

Eugenics and Other Evils

G. K. Chesterton, Cassell, London (Kindle Edition)

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Read by C. S. Lewis starting on June 13, 1926. “To the Reader”: From notes taken before the war, “when the evolutionary fancy of Nietzsche was the new cry among the intellectuals; and when Mr. Bernard Shaw and others were considering the idea that to breed a man like a cart-horse was the true way to attain that higher civilization...” But it’s still around, so “three years after the war with Prussia, I collect and published these papers.” So Chesterton is writing this book in 1921.

Part I: The False Theory

Chapter I: What is Eugenics?

It’s best to resist tyranny before it’s too late. It is Eugenics, which ought to be destroyed. It means different things to different people “because evil always takes advantage of ambiguity.” And “evil always wins through the strength of its splendid dupes ...” Its essence is a moral basis and a scheme of social application that varies a lot. They think about the unborn baby. His aversion to Eugenics comes from “a rooted detestation in the human soul to liking a thing in one way, when you already like it in another quite incompatible way.” And “what Christians call falling in love is a part of man which in the rough and in the long run can be trusted.”

“The second part of the definition, the persuasive or coercive methods to be employed, I shall deal with more fully in the second part of this book.” Pagan freemen would have killed the first person to suggest breeding people like cattle and as stock for labor. The family was founded outside the State.

Chapter II: The First Obstacles

“If I sum up my statement thus: ‘Eugenics, as discussed, evidently means the control of some men over the marriage and unmarried of others; and probably means the control of the few over the marriage and unmarried of the many,’ I shall first of all receive the sort of answers that float like skim on the surface of teacups and talk.”

He distinguishes five classes of people who are Eugenists: the Euphemists who like long words and obscure phrases, the Casuists who deal with extravagant cases such as a schoolboy who wants to marry a mad negress with a hump back, the Autocrats or Idealists who are going to be there to see it happen and who call on words such as “liberty” and “justice” and “mercy” to idealize their tasks, the Precedenters who especially flourish in Parliament and call on some old law as a precedent, and the Endeavorers who call such laws an honest attempt to deal with a great evil. He also writes about another class of people who support State interference, saying “You object to all State interference; I am in favor of State interference. You are in Individualist; I, on the other hand...” Chesterton says he does not object to “the right of the State to interfere to cure a great evil. I say that in this case it would interfere to create a great evil; and I am not going to be turned from the discussion of that direct issue to bottomless botherations about Socialism and Individualism, or the relative advantages of always turning to the right and always turning to the left.” Some want others not to be allowed to have a wife or children.

Chapter III: The Anarchy from Above

Anarchy need not be violent, nor need it come from below. “A government may grow anarchic as much as a people.” The two hinges of all European morals are two spiritual stories. First, the rebellion of Satan, who though a traitor was not an anarchist. Second, Christ before the high priests and the rich traders in the temple. He also was not an anarchist. He claimed authority. “Anarchy is that condition of mind or methods in which you cannot stop yourself. It is the loss of that self-control which can return to the normal.”

He writes about witch hunting as anarchy. Some people have no sense of proportion or power of distinction to know what is libel and what is not. "... you cannot discuss a madman when you have not discussed a man." This is like "Miracles," where people knew both the laws of nature and also that the supernatural had entered into nature.

Chapter IV: The Lunatic and the Law

The Eugenists attempt to treat all men as irresponsible. "But the madman is not the man who defies the world; he is the man who denies it." "That unique man of genius, George MacDonald, described in one of his weird stories two systems of space coincident: so that where I knew there was a piano standing in a drawing room you knew there was a rose bush growing in a garden." The first principle behind Eugenics—"the proposal that somebody or something should criticize men with the same superiority with which men criticize madmen." The weakness of the Eugenists: they cannot define who is to control whom; they cannot say by what authority they do these things. "... if everything is the result of a doubtful heredity, the judgment itself is the result of a doubtful heredity also."

The Eugenists might have gotten rid of Keats or Stevenson because the latter had lung trouble and the former had bad parents.

Chapter V: The Flying Authority

"... there is such a thing as an atheistic literary style; that materialism may appear in the mere diction of a man, though he be speaking of clocks or cats or anything quite remote from theology. The mark of the atheistic style is that it instinctively chooses the word which suggests that things are dead things; that things have no souls. Thus they will not speak of waging war, which means willing it; they speak of the 'outbreak of war,' as if all the guns blew up without the men touching them. Thus those Socialists that are atheist will not call their international sympathy, sympathy, they will call it 'solidarity,' as if the poor men of France and Germany were physically stuck together like dates in a grocer's shop."

