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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Eugenics offended

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Abstract
This commentary continues an exchange on eugenics in *Monash Bioethics Review* between (Anomaly in Defending Eugenics: From Cryptic Choice to Conscious Selection 35:24–35, 2018), (Wilson in Eugenics Undefended 37:68–75, 2019), and (Veit in Can 'Eugenics' be Defended? 39:60–67, 2021). The eponymous question, "Can 'Eugenics' be Defended?", is multiply ambiguous and does not receive a clear answer from Veit et al.. Despite their stated desire to move beyond mere semantics to matters of substance, Veit et al. concentrate on several uses of the term "eugenics" that pull in opposite directions. I argue, first, that (Veit in Can 'Eugenics' be Defended? 39:60–67, 2021) makes much the same error as does (Anomaly in Defending Eugenics: From Cryptic Choice to Conscious Selection 35:24–35, 2018) in characterizing eugenics; second, that the paper misunderstands the relationship between eugenics and enhancement; and third, that it distorts the views expressed in my "Eugenics Undefended".

Keywords Eugenics · Genetic enhancement · Human improvement · Reproduction · Cancel culture

The eponymous question, "Can 'Eugenics' be Defended?", is multiply ambiguous and does not receive a clear answer from Veit et al. (2021). Despite its stated desire to move beyond mere semantics to matters of substance, Veit et al. (2021) concentrates on several uses of the term "eugenics" that pull in opposite directions. Readers may leave the paper more confused about what eugenics itself is than when they set out.

Veit et al. both (a) treat "eugenics" as a hot-button term used to shut down debate, and (b) entertain the idea that "eugenics" is little more than a euphemism for genetic enhancement. (a) implies that:

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(1) the term "eugenics" clouds thinking about important philosophical issues raised by reproductive technologies, policies, and practices (and so is a term we should avoid using).

(b) suggests that:

(2) eugenics is simply a form of human enhancement (and so is unobjectionable as such).

Although Veit et al. state that they "are not primarily concerned with the respective arguments" (p. 61) of the papers their commentary follows, they also indicate that:

(3) the critique of Anomaly's "Defending Eugenics" (Anomaly 2018) in my "Eugenics Undefended" (Wilson 2019) makes an unreasonable demand of proponents of genetic enhancement and aims to curtail rational discussion.

I take up (1)–(3) in each of the following sections so numbered. I argue, first, that in suggesting (1) Veit et al. (2021) makes much the same error as does Anomaly (2018) in characterizing eugenics; second, that (2) expresses a misunderstanding of the relationship between eugenics and enhancement; and third, that the discussion supporting (3) distorts my stated views.

Eugenics consists of a set of ideas, practices, policies, and laws aimed at intergenerational human improvement. Not any-old-which-way, but by favourably changing the balance of desirable over undesirable physical or psychological traits that individuals have in a population. Reproduction and heritable traits typically have been a focus for eugenic intervention because of their role in *intergenerational* improvement. Genetic and enhancement technologies are often discussed in terms of eugenics because of their roles in affecting reproduction and the presence of desirable and undesirable traits in a population. Various past eugenic ideas, practices, policies, and laws constituted part of a world-wide social movement that is often thought to have ended in 1945 or shortly thereafter. This characterisation does not itself delimit the boundaries of eugenics, but does set parameters for those boundaries.[1]

1 Obscured by clouds

I concur with Veit et al. that the term "eugenics" can be used in ways that cloud thinking about important issues. One might gloss my "Eugenics Undefended" as claiming that Anomaly's "Defending Eugenics" exemplifies this epistemic vice.

[1] Here I do not mean to be inviting a resolution of questions about whether (say) the rational persuasion of people to adopt vegetarian beliefs in order to improve humankind is a form of eugenics, or what the preceding characterisation needs for such resolution. Thanks to a reviewer for prompting the clarification.

