

# A SILENT GENOCIDE: DISABILITY AND THE ONGOING CONSEQUENCES OF SOCIAL DARWINISM

Zak Schmoll on the Tragedy of Eugenics

Disability is a term that is difficult to define, but much like G.K. Chesterton said of the term eugenics, “I know that it means very different things to different people; but that is only because evil always takes advantage of ambiguity.”<sup>1</sup> The eugenics movement utilized any ambiguity in its own name to systematically, and legally, seek the genocidal elimination of people with disabilities. It did this by creating doubt about the fundamental humanity of people with disabilities, adding a layer of ambiguity where there should never have been one.

However, lest we feel like the human race has made sufficient moral progress to never even consider the organized eradication of members of

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<sup>1</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *Eugenics and Other Evils* (New York: Cassell and Company, 1922), 3, Digital Edition.

our human family, these issues are more relevant than ever in our era of increased scientific knowledge and genetic testing. Down syndrome has been the most widely publicized example of a disability that, when diagnosed prenatally, leads to extraordinarily high abortion rates, almost universally attacking people on the basis of their genetic code.<sup>2</sup> Proponents argue that a mercy killing is necessary to prevent a life of suffering, but they are disregarding an important reality about human nature; all are made in the image of God, and God became one with us in our humanity.

The assault on the uniqueness of human creation began to gain momentum with the advent of Darwinism. With the Enlightenment-committed intelligentsia concluding that God was no longer necessary for creation, the concept that any were made in the image of God was suddenly no longer required. Humanity was just another type of animal with nothing differentiating it from other primates except for a few fortunate genetic developments.

If humans have no more value than any other part of the natural world, then maybe human

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<sup>2</sup> Sarah Zhang, "The Last Children of Down Syndrome," *The Atlantic*, November 18, 2020, accessed December 29, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/12/the-last-children-of-down-syndrome/616928/>.

institutions should be evaluated by Darwinian principles as well. Darwinism was accepted by Enlightenment scientists who wanted to understand the natural world without the supernatural, so perhaps it had explanatory power for social scientists with similar philosophical commitments as well. Enter Social Darwinism,

a loose set of ideologies that emerged in the late 1800s in which Charles Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection was used to justify certain political, social, or economic views. Social Darwinists believe in 'survival of the fittest'—the idea that certain people become powerful in society because they are innately better.<sup>3</sup>

Blending scientific theory with Nietzsche's will to power led to the idolatry of power and left an important question for these theorists. What do we do with those who are not powerful? What do we do with those who actually might need extra support to fully function in society?

Tragically, the answer to that question is most obviously illustrated in Nazi Germany which

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<sup>3</sup> "Social Darwinism," *History*, last modified August 21, 2018, accessed December 29, 2020, <https://www.history.com/topics/early-20th-century-us/social-darwinism>.

termed such individuals "useless eaters."<sup>4</sup> What many people sometimes forget is that Hitler's first murderous step was to apply Darwinian principles to the human race. Those who were unable to survive independently did not deserve to live. Before he massacred millions upon millions of people for a variety of reasons, he tested his killing machine on individuals with disabilities. From 1939 until 1941, 70,000 people in Germany and Austria were euthanized, labeled as "unworthy of life."<sup>5</sup> Once the intrinsic value of each person was stripped away and the ability to survive and be of use to the state were the only metrics of value, hundreds, thousands, and ultimately millions were massacred utilizing a very similar justification.

Hitler is oftentimes cited as the exemplar of evil, and for good reason. One could contend that because he was an extraordinarily evil individual at the head of a powerful political machine, such terrible things

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<sup>4</sup> Mark P. Mostert, "Useless Eaters: Disability as Genocidal Marker in Nazi Germany," *Catholic Culture*, 2002, accessed December 29, 2020, <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=7019>.

<sup>5</sup> "The Murder of People with Disabilities | The Holocaust Encyclopedia," *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, accessed December 29, 2020, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-murder-of-the-handicapped>.

would not happen among most ordinary people. Eugenics is so obviously evil, you might think it was only practiced by those extraordinarily terrible people like Hitler. Sadly, the history of eugenics extends to our own country as well, and my own alma mater on a personal note. I completed my undergraduate studies at the University of Vermont. Dr. Henry F. Perkins, a professor of zoology, conducted the Eugenics Survey of Vermont beginning in 1925. This study, which directly influenced policy decisions, led to the sterilization of over 200 women who were labeled "mentally deficient."<sup>6</sup> Perkins also wanted to have a "Better Family Contest" at Vermont state fairs to promote eugenics in small towns, showing all the good they were doing by creating better genealogical specimens.<sup>7</sup> The sterilization numbers are far from those in Nazi Germany, but Perkins's evil impulses stemmed from the same root and manifested themselves in several of the same ideas that

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<sup>6</sup> "Vermont Eugenics," *Eugenics: Compulsory Sterilization in 50 American States*, accessed December 29, 2020, <http://www.uvm.edu/~lkaelber/eugenics/VT/VT.html>.

<sup>7</sup> "Letter, H.F. Perkins to W.C. Palmer, American Eugenics Society, . May 27, 1930," *Vermont Eugenics: A Documentary History*, accessed December 29, 2020, <http://www.uvm.edu/~eugenics/primarydocs/olhpaes052730.xml>.

enamored the Nazis, even if they were not put into practice to such a devastating degree.

