

Bertrand Russell and Eugenics

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in Alan Schwerin, ed.,
Russell Revisited:
Critical Reflections on the Thought of Bertrand Russell,
2008



Today, eugenics tends to be associated primarily with reactionary late-Victorian “pseudo-science” or with the horrors of the Nazi regime’s racial policies, despite the fact that in its heyday the ideas behind eugenics were both scientifically respectable and accepted by intellectuals from across the entire political spectrum. The term “eugenics” encompassed a wide range of ideas and practices that were widely debated a century ago, although now, as Diane Paul suggests, eugenics is a “word with nasty connotations but an indeterminate meaning.”¹ Victorian polymath Francis Galton coined the term in 1883, drawing from the Greek term *eugenes* – which means “good in stock, hereditarily endowed with noble qualities.”² Galton, and his early disciples, like the bio-statistician Karl Pearson, expected that their scientific investigation into human biological variation and breeding could be hitched to policies that would ameliorate the overall condition of humanity. A variety of eugenic proposals and ideas were subsequently advanced. “Positive” eugenic measures were designed to encourage the “fit” to breed more and only with other “fit” individuals; “negative” eugenic measures, on the other hand, pushed for decreasing the fertility rate of the “unfit” by either separating so-called defectives and undesirables from society, or preventing them breeding altogether through medical sterilization.³

The very idea of “breeding” humans selectively makes many people recoil in horror. Indeed, bioethicists now routinely raise the example of eugenics in their cautions over the implications of today’s genetic research.⁴ Strikingly, Bertrand Russell’s own views on eugenics encompassed both Galton and Pearson’s optimism about the opportunities that eugenics offered for the betterment of humanity and also the later-twentieth century fears of the potential dangers of purposeful meddling with human reproduction. In particular, while Russell readily accepted the scientific possibilities of eugenics, he warned that the science was liable to

political manipulation. This essay, in briefly outlining Russell's public engagement with eugenics from the 1890s through to the post-World War II years, will argue that Russell's belief in the potential of eugenics for bettering society was increasingly outweighed, over time, by his fear of the uses to which eugenics would be put. But before we can chart Russell's evolving position, we first need to sketch the historical development of eugenics in Britain – the main context in which Russell's own ideas developed.

As a new scientific outlook, eugenics melded together three strands of established late-Victorian science: a hereditary theory of population, the study of population statistics, and a theory of population regulation derived from population genetics.⁵ The belief behind the foundation of eugenics was the conviction that it was possible to scientifically intervene in the reproduction of human populations with the specific goal of biologically improving future generations. Eugenics have typically been derided by later scholars as pseudo-scientific, primarily because of the social and political ends to which the ideas were attached. According to Daniel Kevles, for instance, by the mid-1930s “mainline” (orthodox) eugenics had become “hopelessly perverted” into a “pseudoscientific” facade for “advocates of race and class prejudice, defenders of vested interests of church and state, Fascists, Hitlerites, and reactionaries generally.”⁶ Kevles here provides what has come to be the prevailing homogenizing, negative view of eugenics *tout court*. But eugenics should not be dismissed as an amateurish or pseudo-scientific activity; the ideas on which eugenic proposals were based were formulated by respected scientists and though their findings came to be derided by later scientific and social commentators, the same could be said of most of the science produced in the past, just as today's science will likely be criticized in the future. Moreover, recent historiography has shown that eugenics had many faces and was far more complex and diverse than has been popularly believed.⁷ Many intellectuals up to the 1930s considered eugenics a progressive, rational, and scientifically-based humanitarian project, especially compared to the practices of the past. Political and social conservatives did indeed hitch their reactionary or socially Darwinistic views to eugenic proposals. But so did political progressives, for whom eugenics offered a solution to outdated, irrational, and unethical social and political practices. For them, eugenics would help to improve the intellectual capacity of society as a whole, and diminish the occurrence of socially debilitating mental disabilities. It was only growing doubts about the political implications of eugenics in the 1930s – implications that were fully realized by Nazi *Rassenhygiene* – that eugenics came to be

discredited, both as science and as policy, though not before many European countries and individual states in the USA had enacted eugenic sterilization measures.⁸ Russell lived through the heyday of eugenics, and engaged with the ideas and proposals on the basis of their scientific possibilities. He indubitably shared some of the social and cultural prejudices embedded in the science, but he also recognized the dangers of such prejudice. This resulted in his advocacy of the possibilities, and his simultaneous warning about the probabilities, of eugenic policies. Over time, his warnings outweighed his advocacy, until the latter stopped – at least publicly.

