



# Eugenics and Other Evils : An Argument Against the Scientifically Organized State

*G. K. Chesterton, Michael W. Perry*

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In the second decade of the twentieth century, an idea became all too fashionable among those who feel it is their right to set social trends. Wealthy families took it on as a pet cause, generously bankrolling its research. *The New York Times* praised it as a wonderful "new science." Scientists, such as the brilliant plant biologist, Luther Burbank, praised it unashamedly. Educators as prominent as Charles Elliot, President of Harvard University, promoted it as a solution to social ills. America's public schools did their part. In the 1920s, almost three-fourths of high school social science textbooks taught its principles. Not to be outdone, judges and physicians called for those principles to be enshrined into law. Congress agree, passing the 1924 immigration law to exclude from American shores the people of Eastern and Southern Europe that the idea branded as inferior. In 1927, the U. S. Supreme Court joined the chorus, ruling by a lopsided vote of 8 to 1 that the sterilization of unwilling men and women was constitutional.

That idea was eugenics and in the English-speaking world it had virtually no critics among the "chattering classes." When he wrote this book, Chesterton stood virtually alone against the intellectual world of his day. Yet to his eternal credit, he showed no sign of being intimidated by the prestige of his foes. On the contrary, he thunders against eugenics, ranking it one of the great evils of modern society. And, in perhaps one of the most chillingly accurate prophecies of the century, he warns that the ideas that eugenics had unleashed were likely to bear bitter fruit in another nation. That nation was Germany, the "very land of scientific culture from which the ideal of a Superman had come." In fact, the very group that Nazism tried to exterminate, Eastern European Jews, and the group it targeted for later extermination, the Slavs, were two of those whose biological unfitness eugenists sought so eagerly to confirm.

What are sometimes called the "excesses" of Nazism drove the open advocacy of eugenics underground. But there's little evidence that the elements of society who once trumpeted the idea have changed their mind. Dr. Alan Guttmacher provides a good example. The fact that he had been Vice-President of the American Eugenics Association was no hindrance to his assuming the Presidency of Planned ParenthoodWorld Population in 1962. And his seedy past did not keep Congress from providing millions of dollars in federal funds to Planned Parenthood. Nor did it stop the Supreme Court from carrying out the central item in Dr. Guttmacher's political agenda—legalized abortion. Many of those who now admit that eugenics was evil have trouble explaining why so few of its advocates were ever exposed and why so many are still honored.

As the title suggests, eugenics is not the only evil that Chesterton blasts. Socialism gets some brilliantly worded broadsides and Chesterton, in complete fairness, does not spare capitalism. He also attacks the scientifically justified regimentation that others call the "health police." The same rationalizations that justified eugenics, he notes, can also be used to deprive a working man of his beer or any man of his pipe. Although it was first published in 1922, there's a startling relevance to what Chesterton had to say about mettlesome bureaucrats who deprive life of its little pleasures and freedoms. His tale about an unfortunate man fired because "his old cherry-briar" "might set the water-works on fire" is priceless.

That tale illustrates Chesterton's brilliant use of humor, a knack his foes were quick to realize. In their review of his book, *Birth Control News* griped, "His tendency is reactionary, and as he succeeds in making most people laugh, his influence in the wrong direction is considerable. *Eugenics Review* was even blunter. "The

only interest in this book," they said, "is pathological. It is a revelation of the ineptitude to which ignorance and blind prejudice may reduce an intelligent man."

History has been far kinder to Chesterton than to his critics. It's now generally agreed that eugenics was born of evolution and the "ignorance and blind prejudice" of social elites. But never forget that Chesterton was the first to say so, condemning what many of his peers praised.

The completely new edition of Chesterton's classic includes almost fifty pages from the writings of Chesterton's opponents. They illustrate just how accurate his attacks on eugenicists were. For researchers, it also includes a detailed, 13-page index.

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