Perkins was so influential that Margaret Sanger, the founder of what eventually became Planned Parenthood, wrote to him asking for his support for her birth control legislation. She called Perkins one of many "outstanding authorities" who she was hoping to get to support her legislation.<sup>8</sup> He responded to her with great enthusiasm, saying,

From the point of view of humanitarian attitude, there is reason to promulgate birth control. Economically it would reduce the number of unemployed, paupers and those dependent on society because of mental and physical defects. None of these reasons to my mind is nearly so important from the broad point of view as the eugenical reason--the importance of breeding a higher type of people.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> "Letter, Margaret Sanger to Henry F. Perkins, . February 9, 1933," *Vermont Eugenics: A Documentary History*, accessed December 29, 2020, <http://www.uvm.edu/~eugenics/primarydocs/olmshfp020933.xml>

<sup>9</sup> "Letter, H.F. Perkins to Margaret Sanger, . February 11, 1933," *Vermont Eugenics: A Documentary History*, accessed December 29, 2020, <http://www.uvm.edu/~eugenics/primarydocs/olhfpms021133.xml>

Sanger herself was such a proponent of eugenics that even Planned Parenthood of New York recently disavowed her over her views.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the distance that Planned Parenthood of New York attempted to put between themselves and their eugenicist founder, abortion itself, as referenced above in the example regarding Down syndrome, provides the means of selectively breeding today. Even extraordinarily pro-abortion publications like *Slate* acknowledge,

In many parts of Europe, including the United Kingdom, the termination rate after a prenatal Down syndrome diagnosis is now more than 90 percent. In Iceland, where testing is widespread, “we have basically eradicated, almost, Down syndrome from our society,” one geneticist told CBS last year. In Denmark, where all pregnant women have been offered screening scans since 2004, the disorder is heading for “extinction.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Nikita Stewart, "Planned Parenthood in N.Y. Disavows Margaret Sanger Over Eugenics," *The New York Times*, July 21, 2020, accessed December 29, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/21/nyregion/planned-parenthood-margaret-sanger-eugenics.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Ruth Graham, "Choosing Life With Down Syndrome," *Slate*, May 31, 2018, accessed December 29, 2020, <https://slate.com/human-interest/2018/05/how-down-syndrome-is-redefining-the-abortion-debate.html>.

To say that abortion does not allow those similar Social Darwinist, eugenicist impulses to live on in our society today is simply disingenuous.

This progression of Social Darwinist thought has developed over the past century and a half to create a culture where, even if many will not admit it, human value is anchored in survival value and perceived usefulness. We have rejected the reality that man was specially created in the image of God and have replaced it with a societal construct of value that elevates these utilitarian elements to its chief virtue.

It is one of the many jobs of the Christian, then, to reject these dehumanizing tendencies and restore a holistic and robust definition of human value, especially for those who society has oftentimes sought to diminish. How should we do this?

Perhaps the first myth to dispel is that individuals with disabilities are subhuman in any way. This is the myth that eugenicists consistently promote. Logically, their argument is severely lacking. All of humanity exhibits a variety of ability and disability. Some people are more intelligent, and some people are less intelligent; some people are physically stronger, and some people are physically weaker. Ability and disability are continuums, so to choose an arbitrary cutoff point based on one

measure of ability or disability does not make logical sense when determining value. Human value is not a measure like an exam score where it is easy to determine that someone answered sixty percent of the multiple-choice questions correctly. Rather, human ability is multidimensional. It is simply illogical to conclude that because of a low IQ or legs that cannot stand that someone has less value than someone else. Individuals with disabilities, therefore, seem to be just like everyone else — humans who exist with abilities of varying levels on a variety of scales that interact with each other in a complex, multidimensional way that cannot be reduced to one arbitrary measure of "worthiness to live."

If individuals with disabilities are just as human as anyone else without a disability, then the next question to consider is why humankind in general has value. After all, Social Darwinism has historically led to the extermination of those deemed "unfit" and led to the promotion of those who are "fittest." However, fitness of survival is a very poor measure of value. As a somewhat parallel example, gold has a great deal of value, but its value is not determined by its ability to survive. Rather, its value is determined by the price that someone will pay for it. When more people want to buy it, the

price goes up, but gold has not become any more fit to survive through that process. Albeit this is just one example, but it is quite clear that value is not always determined by fitness to survive. Even in a purely secular example, we intuitively seem to understand that there are other ways to define value.

Considering value as the price that someone is willing to pay, however, finds its ultimate fulfillment in the person of Jesus Christ. He came to earth to die for each and every one of us. That is how much He values each individual person; He gave His life for all humans, with disabilities and without. When asking questions of why the human race has value, it is quite clear that we are incredibly valuable to the Creator of the universe.

But the illustration extends even further because the sacrifice of Jesus Christ was not based on anything that we have done. Our value to God is not determined by what we can do for Him; "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."<sup>12</sup> Our value was high enough simply because of who we are, humans created in the image of God, that He loved us and died for us.

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<sup>12</sup> Romans 5:8, NKJV.

The Gospel is indeed the corrective to society's warped definition of human value that has led to so many atrocities, especially against people with disabilities. While the world creates arbitrary measures of value based on utilitarian metrics, God reaffirms that, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."<sup>13</sup> All have sinned, and all have the ability to approach the throne of God and have everlasting life through Him. We have destroyed far too many lives by our radical acceptance of the destructive ideology of Social Darwinism, and apologists must show a superior way.

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<sup>13</sup> John 3:16, NKJV.

# Bibliography

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