Russell first came to eugenics by reading Francis Galton in the 1890s. To his fiancée Alys Pearsall Smith, Russell excitedly wrote about what he had read, and even suggested a number of mildly eugenic ideas of his own. These included a proposal to issue marriage suitability certificates – an idea that was frequently promoted by members of the (British) Eugenics Education Society (commonly known as the Eugenics Society; hereafter referred to as the ES) in their journal the *Eugenics Review* well into the 1930s.⁹ Indeed, eugenic arguments were successfully used against Russell and Alys by relatives disapproving of their union: it was pointed out to them that there was a prevalence of mental illness among both families' ancestors, and it would be dangerous for them to have children of their own. Although his own interests obviously lay more with mathematics, philosophy and physics, Russell clearly kept abreast of general developments within genetic research from the late 1890s.¹⁰ In Edwardian Britain, evolutionary biology and the study of genetics were consumed by the debate between proponents of deductive experimentation based on Gregor Mendel's research (popularized in Britain by the biologist William Bateson¹¹), and those who favoured a purely statistical, "biometric" approach to population genetics, such as Karl Pearson. Russell was acquainted with both sides of this debate, and both sides actively supported eugenics at the time.¹² When Russell first published on eugenics – a review in 1907 – he applied Pearson's statistical reasoning and the principles of Galton's law of ancestral heredity. Russell advocated direct payments from the state to "desirable" parents, a plan he mooted again in the form of scholarships paid to qualifying parents in 1928 while "undesirable" parents were to be discouraged from procreating and to receive no financial aid for their children from the State.¹³ It was Russell's acceptance of the "dangers" of the so-called "differential birth rate" – the Edwardian concern that the poor sections of society reproduced much faster than the wealthy – that conditioned Russell's understanding of parental desirability.

Social anxiety over the differential birth rate was the result of the shocking revelations by Charles Booth, Andrew Mearns, Seebohm Rowntree and others, about the terrible physical conditions of the labouring poor in urban areas at the end of the century.¹⁴ Fear of the degeneracy of the “submerged tenth” (or the “residuum”) was exacerbated by the findings of recruitment offices for the British Army during the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902), which reported that over a third of working-class volunteers were physically unfit for service. As a consequence, the government struck an interdepartmental committee to determine if the population was facing progressive “racial degeneration.”¹⁵ The report of the committee (published in 1904) suggested environmental factors were mostly to blame, but the neo-Lamarckian understandings of genetic inheritance expressed in the report mirrored those of numerous early-twentieth-century activists and social reformers, many of whom suggested that urban environmental factors were causing the progressive decline of the nation’s “racial” stock.¹⁶ In this and other Edwardian investigations into the fitness of the population, the term race was variously and promiscuously deployed to refer to the whole of the human species, or various subsets within it. Thus while it was predominantly social distinctions that were at issue domestically in Britain, the problems of class were often implicitly linked to the health of the British “race” and its place in the world. This link between race and class difference was most explicit among conservatives and social Darwinists, who argued that generations of inbreeding and rearing in urban crowding and squalor, were causing the working-class’s physical and mental inferiority, which in turn was threatening Britain’s position as a leading “race.”¹⁷ Further, Victorian social amelioration legislation was thought by some to penalize “the fit for the sake of the unfit.” Indeed, eugenists argued that public health and social reform initiatives, often heralded by the Victorians as key measures of progress, had “been based on the [wrong] assumption that better environment meant race progress.”¹⁸ In this view, the threat to class hierarchy and the future of Britain as a leader in the world were not social or economic but rather biological problems.¹⁹ Clearly then, some British eugenists advocated what we would today recognize as biologically-predicated “racial” policies, but not all those who used the language of race did so, and we should be cautious about ascribing 21st Century understandings of racism anachronistically on the past.²⁰

Eugenics was, however, never the preserve of social conservatives or reactionaries. Given the intellectual ferment over Darwinian biology at the turn of the century, and the growing sense that Britain was in some way falling behind its European competitors, it is hardly surprising that

intellectuals across the political spectrum made an effort to link the new science to national life, political action, and social reform.²¹ Many of the progressive intellectuals with whom Russell associated in the early 1900s agreed that manipulation of the social environment through “rational selection” could improve human conduct and thus help direct evolutionary change in a positive way. Fabian socialists, in particular, saw in eugenics a scientific programme of social engineering that corresponded to their views of the role of professional elites in the state.²² Progressives thus supported the 1909 introduction of an allowance of £10 to income payers for every child below 16 on the grounds that as only the middle and upper classes paid significant income tax, the measure would encourage middle-class procreation, with the hope of reversing the fertility differential between classes.²³ Similarly, many progressives supported the Mental Deficiency Act of 1913, which provided that people certified as “feeble-minded” by two medical doctors could be confined in an institution indefinitely.²⁴ It is also the case that progressive support of eugenics was also based, at least in part, on implicit and unacknowledged cultural assumptions about race and racial hierarchies (including even those, like Russell, who were explicitly committed to an anti-racist political ethic) – though this is not an issue that can be dealt with adequately here.²⁵