One aspect of Veit et al. (2021) that I subsequently find bizarre is that it very much points the finger *at others* here. One of its authors (Agar) has recently published a short essay in a popular medium admitting that his past advocacy of liberal eugenics is an instance of "philosophical shit-stirring" (Agar 2021).[2] Another of its authors (Anomaly) wrote "Defending Eugenics", a title acknowledged in its very first sentence as being "deliberatively provocative" and that Anomaly himself has characterised as having a click-bait title. Yet Anomaly doesn't actually defend eugenics as a set of ideas, practices, and policies that once drove a global, historical social movement. Nor do Veit et al. suggest that *this* can be defended. Both purport to defend something they call *eugenics*.

As noted, one primary concern in Veit et al. (2021) is with uses of the term "eugenics" that aim to shut down discussion, especially by drawing attention to a history in which the Nazis feature prominently. I agree that using "eugenics" to truncate or silence discussion can be problematic, just as the use of "genocide" or "euthanasia" can be. Yet the genealogy of such concepts at the interface of politics and science matters, particularly in the case of eugenics, since it names both a set of ideas *and* a historical social movement with substantial, consequential uptake.

More serious problems arise with appeals to eugenics when they (i) aim to be deliberatively provocative, and (ii) mischaracterise what eugenics is. In "Eugenics Undefended" I argued that (ii) was true of Anomaly (2018), where only the meliorative kernel of eugenics is included in Anomaly's working definition of eugenics ("any attempt to harness the power of reproduction to produce people with traits that allow them to thrive", Anomaly 2018, p. 24). The same is true of Veit et al. (2021), which points primarily to this same aspect of eugenics. This allows Veit et al. to make the claim, first, that a wide range of bioethicists are eugenicists, and second, that "it is hard not to implicitly endorse *some kind of eugenics*" (Veit et al., p. 62, emphasis in original).

If eugenics were *simply* a form of human improvement, betterment, enhancement, or melioration, both points might hold. But unfortunately, it is not. Eugenics rests on the distinction between better and worse traits, aiming to shift the balance between their occurrence over intergenerational time. It is concerned fundamentally with what sorts of people there should be in future generations and how we might intervene in the lives of present people to influence this for the better. Historically, eugenics has often focused on reducing or eliminating the "worse traits" in future populations, doing so through negative eugenic measures, such as sterilisation or killing. To make or acknowledge this point is not to "play the Nazi card". Operating with a truncated characterisation of eugenics and then drawing a conclusion about the implicit, widespread endorsement of "some kind of eugenics" manifests (i) and (ii).

[2] Agar relies on the OED definition of a shit-stir as an "attempt to provoke or aggravate, esp. without serious intent" and is very much aware that his "confession" itself may reasonably be viewed as an instance of shit-stirring. Readers no doubt will draw their own conclusions about the phenomenon and its relationship to both academic and public philosophy.

2 Only words

Veit et al. (2021) appear to hold that the support of many contemporary bioethicists for eugenics should be viewed as unproblematic, since "eugenics" for such bioethicists simply refers to genetic enhancement. In attempting to buttress their views of eugenics, Veit et al. (2021, p. 61) appeal to MacKellar and Bechtel's 2014 book *The Ethics of the New Eugenics*, referring to the 2016 printing. They say that MacKellar and Bechtel there "define eugenics as involving 'strategies or decisions aimed at affecting, in a manner which is considered to be positive, the genetic heritage of a child, a community, or humanity in general' (MacKellar and Bechtel 2016, p. 3)" (Veit et al. 2021, p. 61). When MacKellar and Bechtel characterize eugenics in terms of such strategies and decisions, however, they identify it amongst a series of "informed suggestions" (p. 3), rather than widely accepted definitions (p. 3). Moreover, the broader context of that characterization problematizes the equation of eugenics and genetic enhancement and Veit et al.'s more general attempt to destigmatize contemporary eugenic enthusiasm within bioethics.

The introduction to MacKellar and Bechtel's book begins as follows: "Selection strategies or decisions aimed at affecting, in manners which are considered positive, the genetic heritage of a child, a community, or humanity in general have always represented a challenge to human beings from an ethical perspective" (p. 1). They then say that the term "eugenics" is often used to describe those strategies or decisions. MacKellar and Bechtel then immediately note that "a clear definition of the term [eugenics] has remained elusive" (p. 1), say that "it is particularly important to clarify what is meant by the expression" (p. 1), and recount the Greek origins of the term. They then state that "eugenics includes selection on the basis of genetic characteristics and stems from the belief that human beings or humanity can be improved by encouraging people with desirable traits to have children *and by encouraging people with undesirable traits not to procreate*" (MacKellar and Bechtel 2016, p. 1, my emphasis). So from the outset MacKellar and Bechtel are explicit that the means through which eugenic goals can be accomplished include forms of negative eugenics, forms omitted by a characterisation of eugenics given only in terms of the positive genetic enhancement of individuals or populations.

