

Sorts of people

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Eugenic ideas, laws, and policies were often cast explicitly in terms of a person's having certain kinds of socially undesirable properties, such as feeble-mindedness, mental deficiency, or psychosis. For example, in the second amendment to the Sexual Sterilization Act of Alberta (1942), persons with neurosyphilis, epilepsy, and Huntington's disease came to be included amongst those subject to eugenic sterilization in the province. However, in practice eugenics has operated in both popular culture and in science in terms of the corresponding sorts or kinds of people: the feeble-minded, the mentally deficient, and psychotics. One may wonder about the significance of this perhaps innocent-looking shift from talk of people with certain properties to sorts of people, especially in reflecting on the resurgence of eugenic thinking in contemporary contexts. What role does distinguishing between various sorts of people, and attaching a differential value to those sorts of people, play in both the history of eugenics and its contemporary aftermath?

Human Variation and Sorts of People

Thinking of there being distinctive sorts of people is one response to the perception of human variation. This response, however, was not new with eugenics in the nineteenth-century. In fact, thinking about members of our species in terms of various sorts or kinds can be found in ancient civilizations and is often bound up with the very idea of

what it is to be human. Many societies, including those of ancient China and ancient Greece, refer to themselves with terms that are associated with full humanity, whereas they refer to people from alien cultures and distant lands with terms that lack that association. For example, “barbarians” for the ancient Greeks were people who did not speak fully human language, merely “ba-ba”ing instead. Thus, the idea of there being different sorts of people across time and space, not all of whom are valued equally, is many thousands of years old (Lloyd, 2012).

We can approach the eugenic development of this appeal to sorts or kinds of people by reflecting a little further on the nature of human variation. Human beings vary in an unlimited number of ways. People have different heights and weights, different hair and eye colour, and different physical and mental abilities. Some variation, such as that with respect to height and weight, is continuous: the varying characteristic or property exists on a continuum. Other variation, such as that with respect to hair and eye colour, is discrete, or at least is usually thought of as such: there are a relatively small number of categories used to classify the variation here, such as blonde, brown, black, or red (for hair colour), or blue, brown, or green (for eye colour). Both continuous and discrete variation can be the basis for distinguishing between sorts of people, such as when we distinguish tall from short people, or, moving to categories that wear their evaluative dimension more clearly on their sleeve, when we distinguish fat from skinny people.

Some of this variation matters more to us than does other variation. For example, variation with respect to skin colour, language spoken, and cultural practices and affiliations have been highly salient in human history. They have been the basis not simply for distinguishing between sorts of people on the basis of race and culture, but for the

differential and often discriminatory treatment of the resulting different sorts of people.

Eugenic Policies and Laws and Sorts of People

Race and ethnicity themselves have played a direct role in the history of eugenics, with some “races” deemed to be inferior in various ways to others. Thus such lesser sorts of people were subject to restrictive immigration and eliminative sterilization policies that formed part of the late nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century eugenics movement. Eugenic sterilization laws themselves were most often expressed, however, in terms of categories centered on the mental abilities that people possessed, including those of feeble-mindedness and mental deficiency.

Eugenic policies and laws here straddled everyday, “folk” categories and categories for classifying sorts of people that were the result of scientific practice. For example, “idiots”, “imbeciles” and “morons” were sorts of people who were characterized in terms of their level of putative mental deficiency, where that level corresponded to the IQ score those people gained on one or more standardized psychological tests. The kind of thinking that drove eugenic family studies, such as those of “The Jukes” and “The Nams”, also utilized folk categories of people, such as paupers, criminals, and the sexually promiscuous, to pick out sorts of people whose continuing family lineage was viewed as contributing significantly to ongoing social problems resolvable by eugenic intervention (Rafter, 1988).

Like Begets Like, Heredity, and Eugenics Today

An important thread to eugenic thinking about sorts of people is the idea that “like begets like”: that the children of people of a certain sort will also be of that sort. While this was understood in hereditarian terms as eugenics appealed to the emerging biological sciences (e.g., of genetics) from the early part of the twentieth-century, the role of

hereditarian thinking in eugenics is complicated. Nineteenth-century eugenics operated without significant biological knowledge of heredity. Furthermore, those who acknowledge a significant role for environmental circumstances in contributing to the production of a given trait or characteristic can still present the eugenic shaping of future populations as something desirable. Indeed, that is precisely what one finds in the contemporary bioethics literature advocating “liberal eugenics” (Agar, 2004; Kitcher, 2003) and various principles governing parenting that are viewed as seeking to minimize disability (Savulescu, 2001; Savulescu & Kahane, 2008).

Are there Sorts of People?

The broader metaphysical issue of whether any sorts of people “are real” might usefully be located as part of the general issue of the reality of kinds. Proponents of realism about kinds hold that the world is naturally divided into distinct kinds of things, and our task is (to use a metaphor inspired by Plato) to “carve nature at its joints”. For example, oxygen and nitrogen are real kinds of chemical elements, each with distinctive clusters of properties and behaviours, and the task of chemistry, in part, is to accurately characterize those properties and behaviours. Proponents of nominalism, by contrast, hold that reality is differentiated only with the gentle (or not so gentle) touch of the human mind; social constructivism is a variant of this view that emphasizes the role of human institutions and practices in this process.

One might reasonably hold that realist views of sorts of people have been discredited by the history of eugenics. After all, the sorts of people articulated within the eugenics movement are no longer taken to be part of the fabric of the world, and a basis for social policy and legislation. Yet appeals to sorts of people—to the severely cognitively disabled, to schizophrenics, to children with Down Syndrome—where

the people referred to are many of the same sorts of individuals who were the target of eugenic practices and policies, continue to animate contemporary discussions of persons, parents with disabilities, and reproductive rights in ways that are often continuous with the eugenic past.

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