

# GENERAL ESSAY 2020

## Eugenics and Human Morality

### Introduction

Eugenics is the philosophy and social movement that argues it is possible to improve the human race and society by encouraging reproduction by people or populations with “desirable” traits (termed “positive” eugenics) and discouraging reproduction by people with “undesirable” qualities (termed “negative” eugenics). The aim is to improve the genetic quality of a human population by excluding certain genetic groups judged to be inferior, and promoting other genetic groups judged to be superior.

### Historical aspects

The term was coined by Francis Galton in 1883. The concept predates the term; Plato suggested applying the principles of selective breeding to humans around 400 BC.

Eugenics was popular in America during much of the first half of the twentieth century, yet it earned its negative association mainly from Adolf Hitler’s obsessive attempts to create a superior Aryan race.

Eugenics, in the modern understanding of the term, is seen as having close ties to white supremacy.

While eugenic principles have been practiced as early as ancient Greece, the contemporary history of eugenics began in the early 20th century, when a popular eugenics movement emerged in the United Kingdom, and then spread to many countries, including the United States, Canada, and most European countries. In this period, eugenic ideas were espoused across the political spectrum. Consequently, many countries adopted eugenic policies, intended to improve the quality of their populations' genetic stock.

### Morality

Such programs included both positive measures, such as encouraging individuals deemed particularly “fit” to reproduce, and negative measures, such as marriage prohibitions and forced sterilization of people deemed unfit for reproduction. Those deemed “unfit to reproduce” often included people with mental or physical disabilities, people who scored in the low ranges on different IQ tests and members of disfavored minority groups.

The eugenics movement became associated with Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. In the decades following World War II, with more emphasis on human rights, many countries began to abandon eugenics policies.

Thanks to the unspeakable atrocities of Hitler and the Nazis, eugenics lost momentum in after World War II, although forced sterilizations still happened. But as medical technology advanced, a new form of eugenics came on the scene.

## Contemporary science, eugenics and morality

Modern eugenics, better known as human genetic engineering, changes or removes genes to prevent disease, cure disease or improve your body in some significant way. The potential health benefits of human gene therapy are staggering since many devastating or life-threatening illnesses could be cured.

But modern genetic engineering also comes with a potential cost. As technology advances, people could routinely weed-out what they consider undesirable traits in their offspring. Genetic testing already allows parents to identify some diseases in their child in utero which may cause them to terminate the pregnancy.

Since the 1980s and 1990s, with new assisted reproductive technology procedures available, concern has grown about the possible revival of a more potent form of eugenics after decades of promoting human rights.

A major criticism of eugenics policies is that, regardless of whether negative or positive policies are used, they are susceptible to abuse because the genetic selection criteria are determined by whichever group has political power at the time.

Furthermore, negative eugenics in particular is criticized by many as a violation of basic human rights, which include the right to reproduce.

Another criticism is that eugenics policies eventually lead to a loss of genetic diversity, thereby resulting in inbreeding depression due to a loss of genetic variation.

Yet another criticism of contemporary eugenics policies is that they propose to permanently and artificially disrupt millions of years of evolution, and that attempting to create genetic lines "clean" of "disorders" can have far-reaching ancillary downstream effects, including negative effects on immunity and species resilience.