Russell agreed with the concerns of the Fabians and others that the state should step in to do something to rectify the problem of the demographic differential.²⁶ For Russell there was a profound paradox that British “economic and military success” were “causes of biological failure.” The successful elite left “fewer descendants than are left by the poor and the vanquished. Consequently, courage, intelligence, perseverance, foresight, and energy, biologically speaking, [were] disadvantageous to a race or an individual, and these qualities, if selection continues to operate as at present, will tend to die out of the human race.”²⁷ Thus while Russell concurred with Galton that “biologically innate” values like foresight and energy were at risk, he nonetheless reasoned that the mechanism of this process was as much socially as biologically determined.²⁸ It was a combination of economic and social factors – primarily the cost of raising children – that led to a diminution of the propagation of children of the better sort (by which Russell meant the more intelligent) and to an increase of the less desirable. As he explained in his *Principles of Social Reconstruction* (1916):

Working-class boys of exceptional ability rise, by means of scholarships, into the professional class; they naturally desire to marry into the class to which they belong by education . . . [but due to their origins] they cannot marry young, or afford a large family. The result is that in each generation

the best elements are extracted from the working classes and artificially sterilized, at least in comparison with those who are left.²⁹

This explanation follows closely that of eugenic enthusiasts like pragmatist philosopher F.C.S. Schiller, who also argued “the ability in the lower classes always tends to be drafted off into the higher.”³⁰ But while Russell agreed with Galtonian principles to a point, and remained convinced that individuals of intellectual merit were disproportionately found in the upper classes,³¹ Russell did not follow Schiller and many others to the view that there was a *direct* biological correlation between social position, wealth and intelligence.

Indeed, from his first article dealing with eugenics, Russell warned against allowing social and political prejudices cloud what could be known about genetic inheritance. He argued that prejudices could easily warp eugenically-inspired policies. So while he chastised those who rejected eugenics outright, he also reprimanded “men of science” who “use a scaffolding of biology merely to build a shelter for their prejudices.”³² Unlike many conservative eugenis, Russell proposed family limitation arguments as elements of broader social reform, not the justification for the substitution of social reform with eugenic proposals. Nature and nurture were not radically separated in Russell’s thinking on the demographic differential as they were for many conservative eugenists: “The birth-rate among the better sections of society has declined in recent years because of voluntary limitation of families; and this in turn is due to the economic disadvantages of a large family. If these disadvantages were removed, the effect would cease with the cause. The problem then is essentially one of economic and social organization.”³³

The First World War and its legacy complicated but did not fundamentally change Russell’s position on eugenics. Before 1914 Russell had remained within the progressive liberal fold; during the War he came to think such liberalism outmoded. It had not prevented the catastrophe of the conflict, and in his view, liberalism remained too focused on economic self-interest, individualism and naïve faith in rationality. After witnessing industrialized total war and what he saw as the “herd” mentality of Europe’s population regarding participation in it, Russell increasingly viewed human actions as driven by unconscious impulses.³⁴ Since the possessive impulse ruled and led to economic injustice and wars of aggression and greed, only a move to democratic socialism could save western societies. Russell’s advocacy of socialism was not based in Marxian principles, but on freedom of conscience protected by a public commitment to civil liberties, economic and political democracy, and the promotion of a scientific outlook that dealt with the problems of society.³⁵

Advocacy of a “scientific outlook” presented potential problems for Russell, however. In 1924, while discussing the possibilities of science, the dialectic evident in Russell’s thought between the good that eugenics *could* bring, and the harm that it most assuredly *would* bring if allowed to be unchecked in the hands of governments was signaled in his pamphlet *Icarus, or The Future of Science*. Russell pointed to the dilemma of eugenics in his typically sardonic tone:

Passing from quantity to quality of population, we come to the question of eugenics. We may perhaps assume that, if people grow less superstitious, government will acquire the right to sterilize those who are not considered desirable as parents. This power will be used, at first, to diminish imbecility, a most desirable object. But probably, in time, opposition to the government will be taken to prove imbecility, so that rebels of all kinds will be sterilized. Epileptics, consumptives, dipsomaniacs and so on will gradually be included; in the end, there will be a tendency to include all who fail to pass the usual school examinations. The result will be to increase the average intelligence; in the long run, it may be greatly increased. But probably the effect upon really exceptional intelligence will be bad. Mr. Micawber, who was Dickens’s father, would hardly have been regarded as a desirable parent. How many imbeciles ought to outweigh one Dickens I do not profess to know.

