having asserted my own reasons for optimism, I would like to return to the section that began this conclusion, in which I argued that eugenics is a macro-level example of a conflict that is also personal. Eugenics, to restate my contention, is animated by the same drive that is exerted on an individual level—a will that seeks to challenge the degree to which we are genetically determined. This desire, for both the eugenicist and the individual, is about exercising control over ourselves by becoming self-conscious with respect to who and what we are. My thesis might suggest that this type of control is unattainable, but I would like to oppose my own conclusion. I think, following Eagleton, that through a certain, perhaps “traumatic” process, through both “vertical” and “horizontal” forms of transcendence, we might be able to challenge certain pieces of ourselves that seem genetically transfixed and overcome the condition of being entirely and woefully determined.

v.

*Closing Section: Evolution Happens*

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*The entire modern deification of survival per se, survival returning to itself, survival naked and abstract, with the denial of any substantive excellence in what survives, except the capacity for more survival still, is surely the strangest intellectual stopping-place ever proposed by one man to another.*<sup>386</sup>

--William James

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Departing entirely from the previous discussion, I would like to end my conclusion by allowing the eugenists to try to justify themselves. I will let Professor Poulton speak on behalf of the movement:

The justification of the Eugenics Education Society lies in the fact that man, acting as a community, is continually letting loose... the forces that 'improve or impair the racial qualities of future generations.' Every law, custom, or tradition by which society helps or restrains any of its individual members must inevitably produce some effect for the good or for the evil of future generations. Unfortunately, too, the creators of law, custom and tradition are rarely able to foresee the result of the power they have called into being.<sup>387</sup>

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<sup>386</sup> Cited in Hofstadter, 1944, p. 201.

<sup>387</sup> Poulton, 1916, p. 34.

There can be no firm denial of Poulton's contention in its essence; social customs, laws, technological advancements, even everyday decisions have influence over the web of probability that determines the frequency with which different groups reproduce themselves. This, of course, does not mean that morality is at stake—that “good” and “evil” hang in the balance—but it does mean that change occurs over time, not only in a cultural but also a biological sense. This is not a new realization by any means, but it is sometimes strange to think that the choices we make and the policies that our governments enact have some murky influence over what it will mean to be called “human” in the future. Any concerted effort to direct human evolution towards some biological ideal would, of course, be preposterous, not only because political systems are insufficient for the task but also because ideals are transient. Nevertheless, human biology is changing, and human culture, as an amorphous, uncontrollable, vast phantasmagoria of activity, is the variable upon which that change depends.



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