



Eugenics Undefended

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My thinking about eugenics for the past decade has drawn both on my experiences in working together with a relatively small number of eugenics survivors in the Canadian province of Alberta, where eugenic sexual sterilization legislation was in place until 1972 (Wilson 2018a), as well as on a broad range of works by historians, biologists, sociologists, philosophers, bioethicists, and journalists. Central to that thinking has been reflection on the contemporary significance of the eugenic past and on the continuing power of diverse forms of eugenic thinking (Wilson 2018b, 2019). I thus read with interest a freely-available version of “Defending Eugenics” early in 2018, although I was very surprised to see a minimally modified version of the paper appear shortly thereafter in this journal.

The author 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 and St Pierre 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. The paper exemplifies the following seven basic flaws.

1. A failure to argue for eugenics. Given the publication venue, the author’s disciplinary affiliation, and the paper’s title, “Defending Eugenics” leads one to expect one or more arguments either for eugenics or at least against critiques of eugenics. But the paper contains no such explicit, positive arguments for eugenics.

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Likewise, the paper does not attempt to respond to specific critiques of eugenics that have been made by philosophers, historians, bioethicists, disability theorists, and legal scholars, resting content instead with platitudes like “[d]efending eugenics does not commit us to endorsing state-sponsored coercion, nor to the parochial views held by some advocates of eugenics in the early twentieth century” (Anomaly 2018, p. 25).

What the paper does contain is a series of general ideas found in eugenic thinking that the author views as worthy of reconsideration. For example, there is the general idea, governing the paper as a whole, that the meliorative dimension to eugenics deserves renewed attention. There is the idea, central to Sect. 2, that a dysgenic reproductive or demographic trend poses a general problem for future society. And there is the idea, central to Sect. 3, that there are general moral principles that make some eugenic choices and policies defensible. Such ideas are familiar in the literature (see Goering 2014 for an introductory review), but considered individually or collectively they do not provide a philosophical argument for any substantive, controversial view that one might rationally debate [cf. the critique of Savulescu (2001) and Savulescu and Kahane (2009) by Barker and Wilson (2019)]. Surprisingly, neither the general idea nor the two more specific ideas are brought together in the paper to state an actual argument defending eugenics; here my own attempts at charitable reconstruction have languished.

If the defense of eugenics that is offered is a positive argument for eugenics, it is very unclear what that argument is; and if it is a genuine dismantling of misplaced critiques of eugenics, it needs to state those critiques and show what is wrong with them. A reminder that one can distinguish between more odious claims made by eugenicists in the past (e.g., that the lives of those with disabilities are not worthy of life) and those that have more contemporary resonance (e.g., that the improvement of human lives is a worthwhile goal) does not substantially contribute to either kind of defense of eugenics.

2. Mischaracterizations of eugenics. A paper structured around eugenics should operate with a widely accepted or acceptable view of what eugenics is, one reflecting the reality of the eugenic past. Here the paper falls short. To sift the wheat from the chaff in eugenics and eugenic thinking, one must at least start with the whole grain.

First, in the first paragraph, the author says that eugenics “can be thought of as any attempt to harness the power of reproduction to produce people with traits that enable them to thrive” (Anomaly 2018, p. 24). That is certainly part of the ideology of eugenics and it corresponds to some of the practice of eugenics. The greater and best-known part of the history of eugenics, however—in theory, practice, policy, and legislation—was not about producing people with traits that enable them to thrive, as this characterization of eugenics suggests. It was instead about eliminating people with undesirable traits or preventing their birth, e.g., through sexual sterilization or immigration restriction policies. Eugenics is not

only about intergenerational human improvement but about doing so by differentially intervening on the variation in human populations.

In short, it has been a key part of eugenic thinking and practice both philosophically and historically that we aim not simply at promoting human flourishing but that we do so by distinguishing between those with “good traits” and those with “bad traits”. Prominent amongst the bad traits, as evidenced by the sterilization laws passed between 1900 and 1950 in 35 jurisdictions in North America, were “feeble-mindedness”, epilepsy, and criminality (especially sexualized criminality). But the list of eugenic traits found in eugenic research and publicity was much more extensive and included pauperism and alcoholism; those traits were also explicitly racialized in immigration restriction policy (Ambler 2014; Wilson 2018a, ch. 2–3). For many eugenicists, amongst the traits that, to use the author’s terms, enable people to thrive are those like being white or having Anglo-Saxon or northern European heritage. Eugenics is no more simply “any attempt to harness the power of reproduction to produce people with traits that enable them to thrive” than utilitarianism is the view that we should make people happy or Kantianism is the view that we ought to obey the law. No serious philosophy journal would publish a paper with either of these characterizations of utilitarianism or Kantianism, even were they to proceed to advocate “a more cautious approach” (Anomaly 2018, p. 29) to either view.

