

Eugenic Thinking

Robert A. Wilson*

The Eugenic Mind Project explores and critiques both past and present eugenic thinking. Informed by the perspectives of Canadian eugenics survivors in the province of Alberta and standpoint theory, *The Eugenic Mind Project* draws on both my intimate acquaintance with eugenics in Canada and my previous thinking about the cognitive, biological, and social sciences, the fragile sciences. It recounts the history of eugenics and the thinking that drove it, and critically engages contemporary manifestations of eugenic thought, newgenics. Accessible to philosophers of the biological and social sciences, historians of science and medicine, bioethicists, and those working on race, disability, or gender, the book aims to enrich ongoing discussions about human nature and human diversity, the social uses of biotechnology, and social policies governing future generations.

Keywords

disability • eugenics • human diversity • human kinds • human nature • immigration restriction • newgenics • prenatal screening • sterilization • standpoint theory

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Projects of human improvement take both individual and intergenerational forms. The biosciences provide many technologies, including prenatal screening and the latest gene editing techniques, such as CRISPR, that have been viewed as providing the means to human improvement across generations. But who is fit to furnish the next generation? Historically, eugenics epitomizes the science-based attempt to improve human society through distinguishing kinds of people and then implementing social policies—from immigration restriction to sexual sterilization and euthanasia—that influence and even direct what sorts of people populate our future. Despite recognition of the horrors of the eugenic extremes of the past and of the subhumanizing of those sufficiently below appearance or ability norms to be viewed as “defective” or “unfit”, many people continue to be drawn to strands of eugenic thinking.

The Eugenic Mind Project is a wide-ranging, philosophical book that explores and critiques both past and present eugenic thinking. It draws on my intimate acquaintance with eugenics

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33 in North America, a familiarity generated by working closely over an extended period of time
34 with survivors of eugenics in the Canadian province of Alberta. That work began shortly after I
35 moved to the University of Alberta from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign in 2000.
36 In teaching a few standard weeks on eugenics that focused on Nazi and American eugenics, just
37 as I had in my “Biology and Society” course at Illinois, at Alberta I found myself educated
38 by students who knew something about eugenics that I didn’t. They had such knowledge not
39 because of some previous, special course of study but because some of their *living* relatives had
40 been sterilized under the auspices of The Sexual Sterilization Act of Alberta, a provincial law
41 in place from 1928 until 1972. While their knowledge as young adults here was not first- but
42 second-hand, it soon led me to meet people even more closely connected to what I thought of
43 as the eugenic past, people who had been institutionalized and sterilized putatively in accord
44 with The Sexual Sterilization Act. Revelations about the university (indeed, department) that I
45 had just joined as a professor of philosophy also brought eugenics closer to home.

46 Over time, a small number of those who had lived through a eugenic past became my friends.
47 Although the book occasionally draws on ideas—such as the leading idea in Chapter 8—that
48 emerged from our pairwise and small group conversations and other interactions—the influence
49 of these friendships on my thinking about eugenics has been more pervasive than this may
50 suggest. A recent essay in *Aeon*, “Eugenics never went away”, that I had originally entitled “The
51 feeling of eugenics”, gives perhaps the clearest sense of how my experiences while at Alberta
52 have shaped the approach to eugenics taken in the book.

53 *The Eugenic Mind Project* draws on my previous work on the cognitive, biological, and so-
54 cial sciences, the fragile sciences, particularly in my *Boundaries of the Mind* and *Genes and the*
55 *Agents of Life*. It identifies eugenics itself amongst the fragile sciences at the interface of late
56 nineteenth-century ideas about the mind, biology, and sociality, recounts the history of eugen-
57 ics and the thinking that drove it, explores the roots of eugenic thinking, and critically engages
58 contemporary manifestations of eugenic thought, newgenics. And like much of the burgeoning
59 scholarship on eugenics, it aims to provoke and enrich discussions about human nature and hu-
60 man diversity, about the social uses of biotechnology, and about social policies governing future
61 generations.

62 Anything more than passing knowledge of the history of eugenics between 1865 and 1945
63 typically leads those engaged in reflection on the contemporary biosciences to raise questions
64 about the potential misuse of emerging ventures in biotechnology. That reflection casts at least
65 a shadow of caution over future uses of existing reproductive technologies to create so-called de-
66 signer babies and to discard embryos or fetuses that do not measure up to either ideals or norms.
67 Contemporary philosophers and bioethicists have sometimes seen their role in terms of escap-
68 ing from that shadow in sorting the wheat from the chaff of eugenics, using their conceptual
69 acumen to identify defensible forms of, or aspects to, eugenics.