Russell’s faith in the ability of science to raise the average level of intelligence of society is here evident, as is his confidence that those in positions of power would abuse this ability. Russell adds, however, with his reference to Dickens and Micawber, the possibility that eugenical measures applied to “undesirable” parents might decrease the probability of those of exceptional intellectual ability coming to the fore. Doubt here surfaces in Russell about the ability of science to adequately predict who or what conditions are necessary for the emergence of true genius. His doubts continued with his further prediction that the science of eugenics would almost inevitably be corrupted by considerations of power:

Eugenics has, of course, more ambitious possibilities in a more distant future. It may aim not only at eliminating undesired types, but at increasing desired types. Moral standards may alter so as to make it possible for one man to be the sire of a vast progeny by many different mothers. When men of science envisage a possibility of this kind, they are prone to a type of fallacy which is common also in other directions. They imagine that a reform inaugurated by men of science would be administered as men of science would wish, by men similar in outlook to those who have advocated it. In like manner women who advocated votes for women used to imagine that the woman voter of the future would resemble the ardent

feminist who won her the vote; and socialist leaders imagine that a socialist State would be administered by idealistic reformers like themselves. These are, of course, delusions; a reform, once achieved, is handed over to the average citizen. So, if eugenics reached the point where it could increase desired types, it would not be the types desired by present-day eugenicists that would be increased, but rather the type desired by the average official. Prime Ministers, Bishops, and others whom the State considers desirable might become the fathers of half the next generation. Whether this would be an improvement it is not for me to say, as I have no hope of ever becoming either a Bishop or a Prime Minister.

Russell concluded by restating that science really did not know enough about heredity, as of yet, to make definitive conclusions about the efficacy of eugenics. Instead he warned:

If we knew enough about heredity to determine, within limits, what sort of population we would have, the matter would of course be in the hands of State officials, presumably elderly medical men. Whether they would really be preferable to Nature I do not feel sure. I suspect that they would breed a subservient population, convenient to rulers but incapable of initiative. However, it may be that I am too sceptical of the wisdom of officials.³⁶

The statement in *Icarus* about the possibilities and dangers of pursuing eugenics, set the tone for practically every other statement he made about the eugenics in the interwar years, including two of his most widely-read books, *Marriage and Morals* (1929) and *The Scientific Outlook* (1931). Russell raised eugenics in *Marriage and Morals* for two interrelated reasons. Firstly, he was increasingly concerned in the 1920s about increasing state intervention in family life – a trend he correctly predicted would accelerate, and secondly, because of the growing advocacy of pro-natalist concern and policies since the Edwardian period.³⁷ Both developments were intimately connected with eugenics. Indeed, idealization of motherhood and of appropriate marriage practices, guided if not sanctioned by the state, were consistently at the core of eugenic discourse in the first three decades of the century.³⁸ Conservatives warned of racial degeneration if there was not a return to traditional marriage practices. Conversely, progressives argued that Victorian sexual mores had removed the element of natural sexual selection in human mating, thereby weakening the British race – thus sex reformers and social progressives, Havelock Ellis, H.G. Wells and George Bernard Shaw, all argued for a new ethics, promising sexual liberation as a means to national and racial regeneration.³⁹ For Russell, like many progressives, the institution

of marriage itself was an impediment to good breeding and “race regeneration” since the Victorian conception of marriage placed property, respectability, class and religion ahead of rational biological reproduction – the proper concern from a eugenic perspective. Science could bring social advancement but this required freer and more equal marriage relations between men and women.⁴⁰

In *Marriage and Morals* Russell explicitly linked sexual liberation to progress, a view he had first made public in his *Principles of Social Reconstruction* in 1916. But Russell had connected the liberation of women to eugenics through government reform long before the war in those 1890’s courting letters to Alys. Citing Darwin’s *Descent of Man*, Galton’s *Hereditary Genius* and the “obvious argument of Karl Pearson in ‘Socialism and Natural Selection’” that for the “race” to survive “the vast majority of women must be mothers”, Russell proposed that “maternity is work for Society though not for any individual, i.e., no individual gets economic profit out of it – therefore Society ought to pay for child-bearing, and there is no other way of securing economic independence to the mass of women.”⁴¹ Russell accepted that motherhood remained women’s primary role, but he also suggested that the state should help mothers with childrearing. By 1929 Russell was not only advocating that married mothers should get help from the state, on eugenic grounds, but unmarried mothers too.⁴²

Russell was also less concerned in the 1920s about the dangers of the “demographic differential.” The statistical evidence compiled by Alexander Carr Saunders⁴³ in *The Population Problem* (1922), did much to alleviate Russell’s anxiety over differential birth rates: “the birth rate is still higher among the poor than among the well-to-do, but it is lower now in the poorest boroughs of London than it was ten years ago in the richest.”⁴⁴ This convergence was due to the increasingly widespread use of contraceptives, although it was still the case that “stupid people” because of their limited access to birth control had larger families, and when they did try to limit family size it was through abortion.⁴⁵ Russell argued that there was no need in Britain for more population growth, as the population density was high enough, and suggested those that sought increased population growth did so for militarist and spurious nationalist reasons. In a typically pithy comment aimed directly at social conservatives and both feminists and anti-feminists who opposed birth control, Russell averred “the position of these people is that it is better to restrict population by death on the battlefield than by contraceptives.”⁴⁶ Moreover, Russell had now also softened his views on the applicability of Galton’s ideas: “I am

quite convinced that family tradition plays a very considerable part in the phenomena which Galton and his disciples attribute to heredity.”⁴⁷