MacKellar and Bechtel continue by noting the "successful selection *and elimination of inherited characteristics* in plants and animals implied the possibility that similar practices could occur with human beings" (MacKellar and Bechtel 2016, p. 1, emphasis added). Here again they draw explicit attention to the place within eugenics not just of "successful selection" but of the elimination of undesirable traits from individuals and populations, intimating forms of eugenics involving stronger forms of "discouragement", such as sterilization. Their "informed suggestions" list of terms includes, beside "eugenics" itself, "Destructive eugenics", "Negative (or preventive) eugenics", and "Nonvoluntary eugenics" (MacKellar and Bechtel 2016, pp. 3–4). Together with their contrasting characterisation of enhancement (p. 5), and their more general advocacy of retention of the term *eugenics* together with its historical associations, this sets their views apart from advocates of (2) and the views of Veit et al. (2021).

Veit et al. go on to state what they call an "important conclusion", namely that "everyone who considers pre-natal testing justifiable, or who thinks women should be free to weigh genetic information in the selection of a spouse or a sperm donor is a eugenicist" (Veit et al., p. 62, emphasis omitted). These claims are simply false. One might consider prenatal testing and the freedom to weigh genetic information in spousal or sperm donor selection justifiable for a number of reasons, many of which are not eugenic. For example, one might do so on grounds of one's own health or for longer-term family planning (in the former case) or because one aims to preserve a stigmatised trait or population-level diversity (in the latter). Such reasons need not be eugenic, even if they sometimes are.

So while Veit et al. (2021, p. 62) are correct that "genetic enhancement" is sometimes used as a euphemism for "eugenics" by bioethicists seeking to circumvent controversy, the two phenomena are distinct and should not be equated. Eugenics need not involve—indeed, historically has not always involved—enhancement, genetic or otherwise. Genetic enhancement provides one cluster of strategies to achieve either individual or intergenerational human improvement. But other eugenic strategies, such as immigration restriction laws, anti-miscegenation laws, and child removal practices, are well-known to historians and sociologists of eugenics. Perhaps being unduly focused on select uses of "eugenics" within bioethics, Veit et al. (2021) miss what is obvious to those working across the history and philosophy of science, social studies of science, technology, and medicine, and race, gender, and disability studies. Eugenics is not simply genetic enhancement (see also Reinders et al., 2019 and commentaries).

3 Nothing if not critical

Veit et al. (2021) also contains three distortions of my "Eugenics Undefended" (Wilson 2019).

First, they begin by saying that I "criticized almost every premise in Anomaly's paper" (Veit et al. p. 61); however, the very first of "seven basic flaws" that I purported to identify in Anomaly (2018) was its "failure to argue for eugenics". What I had in mind was not that one or more of the premises in an argument were false, but that the paper contained *no argument for eugenics at all*. I considered this especially problematic in a paper entitled "Defending Eugenics" written by a philosopher. The various claims the paper makes about eugenics were not assembled in the form of premises that, suitably linked, constituted an argument. Moreover, they could not readily be rationally reconstructed to do so—or at least I confessed my own shortfall here in "Eugenics Undefended". I did not criticize "almost every premise in Anomaly's paper". My view was (and is) that the paper, lacking an argument for eugenics, *contains no premises at all*.

Second, Veit et al. (2021, p. 63) purport to find the following objectionable demand in "Eugenics Undefended":

> Wilson (2019) demands that proponents of genetic enhancement such as Peter Singer (2001, 2003), Jonathan Glover (2006), Nicholas Agar (1998, 2004,

> 2019), Julian Savulescu (2001, 2009), John Harris (1992, 2007), Walter Veit (2018a, b, c), and Jonathan Anomaly (2018, 2020) should pay attention to 'the actual history of eugenics and the considerable scholarship on it', which should ultimately raise the standards of credibility that 'any publishable work defending eugenics should meet' (p. 68).