70 A shadow of caution certainly pervades the general scholarship on eugenics and can be found
71 in the earliest and most influential work on the history of eugenics. In his preface to the second
72 edition of *In the Name of Eugenics*, the historian Daniel Kevles cautioned that the “specter of
73 eugenics hovers over virtually all contemporary developments in human genetics” (1995, ix).
74 And the sociologist Troy Duster’s *Backdoor to Eugenics* likewise presciently warned of eugenic
75 futures being created by the backdoor of individual choice. For both Kevles and Duster, the
76 dangers of dormant eugenic ideas remain nascent in present and emerging biotechnologies. The
77 message here has been clear: understand past eugenics, critique present eugenics, avoid future
78 eugenics.

79 Despite that message, there remains a feeling of distance between ourselves and the eugenic
80 past to which, I believe, our collective scholarship has inadvertently contributed. In my view,

81 this is in part because that scholarship has developed largely without attention to the perspective
82 of eugenics survivors themselves. By adopting what I call a *standpoint eugenics*—eugenics from
83 the standpoint of those who have survived and those who continue to survive eugenics past and
84 present—*The Eugenic Mind Project* attempts to dispel whatever lingering feelings of distance
85 from a eugenic past remain. From that standpoint, the pro-eugenic, arm’s-length bravado shown
86 particularly by philosophers and bioethicists in sorting the wheat from the chaff in eugenics past,
87 present, and future have a different feel to them.

88 I have already signalled that, in my own case, that feeling of distance dissolved through my
89 personal connections with Alberta students and survivors of eugenics for whom eugenics was
90 not at arm’s length at all. But eugenics came closer to home in another way due to peculiarities
91 of the history of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Alberta. While there
92 were a number of students in my class who had relatives who had been sterilized on eugenic
93 grounds, many more were familiar with the history of eugenics in the province because in the
94 immediately preceding years—roughly 1995 until 2000—over 900 cases for wrongful confinement
95 and sterilization had been filed against the Province of Alberta, the vast majority of which
96 had been eventually settled by the government of then premier Ralph Klein. These actions followed
97 the successful lawsuit of a very brave and persistent woman, Leilani Muir, with whom I
98 became particularly close friends. In the course of both Leilani’s case and those settled in light
99 of it, the activity of Alberta’s “Eugenics Board” came under critical scrutiny, much of which was
100 widely reported in popular media venues. That board was headed for most of its history—right
101 through until 1965—by the founding chair of Philosophy at the University of Alberta, John
102 MacEachran, who is also the university’s longest-serving Provost.

103 The introductory chapter, “Standpointing Eugenics”, locates and explains my personal and
104 professional interests in eugenics and expands upon these remarks. It says a little more about Alberta’s
105 eugenic past, briefly describes the five-year, federally-funded project—the *Living Archives*
106 *on Eugenics in Western Canada* project—that brought together eugenics survivors, students, researchers,
107 and community leaders to engage around the topic of eugenics, and attempts to be
108 more explicit about the impact of working directly with eugenics survivors. Identifying what I
109 call *institutional complicity* and *engaged individuality* as two dimensions anchoring the ensuing
110 discussion in the book, the chapter concludes by discussing recent cases of the sterilization of women
111 and girls with intellectual disabilities in Australia in 2012, Latina and African-American
112 women in the California prison system in 2013, and low-caste women in India in 2014. The
113 chapter as a whole raises questions about the relationships between eugenics past and present.
114 To take one posed and discussed in some of the recent historiography (e.g., Levine and Bashford
115 2010; Paul 2016; Reilly 2015), casting it here in my own terms: how does eugenic thinking,
116 *The Eugenic Mind*, continue on beyond the 80-year social movement, ending in 1945, that was
117 eugenics? And to take one that is perhaps original to the book and central to the chapters in
118 Part Two of it: where does *The Eugenic Mind* come from?

119 This introductory chapter is the first of four chapters in Part One that focus on particular
120 activities central to my perspective on eugenics: standpoint, characterizing, specifying, and
121 subhumanizing. Drawing on Francis Galton’s early characterization of eugenics to offer a working
122 characterization of eugenics useful for understanding eugenic thinking more generally, the
123 second chapter, “Characterizing Eugenics”, positions eugenics as an applied science and a social
124 movement and identifies the importance to *The Eugenic Mind* of the idea of *sorts of people*.
125 The chapter discusses the place of race, ethnicity, and disability in the practices of *The Eugenic*
126 *Mind*, identifying feeble-mindedness or mental deficiency as a central eugenic trait. Although
127 the chapter covers much ground that is well-trodden by historians of eugenics, the focus on
128 the kind of thinking that permeates eugenics distinguishes the perspective that emerges. Con-

129 centrating on what I call the short history of eugenics from 1865 to 1945, the chapter also
130 reaches back to interrogate the claim that eugenics also has a long past and suggests an intimate
131 connection between eugenics past and present thinking.