In 1931, in *The Scientific Outlook*, Russell presented his dystopian vision of science’s potential impact on society. This book was the capstone to a string of essays going back to the mid 1920s, and with regard to the impact of the biological sciences, Russell’s conclusions were stark restatements of his earlier predictions that governments would, over time, progressively interfere in the demographic profile of society, and thereby increasingly restrict personal liberty.⁴⁸ Russell again suggested that governments would expand definitions of “mental deficiency” for political, as opposed to scientific, reasons.⁴⁹ However, whereas in *Marriage and Morals* Russell limited his discussion to Western (and really, Anglo-American) developments, and his consideration of eugenics was limited largely to questions of mental capabilities and socio-economic class, *The Scientific Outlook* ruminated on the fate of the entire planet, and here Russell pointed to the global racial division of labour that a programme of eugenics could bring. Pointing to the general decline of the birth rate amongst the “most scientific nations” and the diminishing white population across the globe, “there will be an increasing tendency to leave the rough work to men of other races.”⁵⁰ This was a reiteration of a fear expressed in *Marriage and Morals*, about the possibility of not differential declining birth rates, but absolute declines in western society: “It may easily go on until the population begins to diminish, and the ultimate result may, for aught we can tell, be a virtual extinction of the most civilized races.”⁵¹ Such a population decline and subsequent division of labour was dangerous since in “the long run this will lead to mutinies, and reduce Europe to the condition of a Haiti.”⁵² “Scientific society” would then be in the hands of other races like the Chinese or Japanese, but as they too might develop lower birth rates, it was inevitable that artificial methods would be adopted to stimulate the breeding of desirable people of “excellent heredity” for the world’s governing class.⁵³ Russell predicted, then, that global inequalities would become hereditary: for “entirely inferior work negroes will be employed wherever possible” and “negroes and ... manual workers in general will be [henceforth] bred for patience and muscle rather than for brains” while the experts and governors “will be bred chiefly for their intellectual powers and their strength of character.”⁵⁴ If “scientifically” carried out, such a eugenical programme would produce “in the end almost [two] different species.”⁵⁵

The Scientific Outlook was, of course, as much a warning as it was a prediction of future outcomes. With regard to eugenics, Russell reiterated

his belief in the possibility of such science to improve human civilization, but warned that men seeking to employ science to do this

suppose themselves actuated by some idealistic motive, and it is possible that such motives may play a part in determining what sort of society they shall aim at creating. But the desire to create is not itself idealistic, since it is a form of the love of power, and while the power to create exists there will be men desirous of using this power even if unaided nature would produce a better result than any that can be brought about by deliberate intention.⁵⁶

The danger of “artificially created societies” was therefore not the scientific knowledge that made them possible, but rather the power that such knowledge provided those in positions of authority; of “power wielded for the sake of power, not wielded for the sake of genuine good.”⁵⁷ Russell demonstrated extreme skepticism that scientific knowledge could be shielded from those wishing to use it as power over others, and furthermore, that even the most scientifically-organized society would destroy the quirks and accidents of human existence that had produced some of humanity’s greatest achievements. As he lamented, “I find pleasure in splendid individuals rather than powerful organizations, and I fear that the place for splendid individuals will be much more restricted in the future than in the past.”⁵⁸

Regardless of what might be wrought by science in the future, Russell was increasingly concerned that the state of scientific knowledge among those committed to eugenics in the present was woefully deficient. Immediately following *The Scientific Outlook*, Russell published his second book on education, *Education and the Social Order* (1932), in which he made a point of deflating the confident assumptions of eugenic enthusiasts – particularly those in the United States. Noting that “the importance of congenital differences among human beings” could not be denied, “the practical inferences drawn by eugenicists” were largely unscientific, since no one at the present time knew “what factors making for socially desirable qualities [were] hereditary, nor which of such factors [were] respectively dominant and recessive.”⁵⁹ Russell argued that there were neither scientific nor ethical grounds for widespread eugenic measures at this time, and pointed to the “unwarranted assumptions” underpinning American immigration law – that blacks were congenitally inferior to whites, that Asians were inferior to Europeans, that northern Europeans were superior to southern Europeans – and of the ES in Britain – that people of wealth were of better breeding than the poor.⁶⁰ Russell’s doubts about the validity of such assumptions were based in the lack of

scientific evidence about them, which led him to cast further doubt on his own past beliefs, and his increasing lack of confidence about the views of Galton: “The work of Galton and his followers, designed to prove that ability is inherited, is far from scientifically convincing, although it is probable that there is some truth in his thesis. But until ways have been devised for eliminating the effect of the parental environment, the whole subject must be open to doubt.”⁶¹ Russell raised the same doubt regarding hereditary differences between races at this time – a point to which we shall return later.