Second, the author continues by saying that to the view that “parents should provide an environment that promotes the welfare of their children”, eugenicists add the idea (subject to a proviso) that “we should also manipulate biology to promote well-being” (Anomaly 2018, p. 24). This is misleading in a way that extends the preceding mischaracterization of what eugenics is since it suggests that eugenics is primarily about increasing individual well-being, whether through environmental provision or biological manipulation. But this is false: eugenics is primarily a view about overall societal, populational, or “racial” improvement, whether by environmental or biological means, or via state policy or individual choice. It is not primarily a view about individual thriving, even if increases in individual well-being are claimed to be one virtue of eugenic policies and laws. This is why Galton himself said, in one of his final statements about eugenics in 1908, that eugenics’ “first object is to check the birth-rate of the Unfit, instead of allowing them to come into being” (1908, p. 323).

In addition and relatedly, note that you can perhaps promote the well-being of your own existing children by biological manipulation (though see Barker and Wilson 2019 on epistemic humility here); whether the empirical facts on the ground change significantly in light of technologies such as CRISPR presently remains unclear. But it does not promote their well-being for their existence to be prevented, as is widely acknowledged in the literature on disability and bioethics (Parens and Asch 1999; Saxton 2000; Asch 2003). Such preventative uses are how reproductive technologies have been deployed eugenically in both the more distant and more recent past and they are likely to continue to be prevalent in the future.

In summary, eugenics rests on a distinction between desirable and undesirable traits in a population and historically operated in large part by seeking to curtail the reproduction of those thought to possess undesirable traits. Characterizing eugenics

simply “as any attempt to harness the power of reproduction to produce people with traits that enable them to thrive” masks this and thus mischaracterizes eugenics.

3. Mischaracterization of scientific consensus. In the second paragraph, the author appeals to “the consensus from behavioral genetics” on the point that “virtually every trait that influences our personality and our likelihood of living a good life—including intelligence, health, empathy, conscientiousness, and impulse control—has a substantial genetic component” (Anomaly 2018, p. 24). In addition to expressing the much-discussed confusion of heritability with the material, genetic basis of inheritance, this is false as a report of the scientific consensus, at least if it is intended to support the idea that genetic manipulation is a plausible way to control psychological traits (for a recent, balanced review, see Turkheimer and Harden (2014)). Some behavioral geneticists do hold the view that the author identifies as the “consensus from behavioral genetics” but there are many who don’t and have defended contrary views [for widely discussed critiques, see Wahlsten (1990) and Charney (2012)]. As importantly, there are widespread critiques of even more restricted pockets of consensus in behavioral genetics that the author ignores here. These come from outside behavioral genetics and in appealing to the putative authority of findings in a science to establish a starting point or given, they should hardly be ignored. These stretch from early critiques within population genetics (Lewontin 1972), in criminology (Rafter 1988, 1997) and in sociology (Duster 2003), through to more recent philosophically sophisticated work by (e.g., Kaplan 2006; Tabery 2014). None of this work is so much as mentioned in the paper
4. Misleading simplifications of history. Section 2 contains a number of misleading simplifications of history that ignore basic scholarship on eugenics. For example, consider three problems with the following claims:

The eugenics programs implemented in Nazi Germany are probably the main reason most people no longer acknowledge that there might be some truth to Darwin’s worries. Indeed, because of the racist direction the eugenics movement took in the United States and Germany, many academics after World War II began to deny that races exist, that genes matter, and that intelligence or impulse control are heritable traits that help predict the relative success of different people or groups (Anomaly 2018, p. 26).

First, concerns about and even rejections of the claims about race, genes, and intelligence were all present within the North Atlantic eugenics movement before 1933, let alone 1945; this was made widely known in the scholarly community through Daniel Kevles’ *In the Name of Eugenics* back in 1985. Second, the particular claims—that races exist (in some sense), that genes matter, and that intelligence is heritable (bracket impulse control here)—are ones that very few informed people would deny even now. It is really the implications of more nuanced expressions of each of these views that have been, and continue to be, debated. Third, the first sentence here suggests that knowledge of the Holocaust

functions as a trigger for some kind of groupthink (Janis 1972) that either serves as a scholarly blindspot or leaves “most people” unable or unwilling to acknowledge the dysgenic demographic worry that the author attributes to Darwin. By contrast, that worry is generally acknowledged by those with heterogeneous views, particularly when discussion is focused on developmental disabilities (Buchanan et al. 2000, ch. 2; Duster 2003, ch. 1). Furthermore, much contemporary scholarship on disability not only acknowledges but attempts to grapple with this kind of concern, particularly in the wake of the atrocities of the Holocaust “in the name of eugenics” and the continuing presence of eugenic thinking in contemporary bioethics and public policy (Brock 2005; Glover 2006, ch. 1; Wasserman 2009).