132 What were the traits that some people had that made them targets of eugenics in the past?
133 We can answer this question by exploring research publications, popular culture, and marriage
134 and immigration laws. But the most powerful way to determine what a eugenic trait is in-
135 volves examining eugenic sexual sterilization legislation. The third chapter, “Specifying Eugenic
136 Traits”, contains a synoptic view of all such legislation passed in North America in the twentieth
137 century across thirty-five jurisdictions. By comparing the province of Alberta’s sexual steriliz-
138 ation law and its implementation to American eugenic laws, the chapter shows the role that
139 institutionalization played in the social mechanics of eugenics and underscores the centrality of
140 mental health to *The Eugenic Mind*. It concludes by drawing out some general conclusions
141 about three eugenic traits and their atypical presence in Canadian eugenics: syphilis, Hunting-
142 ton’s, and epilepsy.

143 Chapter 4, “Subhumanizing the Defective”, takes up themes of life worthiness and subhu-
144 manization in *The Eugenic Mind*. The question “what sorts of people should there be?” re-
145 mains live for philosophers and bioethicists who have reopened consideration of eugenics under
146 headings such as “liberal eugenics” or “procreative beneficence”. Yet that consideration typically
147 neglects the significance of the subhumanization of the targets of eugenics in the short history of
148 eugenics. Within standpoint eugenics, subhumanization looms large in continuing discussions,
149 particularly by philosophers and bioethicists, of the differential life worthiness of different sorts
150 of people. Discussing the relationship between eugenics and euthanasia and the forms that sub-
151 humanization took in Alberta’s eugenic past, as well as recent challenges that cognitive disability
152 has posed to philosophical ethics in discussions of newgenics, the chapter illustrates standpoint
153 eugenics in action. It concludes with reflection on a recent, widely discussed case involving in-
154 tellectual disability, that of the child known in both the academic literature and social media as
155 “Ashley X”.

156 The next four chapters constitute Part Two of the book and focus on understanding the
157 persistence of eugenics and what I call its *social mechanics*. The fifth chapter, “Where Do Ideas
158 of Human Variation Come From?”, begins by returning to consider the prosociality that mo-
159 tivates eugenic interventions and its relationship to views of human diversity and variation. It
160 articulates a novel problem, what I call the puzzle of marked variation, and outlines four ini-
161 tial desiderata that a response to the puzzle should meet. The puzzle of marked variation is
162 quite general and can be raised with respect to many ways of sorting people, but this chapter
163 focuses on its application to categories of disablement and their relationship to sub-normalcy.
164 The chapter argues that the appeal to biopolitics and the socially constructed nature of disability
165 offered by those drawing on the work on Michel Foucault—such as Lennard Davis, Nikolas
166 Rose, and Shelley Tremain—are more limited than is suggested by their popularity in explora-
167 tions of the relationship between disability and eugenics. The chapter concludes by drawing
168 on a variant of the open question argument against naturalism in ethics that traces back to the
169 philosopher G. E. Moore to extend the list of desiderata for responses to the puzzle of marked
170 variation.

171 The desiderata introduced in Chapter 5 not only help to identify problems with the ap-
172 peal to biopolitics in discussions of eugenics and disability but also suggest that the puzzle of
173 marked variation has both psychological and social dimensions. Beginning with a point about
174 human vulnerability that can be traced to the work of the political philosopher Thomas Hobbes
175 and drawing on my past and ongoing work on situated cognition and collective intentionality,
176 Chapter 6, “A Socio-Cognitive Framework for the Puzzle of Marked Variation”, introduces

177 a general framework for addressing the puzzle of marked variation that straddles the fragile
178 sciences of cognition and sociality. It discusses what is distinctive about human sociality and
179 prosociality and identifies the cognitive demands that each makes. As a species, we have de-
180 veloped distinctive forms of cognition that are situated, extended, and collective and which are
181 integral to our prosociality. The resulting cognitively-mediated normativity we possess allows
182 us to distinguish between sorts of people. That, in turn, creates the possibility of treating those
183 who are perceived or thought of as being like us—as being of our kind—differently than we treat
184 others. In postulating a “like us” detector and clarifying the idea of first-person, plural mechan-
185 isms, the chapter specifies the nature of some of the socio-cognitive mechanisms hypothesized
186 as being operant in *The Eugenic Mind*.