Basic canons of interpretation have been ignored or abandoned here. "Eugenics Undefended" doesn't use the term "enhancement", let alone "genetic enhancement", and doesn't mention Harris or Veit at all. Here is the relevant passage, which occurs just before I list the seven putative shortcomings of Anomaly (2018):

> The author [Anomaly] is certainly correct to suggest that there are aspects to eugenics that remain attractive to many and are perhaps even philosophically defensible. That is why some leading figures in ethics and bioethics—Peter Singer, Jonathan Glover, Nick Agar, and Julian Savulescu for example—have provided defenses of versions of, or aspects of, eugenics, or ideas central to eugenics, as I have discussed elsewhere (Wilson et al. 2016; see also Barker and Wilson 2019). "Defending Eugenics" seems to advertise itself as engaged in the same sort of enterprise but does little to contribute to meaningful, ongoing debate over eugenics. Given the actual history of eugenics and the considerable scholarship on it, there are reasonable expectations that any publishable work defending eugenics should meet. In my view, both the penultimate and published version of "Defending Eugenics" fails to meet them (Wilson 2019: 68).

Here I draw a contrast between the discussion in "Defending Eugenics" and defences of aspects of eugenics that I consider to be "perhaps even philosophically defensible"—defences that I identify via the names of the first four authors that Veit et al. (2021) lists in the passage above. Far from tarring seven authors as inattentive to the history of eugenics and the scholarship on it, I am distinguishing between four who have made philosophically worthwhile contributions to discussions of eugenics and another who has fallen short here in a single publication.[3]

The view expressed in "Eugenics Undefended" is not that any worthwhile work discussing eugenics needs to rehearse or reflect on the history of eugenics. Rather, it is that given the history of eugenics and the substantial scholarship on that history, there is a reasonable expectation that any defence of eugenics will do at least seven things: argue for eugenics, accurately characterize eugenics, accurately summarise any scientific consensus invoked, avoid misleading simplifications of history, avoid misplaced virtue signalling, show historical sensitivity in reaching for moral principles, and ensure that the links from eugenics to policy recommendations are substantial or robust. The argument was that Anomaly (2018) fails to meet every one of these reasonable expectations.

[3] To be clear that it is the paper not the person that is my target here, Anomaly (2020) clearly belongs in the former category; it does so while largely avoiding the term "eugenics".

Finally, Veit et al. (2021) intimate that "Eugenics Undefended" is part of a restrictive, unhelpful movement that aims to shut down discussion of brave new ideas. They write that it is "important that the debate about eugenics continue [sic] unconstrained by requirements such as those that Wilson (2019) would impose. The silencing of reasonable defenses of eugenics threatens a dangerous neglect of the risk of repeating past errors …" (pp.62–63). As my reply here underscores, "Eugenics Undefended" is squarely and somewhat narrowly focused on Anomaly (2018). It readily concedes that "there are aspects to eugenics that remain attractive to many and are perhaps even philosophically defensible" (Wilson 2019, p. 68).

In *The Eugenic Mind Project* (2018a) I have explored a position I call *standpoint eugenics* and argued for both its epistemic potential and epistemic limits. In "Well-Being, Disability, and Choosing Children" (2019), written jointly with Matthew J. Barker, I have challenged a popular argument from the principle of procreative beneficence to the claim that we should create children who are disability-free, including through the use of genetic technologies. In this and in other work (e.g., Wilson 2015, 2018b, 2020, 2021, in press; Wilson et al., 2016) I show concern for the perspectives of people living with disability. But it is both false and its own form of uncharitable dismissiveness to suggest that I view my "scholarship as a sort of activism for the rights and concerns of the disabled" (Veit et al., p.65).[4] Having any of the authors contributing to Veit et al. (2021) engage with the substantive issues raised in such discussions would be welcome.

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[4] Scholarship informed or motivated by activism can be fruitful; I resist the suggestion that activism has a truth-spoiling presence either in the present discussion of eugenics or more generally. For more on activism, disability, and philosophy, see Wilson (2020).

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