**The Origins of Eugenics**

By the late 1800s, the Industrial Revolution had changed not only how goods were made in the United States and much of Europe but also where they were made. More and more people were leaving the countryside for jobs in large urban centers, where they lived and worked among strangers. In such a society, it is all too easy to blame someone else for all that is new and disturbing in life. They are responsible for society’s ills. Who are they? In the United States, they were African Americans, immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, Native Americans, and others who looked, spoke, or acted differently than we do.

Francis Galton, an English mathematician and Charles Darwin’s cousin, offered an attractive solution to the threat they posed. He promised to “raise the present miserably low standard of the human race” by “breeding the best with the best.” His theories were based on the idea that individuals are born with a “definite endowment” of qualities like “character, disposition, energy, intellect, or physical power”—qualities that in his view “go towards the making of civic worth.”

Galton decided that natural selection does not work in human societies the way it does in nature, because people interfere with the process. As a result, the fittest do not always survive. So he set out to consciously “improve the race.” He coined the word eugenics to describe efforts at “race betterment.” It comes from a Greek word meaning “good in birth” or “noble in heredity.” In 1883, Galton defined eugenics as “the science of improving stock, which is by no means confined to questions of judicious mating, but which . . . takes cognizance of all influences that tend in however remote a degree to give the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing speedily over the less suitable than they otherwise would have had.”

Galton was particularly concerned with the decline of genius in society. He believed that intelligence is an inherited trait and that the upper classes contain the most intelligent and accomplished people. He was therefore alarmed to discover that the poor had a higher birth rate. In 1904, Galton explained how eugenics might address that problem:

Eugenics is the science which deals with all influences that improve and develop the inborn qualities of a race. But what is meant by improvement? We must leave morals as far as possible out of the discussion on account of the almost hopeless difficulties they raise as to whether a character as a whole is good or bad. The essentials of eugenics may, however, be easily defined. All would agree that it was better to be healthy than sick, vigorous than weak, well fitted than ill fitted for their part in life. In short, that it was better to be good rather than bad specimens of their kind, whatever that kind might be. There are a vast number of conflicting ideals, of alternative characters, of incompatible civilizations, which are wanted to give fullness and interest to life. The aim of eugenics is to represent each class or sect by its best specimens, causing them to contribute more than their proportion to the next generation; that done, to leave them to work out their common civilization in their own way.

There are three stages to be passed through before eugenics can be widely practiced. First, it must be made familiar as an academic question, until its exact importance has been understood and accepted as a fact. Secondly, it must be recognized as a subject the practical development of which is in near prospect, and requires serious consideration. Thirdly, it must be introduced into the national conscience, like a new religion. It has, indeed, strong claims to become an orthodox religious tenet of the future, for eugenics cooperates with the workings of nature by ensuring that humanity shall be represented by the fittest races. What nature does blindly, slowly, and ruthlessly, man may do providently, quickly, and kindly. As it lies within his power, so it becomes his duty to work in that direction, just as it is his duty to be charitable to those in misfortune. The improvement of our stock seems one of the highest objects that can be reasonably attempted. We are ignorant of the ultimate destinies of humanity, but feel perfectly sure that it is as noble a work to raise its level as it would be disgraceful to abase it. I see no impossibility in eugenics becoming a religious dogma among mankind, but its details must first be worked out sedulously in the study. Over-zeal leading to hasty action would do harm by holding out expectations of a near golden age which would certainly be falsified and cause the science to be discredited. The first and main point is to secure the general intellectual acceptance of eugenics as a hopeful and most important study. Then let its principles work into the heart of the nation, which will gradually give practical effect to them in ways that we may not wholly foresee.

Galton was not sure how to bring about these changes. Although he spent years studying heredity, by the time he died in 1911 he still had no idea how traits are passed from parent to child. In his research, however, Galton stumbled upon two discoveries that might have led another scientist to abandon eugenics. Neither fazed him. One was the result of a test he devised to measure intelligence. To his dismay, the poor did as well on the test as “the better elements in society.” He concluded that the problem lay in the test rather than his theory.

His second discovery resulted from his efforts to track successive generations of pea plants. He found that, no matter how high the quality of the parent strains, some offspring were as good as the parent plant and some worse, but most were a little worse. This idea is known in statistics as “regression toward the mean” or middle. Galton suspected it was true for humans as well. If so, it would be impossible to improve the “race” through eugenics. Yet neither finding altered Galton’s beliefs. He continued to insist that intelligence is linked to social class and that “the fittest” parents produce superior offspring.

<https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/origins-eugenics>

**Connection Questions**

1. Compare and contrast Galton’s definitions of eugenics. What are the key words in each definition? How are the two definitions alike? What differences are most striking? How do both definitions relate to Darwin’s theory of natural selection?
2. Reread the first paragraph in Galton’s 1904 description. What words or phrases stand out (“inborn qualities of the race,” “better to be healthy than sick,” etc.)? What does Galton say about eugenics? What does he imply? When Galton writes that the aim is for each “class or sect” to contribute its best elements to future generations, he is suggesting that all groups contribute to the future of humanity even though they are not equal. How do you think Galton expects each class to weed out its worst elements and find its appropriate place in society?
3. Galton insisted that the “best” people in a society are the “brightest.” What is the power of that argument? How does it shape our society today?