"Thus, lastly ... the atheist style in letters always avoids talking of love or lust, which are things alive, and calls marriage or concubinage 'the relations of the sexes'; as if a man and a woman were two wooden objects standing in a certain angle and attitude to each other, like a table and a chair."

The Eugenists and others like to use the passive voice. "The question remains, therefore, whom they (the Eugenists) do instinctively trust when they say that this or that ought to be done." The Eugenist means himself. Chesterton mentions Mr. A. H. Huth, a Eugenist, Dr. Saleeby, Dr. Karl Pearson, Dr. Fell, H. G. Wells' *Mankind in the Making*, Dr. Neisser.

"... even if I could share the Eugenic contempt for human rights ..." Better to remove the strong-minded than the weak-minded in "the Feeble-Minded Bill." Each Eugenist would remove a different part of society because they have no higher authority. "There is one large, though vague, idea of the Eugenists..." That is, the Eugenist should be "the health adviser of the community." "Commenting on this, I said that it amounted to treating all people who are well as if they were ill. This the writer admitted to be true, only adding that everyone is ill. To which I rejoin that if everyone is ill the health adviser is ill too, and therefore cannot know how to cure that minimum of illness." "Prevention is not only not better than cure; prevention is even worse than disease."

Last sentence of the chapter: "We now pass on to consider whether there is really anything in the way of Eugenics to be done, with such cheerfulness as we may possess after discovering that there is nobody to do it."

Chapter VI: The Unanswered Challenge

“feeble-mindedness is a new phrase under which you might segregate anybody.” “What is the use of your finding by experiment in some people a thing we know by reason must be in all of them?” “The vaguer the charge is the less they will be able to disprove it.”

“Believing that there are spirits, I am bound in mere reason to suppose that there are probably evil spirits; believing that there are evil spirits, I am bound in mere reason to suppose that some men grow evil by dealing with them.”

Chapter VII: The Established Church of Doubt

“The best instance of his belated state is his perpetual assertion that the supernatural is less and less believed. It is a perfectly true and realistic account—of the eighteenth century.”

“The thing that really is trying to tyrannize through government is Science. The thing that really does use the secular arm is Science. And the creed that really is levying tithes and capturing schools, the creed that really is enforced by fine and imprisonment, the creed that really is proclaimed not in sermons but in statutes, and spread not by pilgrims but by policemen—that creed is the great but disputed system of thought which began with Evolution and has ended in Eugenics. Materialism is really our established Church, for the Government will really help it to persecute its heretics.” They are trying to enforce the questions and answers of the last chapters, “questions whose only interest is that they are trackless and mysterious; answers whose only glory is that they are tentative and new.”

Chapter VIII: A Summary of a False Theory

Chapter I dealt with the claim that Eugenics was a new morality. However, one doesn't know what the future will hold nearly as well as what the past offered. Chapter II dealt with mental confusions arising from Eugenics. Chapter III described the atmosphere in which such things become possible, i.e. anarchy instead of authority. Some won't know where laws should stop. Chapter IV described an impatience bursting through the Lunacy Laws and obliterating them. Chapter V was about “The Flying Authority.” He dealt with where authority is rooted. Then he discussed the unworkable despotism of professors of hygiene. Chapter VI dealt with heredity and how we pass on what we know. Do we know enough “to put such powers into the hands of men who may be deceived or who may be deceivers”? Chapter VII dealt with being allowed to find out what they want, i.e. “making a thing official and compulsory.” They want a State Church. This ends the first half of the book. The second half will deal with things that really exist. “There is no reason in Eugenics, but there is plenty of motive. Its supporters are highly vague about its theory, but they will be painfully practical about its practice. And while I reiterate that many of its more eloquent agents are probably quite innocent instruments, there are some, even among Eugenists, who by this time know what they are doing.”

Part II: The Real Aim

Chapter I: The Impotence of Impenitence

The Middle Ages had an eagerness for building and planning, which “made architecture their most successful art. Thus even a slave seemed sacred; the divinity that did hedge a king, did also, in one sense, hedge a serf, for he could not be driven out from behind his hedges.” He traces the historical epochs of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and their ideas. “We entertain the weak-minded notion that what is done can't be undone.” This is both an intellectual and a moral fault. “It is also our spiritual refusal to admit that we have made a mistake.”