The one eugenic measure that Russell could, and did support in the interwar years was the sterilization of the “feeble-minded.” Russell consistently held the position that feeble-mindedness was inherited and that it could be eliminated through eugenic reform, a measure that would be to the benefit of all humanity.⁶² Generally there were two proposed ways of dealing, eugenically, with the feeble-minded: separating them from the rest of society in institutions or colonies, or sterilizing them so that they could not produce feeble-minded children. In preferring sterilization of those deemed feeble-minded to their institutionalization and separation from society, Russell’s reasoning was essentially utilitarian. Simply put, sterilization of the feeble-minded maximized the chances of protecting individual rights in an environment in which the state was increasingly using scientific experts to police the parameters of social and political normalcy. Explaining Russell’s position requires a brief exploration of the rise of concern about the “feeble-minded” in early-20th Century Britain, for it is this context that explains Russell’s position.

There has never been a completely satisfactory or agreed-upon clinical definition of feeble-mindedness. From the late Victorian period, however, the “feeble-minded” were thought to comprise the “higher grade of mental deficiency” – a category which brought together under one term those who had permanent mental damage or incapacity from birth (designated in increasing order of incapacity: feeble-minded, imbecile and idiot), and differentiated them from both the normal population and from lunatics – those with mental disease and/or a temporary and curable condition.⁶³ Prior to the First World War, doctors continued to place much emphasis on the physical signs of mental deficiency in their diagnosis, often including unrelated conditions such as partial sight, deafness, dyslexia, and even left-handedness.⁶⁴ In fact, it is now clear that much of the early-twentieth-century discussion of feeble-mindedness was based on tautological social construction grounded in a variety of prejudices.⁶⁵ The feeble-minded were judged “higher grade defectives” unable to adequately perform “duties as a member of society in the position of life to which he

is born.”⁶⁶ After the First World War, to provide some objective statistical definition to the category, IQ tests were used to determine levels of mental ability/deficiency. The guidelines adopted were that crude IQ scores under 20 were designated idiots; 20-50, imbeciles; and 50-70, feebleminded.⁶⁷ This IQ-based categorization lasted until well after the Second World War.

Feeble-mindedness as part of the whole spectrum of mental “defectiveness” was believed to be the central eugenic threat facing Britain at the turn of the 20th Century. Social failures in the recently instituted mass schooling, the recognition that many of the inmates of workhouses and prisons were mentally disabled, and the public’s reaction to the unpalatable facts thrown up by the recruitment efforts of the Boer War, brought the social problems of mental deficiency onto the public agenda.⁶⁸ Fears were fuelled by the inclusion of the category of “feebleminded” on the 1901 census, which added some 36,000 to the estimated national population of mental defectives – an increase of 37% – and by the recognition of differentially falling birth rates. Mental deficiency became a symbol of the linked, overlapping concerns about moral, demographic and perceived racial decline: it was argued that those with mental defect “sank within society to join the residuum; lacking moral restraint they bred unchecked with similarly weak-minded individuals; and their offspring were brought up in such a socially and morally impoverished environment, and inherited such weak mental powers, that they perpetuate the vicious circle of decline, turning to crime or falling on the rates in order to survive.”⁶⁹ The feebleminded were viewed as a particular eugenic threat because they represented the borderland between normal and defective.⁷⁰ Moreover, as an increasing number of women in rescue homes were found to be feebleminded, a connection was made between mental defect and immorality. Indeed, in some eugenic discourse, immorality came to be seen as evidence, rather than a consequence, of mental defect, and the large number of illegitimate births to women suspected of being feebleminded due to their immorality further condemned them to this diagnosis.⁷¹

