Eugenics Revisited

by Marian VanCourt

The basic idea of eugenics—that human genetic quality should be preserved and enhanced—is hardly a new one. In *The Republic*, Plato argued that to improve society, it is necessary to improve the innate quality of the citizens, as well as their environment. Augustus Caesar made futile attempts to persuade senators to have more children to provide leaders for the future of Rome. In somewhat more recent times, prominent scientists and social reformers have spoken out in favor of eugenics:

- Charles Darwin warned of long-term adverse effects of a relaxation of natural selection resulting from civilization.
- Francis Galton, who coined the word "eugenics," saw it as both a science and a social movement, incorporating elements of religion.
- Margaret Sanger faulted the early eugenicists for being unable to formulate a practical program. Birth control, which has been criticized as negative and destructive, is really the greatest and most truly eugenic method, according to Sanger.
- H. G. Wells said: "It seemed to me that to discourage the multiplication of people below a certain standard, and to encourage the multiplication of exceptionally superior people, eugenics was the only real and permanent way of mending the ills of the world. I think that still."
- Julian Huxley described eugenics as: . . . "of all outlets for altruism, that which is most comprehensive and of longest range."

Ironically, the Nazis' pseudo-scientific perversion of the eugenics concept had the greatest influence on public opinion, promulgating the notion of eugenics as the ideology of racism and genocide. Largely because of this pernicious association, eugenics as a social movement has remained dormant since the end of World War II. Only recently have people been able to look at it more objectively, and to reassess its possible value to a modern democratic society.

Renewed interest in eugenics arises in part from disillusionment with the philosophy of environmentalism. "Environmentalism" is simply the belief that individual and social problems are environmental in origin (due to "faulty conditioning," "psychological deprivation" or "traumatic experiences"), and can be solved by various sorts of environmental intervention. This belief has inspired ambitious and well-intentioned governmental programs designed to eliminate poverty, rehabilitate criminals, raise the intelligence of the mentally retarded and so on. While the costs have been enormous, demonstrable benefits have generally been disappointing, to say the least. Thus, the underlying assumption that the environment is the cause and cure of all problems is being viewed with increasing skepticism.

Another reason for renewed interest in eugenics is the accumulation of scientific evidence showing the influence of heredity on behavior. It has been established that many psychological traits—intelligence, temperament, mental illness, homosexuality, musical talent, even tendency toward criminal behavior—are determined by heredity in varying degrees. Recent media attention has focused on remarkable similarities between identical twins separated at birth. Testing identical twins reared apart is just one of the methods researchers have used in attempting to untangle hereditary and environmental influences. A second method studies both identical and fraternal twins. Since a pair of twins raised together in the same home will have essentially the same environment, if identical twins (who share 100 percent of their genes) resemble each other very closely on a given trait, and fraternal twins (who share 50 percent of their genes) resemble each other only moderately, it can be concluded that the trait must have some genetic basis. A third approach contrasts traits of adopted children, adoptive parents (who raised the children from birth) and biological parents.

Since psychological traits have substantial hereditary components, it follows that the reproductive patterns of each generation will necessarily help shape the character of successive generations. Present trends, with regard to intelligence, are not encouraging. Highly intelligent people tend to have disproportionately small families, and Mensans are no exception. Traditionally, eugenicists have been particularly concerned with the relationship between intelligence and fertility, viewing innate intelligence as a profoundly

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