5. Carelessness about race, IQ, and Ashkenazi Jews and misplaced virtue signaling. Creating some distance between Nazi policies and practices of genocide and eugenics is a standard move in contemporary defenses of the latter. As part of his “more cautious approach to eugenics”, the author embellishes this move by claiming that in attempting to eliminate the Jewish population through genocide, “in addition to being racist and cruel, Nazi policies had dysgenic effects” (Anomaly 2018, p. 26). This is due to the putatively high level of intelligence of Ashkenazi Jewish populations; given that, the author suggests that a “truly eugenic program might have encouraged Jews to breed more, not less” (Anomaly 2018, p. 26). The author’s virtue signaling on this point seems misplaced, however; his brief discussion here is careless and its scholarly omissions and confusions raise broader concerns about just how cautious the author really is here while treading on complicated and contentious ground.

First, the claim that the author makes—that “Ashkenazi IQ is the highest in the world, nearly two standard deviations about the global average” (Anomaly 2018, p. 26, fn. 6)—exaggerates a claim about IQ in Ashkenazi populations made by Cochran and colleagues in work that proffered an explanation for a difference of between .67 and 1 standard deviation in the IQs of Ashkenazi Jewish and European populations (Cochran et al. 2006; see also Cochran and Harpending 2009). That work found a larger audience after it was originally published through supportive discussion in chapter 8 of Nicholas Wade’s *A Troublesome Inheritance: Genes, Race, and Human History* (2014), a book the author reviewed enthusiastically with special reference to the connection between it and the earlier book by Cochran and Harpending (Anomaly 2014). The basic idea of Cochran and colleagues is that Ashkenazi Jews have evolved a cognitive adaptation in the past 800 years in response to finding themselves in cognitively demanding occupations (e.g., as money lenders) and we see the genetic signature of this adaptation in the prevalence of certain genetic diseases in that population, such as Tay-Sachs.

Second, the author ignores not only Wade’s own caution—that the material he reports in his chapter on Cochran’s work involves “leaving the world of hard science and entering into a much more speculative arena at the interface of history, economics, and human evolution” (Wade 2014, p. 15)—but omits any mention

of the contentious nature of the claims reported here, let alone specific critiques. Brief, incisive critiques of Cochran's claims here can be found in Gilman (2008) and most recently in Evans (2018), both of which usefully locate the Ashkenazi case in the broader context of race science. A significantly more detailed examination of the claims can be found in Ferguson (2008), an unpublished paper that has been available online for many years that identifies ten major problems with the original claims that Cochran and colleagues made.

Third, the author not only ignores this broader context but also fails to point out that Cochran's explanation for the putative difference in IQ involves positing a connection between higher IQ and a higher prevalence of a range of specific genetic diseases in Ashkenazi populations. This complicates, however, and *prima facie* undermines the very claim about "Nazi dysgenics" that the author appeals to this evidence to support and lends itself to an inversion of the author's own claims here. Hence, the author's attempted virtue signaling in this short discussion in fact raises concerns about how great that distance is. Careless enthusiasm about race science is something that good scholarship should strive to avoid.

6. Idiosyncratic appeal to *Buck v Bell* for moral principles. The whole of Sect. 3 on moral principles is dedicated to the landmark 1927 Supreme Court decision in *Buck v Bell*, a much-discussed legal case in the history of eugenics in the USA. However, the author only discusses a few sentences from Justice Holmes' majority decision in that case, a strange choice as a source for general moral principles to govern eugenic policies now. More disconcerting here, however, is the ignorance shown of scholarship on that case, originally by Paul Lombardo (2008) but also expressed and supplemented in popular accounts (e.g., Bruinius 2006; Cohen 2016). The author omits the most famous line from Holmes' judgement "three generations of imbeciles are enough!", which refers to Carrie Buck, her mother, and her daughter, all of whom were institutionalized and the first two of whom were sterilized under Virginia's eugenic sterilization law, the focus of the Supreme Court case. As Lombardo convincingly shows, it is very likely that none of the "three generations" in that case were mentally deficient; in addition, Carrie Buck's institutionalization was entangled with her social circumstances, which included being raped by a member of her adopted family when she was a teenager, with her institutionalization effected by an attempt to avoid the social embarrassment the revelation of this sex crime would have caused to the adopting family. If the author is aware of this scholarship, his failure to acknowledge (let alone mention) it is a serious shortcoming. Drawing out some moral principles from a few sentences in Justice Holmes' decision as a kind of guide for the future seems particularly uninformed in light of the actual history of the case, as reflected in the work of historians and journalists here. In my view, an insensitivity to the historical reception of the Holmes decision detracts from the credibility of the paper as a whole.
7. Lack of substance in linking demography, eugenics, and policy recommendations. In Sect. 4, the author moves to policy recommendations, which include free contraception, heightened genetic counselling, and parental licencing and its enforcement. There is a dearth of detail here on just how these policies would con-

tribute to solving the dysgenic reproductive or demographic problem of Sect. 2 and no substantive details linking those policy recommendations to a defense of eugenics. For example, just how would the introduction of free contraception or increased genetic counselling promote eugenic ends? On basic questions like these, the paper offers very little either theoretically or empirically. In a paper purporting to extract something novel from eugenic ideology and practice, the lack of substance in this section is especially surprising. I suspect that providing those missing details would only serve to bring out how close the author's views are to more traditional, negative forms of eugenics.

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