The problem of feeble-mindedness was first raised in British official circles in the Royal Commission on the Care and Control of the Feeble-minded of 1904, to which expert witnesses testified that a shockingly large number of defectives were not adequately dealt with by existing legislation and social infrastructure; the rate of mental deficiency was reported at 0.46% of the population, with about 45% of that number needing some form of permanent care. The 248 witnesses testified that the feebleminded were inadequately cared for in the huge range of institutions in which they ultimately found themselves. The report found that it was

inhumane and unjust to incarcerate this population in prisons and workhouses for actions for which they were not fully responsible, and in which they could not possibly be rehabilitated. Instead, it suggested the creation of specialized, protective colonies for those who could not care for themselves, and family and community supervision for those of a higher grade of capability.⁷² It is important to note that the 1904 Commission was not promoted by organized eugenical pressure; most of the commissioners came to the issue over concerns about education for those not properly catered for by the current system and those worried about the legal status of mental defects in prisons and other institutions. Indeed, the commissioners were wary about direct references to eugenics and there had been considerable confusion about the aetiology of mental deficiency among the witnesses. However, the final report (published in 1908) concluded that the weight of evidence suggested mental deficiency was inheritable; that the feeble-minded were abnormally fecund and prolific (that feeble-minded women, in particular, were promiscuous and oversexed); and that the feeble-minded as a group were implicated in most of the pressing social problems that afflicted Edwardian society.⁷³

The Commission's operation stimulated proponents of eugenics to found the ES in 1907, and the ES, in turn, played a crucial role in lobbying the government on the Report's findings, influencing both the Committee on Poor Law Reform of 1910,⁷⁴ and more significantly, the 1913 Mental Deficiency Act, which moved to permanently segregate the feeble-minded from society by housing them in special institutions on the certification of two medical doctors.⁷⁵ In practice, only a small percentage of the number of feeble-minded believed to live in Britain were subjected to this legislation, mainly because the Act had significant and worrisome consequences. By formalizing feeble-mindedness as a legal category, the Act in effect suspended the political and civic liberties of those subject to its provisions, thereby effectively creating a biological definition of citizenship in which only those deemed mentally fit were entitled to basic civil and political rights. Ironically, however, for proponents the argument that the feeble-minded lay outside the boundaries of responsible citizenship was the most convincing arguments in favour of the Act. The feeble-minded were "in need of care and control, with the right to be given humane care, but too irresponsible to exert their own civil rights or have the right to liberty."⁷⁶ The small number of opponents to the Act had argued, conversely, that it was dangerous to place civil liberties in the hands of experts and to scientific conjecture. It was this position – the problem of protecting the rights of the mentally deficient – that was

thereafter frequently at the forefront of debates about the segregation or sterilization of the feeble-minded.⁷⁷

While segregation of the feeble-minded was thus enacted in a limited way in Britain, many health experts argued that given the inherited nature of feeble-mindedness, it might be possible to eliminate it altogether through a programme of sterilization. Such a programme was urged by an alliance of doctors, scientists and politicians after the First World War, and relentlessly lobbied for by the ES, although given the evident public antipathy to the idea, only a voluntary programme was ever considered seriously in Britain.⁷⁸ Calls for voluntary sterilization came from across the political spectrum: liberals and progressives like C.P. Blacker and Julian Huxley, both key figures in the ES in the interwar years, argued they aimed to make available to the poor (at state expense) the same procedure already available to the middle class. Blacker went as far to maintain that “there are large numbers of people who do not want large families, especially those in the lower grades of society who cannot afford to bring up a number of children. The motive which led these people to undergo sterilization is the desire to limit children.”⁷⁹ Conservatives in the ES, meanwhile, spent most of the interwar years putting together extensive pedigree charts that purported to prove the connection between feeble-mindedness and pauperism and other social ills – a methodology totally discredited by Lancelot Hogben in the 1930s.⁸⁰ At the continued urgings of ES supporters, the government considered the possibility of a voluntary sterilization programme throughout the 1920s, concluding in 1929 that such a programme would be highly desirable.⁸¹ Subsequently, Labour Party MP C.P. Church introduced to Parliament a bill proposing a sterilization campaign in 1931. However, despite the best propaganda efforts of the ES, the bill was viewed as fundamentally anti-working class by its opponents. The Catholic Church, trade union and working-class leadership, and professional municipal health and social workers protested vigorously and the request to introduce the bill was defeated 167 votes to 89.⁸²

We know from his correspondence and journalism that Russell followed the Eugenic Society’s campaign and the very public discussions over voluntary sterilization in the 1920s and 1930s: indeed, he references the British campaign in *The Scientific Outlook*, noting that a sterilization proposal was now “in the domain of practical politics.”⁸³ He was also personally acquainted with many of the key protagonists. But why did Russell side with those progressives who preferred the sterilization option to institutional separation? The answer lay in the fact that since the passing of the Mental Health Act in 1913, progressives had continued to worry

