

Eugenics (Query Club April 1912)

In England we are, typically, a people of high ideals; hence our high morality, commercial and social, which is probably the largest factor in our racial prosperity; hence too our national hypocrisy, which disguises the gross realities it cannot abolish; and hence also comes that passion for reforming things, for forming societies to propagate, or to abolish things; a passion which rose to its height, with singular irony, in the latter half of the 19th century, at a time when quite a lot of intelligent people imagined, with the economists, that our civilization could be based on individualistic selfishness.

From one point of view the formation of the Eugenic Society was the crowning outcome of this passion for social service; for while other societies have striven for the realisation of different ideals, ethical, economic, aesthetic or political, the Eugenic Society deals with the innate qualities and tendencies of human nature, which is the basic raw material out of which these ideals are built, and relative to which they exist. But we may look upon the matter from a rather wider and more illuminating standpoint.

Natural selection on an individualistic basis would account fully enough for the development of the human intellect, as well as for the human body, and a full-blooded pursuit of the selfish instincts; it does not account for unselfishness, for the higher social instincts, or for the moral qualities, like courage or chastity. Courage for instance would mean nothing to the wild individualist; his instinctive anger or greed, and his instinctive fear are nicely balanced, so that he may obtain his necessities, without wasting his life by taking undue risks, or his opportunities by useless caution.

It required the simultaneous action of social selection, the extermination of tribes or societies which lacked the social qualities, to give rise to the higher mental, or as they are usually called, the moral instincts. And as has been frequently pointed out, by Herbert Spencer for instance, and more recently by Karl Pearson, and Benjamin Kidd, it is social selection, acting by the competition of different nations for food, land and mineral wealth,



and for commercial and political supremacy, which has driven modern nations to adopt a more complex, and a closer political organisation, and to enforce a more complete subservience of individual to national interests, even then<sup>a</sup> the moral instincts, unassisted by intellectual considerations, would themselves justify. It is from this point of view, as a final and predominant factor in the survival not only of our race, and the political organisation with which it has associated itself, but especially of the ethical and intellectual inheritance which requires a continuous supply of the highest type of men for its support and increase, that I shall principally regard Eugenics this evening.

The interest of the community in developing and using the latent abilities of its individual *members* has resulted in a number of legal measures dealing with the support and education of the lowest classes. Apart from any benefit these measures may have conferred on the classes concerned, they have had a valuable effect of calling public attention to the problem of degeneracy, which is intimately involved. Instead of feeble-minded persons being as unimportant as they were useless, they have risen to some prominence now that they are positively harmful. The Report of the Royal Commission for the Care and Control of the Feeble-minded gives full illustrations of the various ways in which these people, whose life is usually a misery to themselves, dissipate public money, and waste the time of the work house, law court and prison officials; while it is noticeable that their birthrate is far in excess of that of other classes. But we must not confine our attention to those who can be certified as Feeble Minded, it is hoped that they will be dealt with on the lines of the Bill which the Eugenic Society drew up some time ago, and for which facilities have been promised this Session; we may divide all distress, entailing expenditure under the poor law, into that which is accidental, and can be allowed for on the ordinary rates of Insurance; and that which is caused by the inherited ineptitude of the classes concerned. Inquiries have elicited families of paupers, often seven or 800 members being recorded, the majority of whom have bred true to the family tradition of simple pauperism, though these families throw a large proportion of feeble minded children. About 30 per cent of the



juvenile crime is committed by feeble minded boys, but a large proportion of the petty crime, adult as well as juvenile, is committed by persons, who though not definitely feeble minded, are lazy, clumsy or careless, to an extent which renders them unfit to earn their own living, or to make the community any adequate return, for the cost they throw upon it.

The financial burden of this growing mass of ineptitude would be difficult to exaggerate; apart from the direct burden of the rates, which transfers itself into house rent and wages in the poorer districts, industries are hampered by the higher wages required, as well as by the loss and waste of bad workmanship. There is not an industry or business in the country which could not afford better salaries or wages to its employees, or better dividends to its owners, if the burden were lightened. The state would be relieved of a growing charge on the exchequer, besides receiving income and other taxes on the wealth released. Finally, better means would remain to be spent on the amenities of life by the middle classes, and on the rudiments of comfort and culture by the poorer.

And although the economic effects, of the degenerate core which we are supporting, are possibly the most important, yet there are others which should be considered. There is a moral as well as an economic advantage in the removal of the criminal and sub-criminal classes whose influence is widespread in all our larger towns. There is an intellectual as well as an economic advantage in the elimination of those children, varying from the merely stupid to the semi-idiotic, who clog the wheels of educational efficiency in the primary schools. And there is, it appears to me, an immense advantage possible to the peace and happiness of thousands of families of all classes, if we could avoid those sad cases, where the Eugenically lower type has filtered upwards from its proper stratum, and crops out in erratic examples of vice, profligacy, or mania.

It is sad to conclude as the majority of the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws would have us do, that this social work of provision and education in the last century has failed; and has failed because the social reformers overlooked