187 Chapter 7, “Backdoors, Newgenics, and Eugenics Underground”, returns to consider in
188 more detail appeals to newgenics, the so-called backdoor to eugenics, and issues arising at the
189 interface of contemporary bioethics and disability. Working with the disability theorist Rose-
190 marie Garland-Thomson’s idea of a eugenic logic, the chapter recasts the debate over the disab-
191 ility rights critique of prenatal screening with selective abortion and identifies newgenic strains
192 in contemporary bioethical thinking about procreation. My aim with respect to the first of these
193 has been to keep the focus squarely on *selective* abortion and disability without entering larger
194 debates over, or the history of, reproductive rights and abortion (cf. Dyck 2013, chap. 7–8).
195 The discussion of selective abortion and disability here shares with the original disability rights
196 critiques offered by Adrienne Asch and Marsha Saxton the assumption that abortion is in gen-
197 eral permissible. Yet like those critiques, my discussion also shares the permanent possibility
198 of being appropriated by “pro-life” factions in debates over abortion, possibilities heightened
199 in present US politics. The application of the principle of procreative beneficence, articulated
200 and defended by the philosopher Julian Savulescu to argue that reproduction should be free of
201 disability, is rejected and the general character of eugenics under neoliberalism identified and
202 critically discussed. The chapter, which draws in part on joint work with Matthew Barker and
203 Joshua St. Pierre, concludes with a discussion of eugenic silencing by focusing on autism and
204 self-advocacy.

205 The eighth chapter, “Eugenics as Wrongful Accusation”, completes the exploration of the
206 persistence of eugenics by introducing another dimension to the social mechanics of eugenics.
207 It begins with a question about eugenics after 1945: how is it that eugenic practices, such as
208 sterilization, didn’t simply disappear or cease? In offering an answer to this question, the chapter
209 further develops the socio-cognitive framework, working very much across the borders that are
210 usually drawn between the social and the psychological and further documenting the corres-
211 ponding continuities between eugenics past and newgenics present. The subject matter here is
212 not the origins of our ideas of human variation, as in Chapters 5 and 6, nor their manifestation
213 in contemporary newgenics and the continuity between eugenics and newgenics, as in Chapter
214 7; rather, it is the persistence of old-fashioned eugenics itself.

215 The novel perspective that the chapter introduces is to view eugenics as wrongful accusa-
216 tion, a phenomenon best understood through a paradigm example: the ritual sexual abuse cases
217 predominant in the 1980s and 1990s. The explanatory value of this assimilation of eugenics to
218 such cases lies in what it reveals about the psycho-social dynamics of eugenics. Here the chapter
219 draws on the work of Judith Herman on trauma and witnessing, though it takes those ideas in a
220 direction that Herman herself (and those whom she has influenced in thinking about witnessing
221 and sex crimes) would likely resist.

222 Having introduced the idea of standpoint eugenics early in Chapter 1, the book has pro-
223 ceeded by approaching *The Eugenic Mind* from the perspectives of eugenics survivors. In the
224 final two chapters, which make up Part Three, the discussion returns to reflect more explicitly

225 on the nature of standpoint eugenics itself. Chapter 9, “Knowing Agency”, develops the idea of
 226 what I call *knowing agency at the margins* by drawing on standpoint theory in epistemology, with
 227 particular attention given to the standing and credibility of cognitive disability in philosophy.
 228 There is a kind of unacknowledged epistemic apartheid in approaches to the general idea that
 229 knowledge is contextual that itself shapes how marginal knowers are viewed in the discipline of
 230 philosophy. The politics of epistemic apartheid—between feminism and analytic epistemology,
 231 for example—forms part of the context in which the possibilities for standpoint eugenics can
 232 be envisaged and assessed. What it’s like to occupy the marginalized standpoint of cognitive
 233 disability is conveyed through a discussion of the work and perspective of Eva Kittay.

234 The final chapter, “Standpoint Eugenics Unbound: Survivorship for the Subhuman”, artic-
 235 ulates and takes up some of the internal complexities to applying standpoint theory to eugenics
 236 and disability. Standpoint theory applies paradigmatically to class and gender, and has been
 237 deployed with respect to other examples, such as race and sexuality within feminist standpoint
 238 theory. The generalization of standpoint theory to disability, particularly intellectual disability,
 239 faces distinctive problems that derive from the focus of standpoint theory on class and gender
 240 and the kind of view of the dynamics of knowing agency from the margins that holds in these
 241 cases. Here I make use of the ideas of joint action and extended action familiar from the cogni-
 242 tive sciences, and, taking my cue from work in the philosophy of biology, raise questions about
 243 the significance for standpoint eugenics of the intrinsic heterogeneity of categories of disable-
 244 ment. Whether there are the sorts of people posited in *The Eugenic Mind* is an issue that also
 245 affects the prospects for a robust standpoint eugenics. Perhaps we will need to be satisfied, after
 246 all, with a standpoint-ish eugenics, a perspective on eugenics that takes seriously the motivations
 247 for and orientation of standpoint theory but which stops short of applying an adapted form of
 248 standpoint theory to eugenics and disability.

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