“... there is ... the story of the horrid man who is an atheist and wants to destroy the home, but who, for some private reason, prefers to call this Socialism.”

Chapter II: True History of a Tramp

He discusses the madness and meanness of British society. "In short, the English ruler is always appealing to a nation of sportsmen and concentrating all his efforts on preventing them from having any sport." The ruler also bewilders the tramp. England persecutes beggars, especially through the game laws.

Chapter III: True History of a Eugenist

He opposes vivisection. He writes of a thirty-year Member of Parliament, who has become a Socialist and the man really behind Eugenics. He laments the poverty in Belfast and Liverpool. "That is the unique tragedy of the plutocratic state today; it has no successes to hold up against the failures it alleges to exist in Latin or other methods."

Chapter IV: The Vengeance of the Flesh

"... the modern materialists are not permitted to doubt; they are forbidden to believe. Hence, while the heathen might avail himself of accidental omens, queer coincidences or casual dreams, without knowing for certain whether they were really hints from heaven or premonitory movements in his brain, the modern Christian turned heathen must not entertain such notions at all, but must reject the oracle as the altar. The modern skeptic was drugged against all that was natural in the supernatural." "...the disappointed capitalist..."

Chapter V: The Meanness of the Motive

"... at the root the Eugenist is the Employer ..." "Old ideas' are treated as impossible, though their very antiquity often proves their permanence." Some want the poor to have large families and low wages to keep them in a form of bondage. We know about the hairdressing of the Eugenists, but nothing of their heredity, which could include a lot of Asiatic or negro blood. The Eugenist merely wants "to get the grip of the governing classes on to the unmanageable output of poor people." No one thinks of applying Eugenics to the prominent classes. "The modern poor Englishman is only told about medieval civilization when its cruelties and mistakes are told. "There is one strong, startling, outstanding thing about Eugenics, and that is its meanness." The next three chapters will address (1) how much remains of the old ideal of individual liberty, (2) how far the modern mind is committed to such egalitarian ideas as may be implied in Socialism, and (3) whether there is any power of resistance in the tradition of the populace itself." Progress toward these ideals has broken down.

Chapter VI: The Eclipse of Liberty

"Liberty has produced skepticism, and skepticism has destroyed liberty." "... the excuse for the last oppression will always serve as well for the next oppression; and to that tyranny there can be no end."

Chapter VII: The Transformation of Socialism

"Socialism is one of the simplest ideas in the world." "At one time I agreed with Socialism, because it was simple. Now I disagree with Socialism, because it is too simple." "The Socialist system, in a more special sense than any other, is founded not on optimism but on original sin. It proposes that the State, as the conscience of the community, should possess all primary forms of property; and that obviously on the ground that men cannot be trusted to own or barter or combine or compete without injury to themselves." "I am myself primarily opposed to Socialism, or Collectivism or Bolshevism or whatever we call it, for a primary reason not immediately involved here: the ideal of property." "I do not admit that private property is a concession to baseness and selfishness; I think it is a point of honour. I think it is the most truly popular of all points of honour." "It may be said of Socialism ... that its friends recommended it as increasing equality, while its foes resisted it as decreasing liberty." "Indeed, there was not the faintest attempt to gain equality, least of all economic equality. But there was a very spirited and vigorous effort to eliminate liberty, by means of an entirely

new crop of crude regulations and interferences.” Socialism “does not send food into the house to feed the children; it only sends an inspector into the house to punish the parents for having no food to feed them.” The capitalist feels that “he must check or improve the reckless and random breeding of the submerged race...” “I need not pause to explain that crime is not a disease.”

Chapter VIII: The End of the Household Gods

“The Bolshevist is above all a bourgeois.” “If he owned his own well his water could never be cut off, and while he sits by his own fire his pipe can never be put out. That is the real meaning of property, and the real argument against Socialism; probably the only argument against Socialism.” “The obvious thing to protect the ideal of marriage is the Christian religion.” “... her household goods as her household gods.” “I have considered in this chapter the chances of general democratic defense of domestic honour, and have been compelled to the conclusion that they are not at present hopeful...”

Chapter IX: A Short Chapter

Eugenics moved from fad to fashion around 1913. People tried to popularize Eugenics, but then England went to war, interrupting this process. England “went to war with that very land of scientific culture from which the very ideal of a Superman had come.” He ends the book with a poke at Nietzsche, because Nietzsche was the man who inspired Prussia/Germany to aspire to the Superman ideal.