about the deprivation of civic and political rights that followed from the institutionalization of the feeble-minded. They reasoned, however, that once sterilized the vast majority of the feeble-minded would no longer need institutionalization, and could therefore regain both liberty and their civic rights. Russell, himself, went further, and prophesized that the Act had opened the door to political incarceration on medical grounds. Since the definition of feeble-mindedness was so elastic, it was practicably inevitable that governments would abuse the right to define someone as feeble-minded. He reasoned that because the state would try to police social and moral normalcy and political acceptability by having medical experts declaim on suspect individuals' mental health, there was less danger to society in the state having the power to sterilize than there was in it having the right to compulsory segregate the "unfit." In his 1927 article, "Should we let the Scientists Govern?" Russell pursued his argument to its logical limits. Echoing a theme found in many of his interwar pieces, Russell warned that the scientifically-minded were "not so objective in their judgments as they like to pretend,"⁸⁴ and as long as IQ could not be measured precisely there was always a danger of prejudice coming into the decisions, and moreover, those in authority might prevail upon the experts to designate someone as unfit for political or other reasons. Russell concluded sterilization was therefore safer for civil liberties than separation: "To shut up political opponents in a lunatic asylum would be to inflict a very severe punishment, and one, moreover, which a certain kind of government might find tempting; but to sterilize a man without stopping his work would be a rather slight judgment, and in no way useful to the holders of power." Sterilization thus offered a means to pursue a eugenic course without extending the state's powers that it might be tempted to abuse.⁸⁵

Russell never abandoned his libertarian concerns about the uses to which eugenics would be put; in supporting the sterilization of the feeble-minded he tried to balance individual liberties with his perception of the inevitably increasing reliance on scientific authority by the nation state. In the late 1950s in response to a proposal by Herman J. Muller to create a sperm bank of genius with the purpose of "breeding a race with the genes of Lincoln, Einstein and Pasteur," Russell responded, "such a thing, if not possible at the moment, is certainly scientifically feasible. But I hope it will not come about until we have a world government."⁸⁶ In Russell's mind, eugenic breeding policies in a world of nation states was as apt to produce Hitlers as it was Einsteins – a view which he continued to hold throughout the 1960s.⁸⁷ Significantly, Russell did not dismiss the idea that, given the right conditions – a world governed by a benevolent global government – such a plan would be desirable. But Russell had long

stopped endorsing or proposing eugenic measures, of any kind. In returning to the question of the scientific society in 1952, Russell raised eugenic “scientific breeding” as an example of what the Nazi regime would have done had it won the war. His discussion is clearly meant to evoke horror, even though he uses the exact same argument – that in a scientifically organized oligarchy a small percentage of men and women would be set aside for the breeding of certain desired traits and the rest of the population would be sterilized – as he had in his first predictions about the coming scientific society in the 1920s.⁸⁸ Indeed, no public endorsement of eugenics seems to have been made by Russell after the early-1930s.⁸⁹ The reason for this would appear to be Russell’s recognition of the changed political context of eugenics given the rise of European fascism. As noted above, Russell had repudiated the notion that intelligence and ethnic origin were directly connected in the early ‘30s, especially in his criticism of the supposed eugenic justification for American immigration laws, but in his essay “The Ancestry of Fascism” (1935), Russell perceived the even more alarming turn to race-based notions of human value in the politics of Nazism. He conceded that it was “probable that there are genetic mental differences between races” but was “certain that we do not yet know what these differences are” consequently the “whole business of introducing pseudo-Darwinian jargon in such a question [was] utterly unscientific.”⁹⁰ Given the lack of knowledge it was politically dangerous to assert claims of inferiority or superiority. This Russell connected to the “revolt against reason” and the abandonment of objective truth, leading to the inevitable “appeal to force and arbitrament of the big battalions.”⁹¹ By 1941 Russell was even actively lecturing about the dangers of publicly venting any form of race consciousness:

1. Never acquiesce in what you believe to be wrong: protest against it, even though your protest may seem useless....For example, if you are at a party where someone begins to disparage the Jews, or any other race, do not let them get away with it. Remember that it is from such small beginnings that terrible persecutions grow.
2. If you share such a prejudice, struggle against it. It is very easy to become infected by racial prejudice. Hitler has already won a victory in making us all more or less race conscious. . . . If you have such a prejudice that you are unable to conquer, at least keep it to your self.

Explaining further that it was easy to blame a group for the wrongs of an individual, Russell cautioned against making such irrational leaps of prejudice.⁹² Evidently, Russell chose to follow his own advice.

Two other, connected, developments in the mid-1930s likely also pushed Russell into silence on the question of eugenics. First, his relationship with his second wife, Dora, collapsed and Russell removed himself from the vicinity of their experimental school. Over the course of their experiment at Beacon Hill, Russell's thoughts on the relationship between innate ability and environment were severely tested. His views on education written before Beacon Hill was established – most famously in *On Education* (1926) – included the possibilities of self-directed learning and of allowing children a wide degree of freedom. As Alan Ryan has remarked, this view of education “was more akin to gardening than it was to engineering, and demanded of the same affection for variety and difficulty.”⁹³ But by 1931 when he came to write *Education and the Social Order* (1932), Russell had dropped much of his utopian optimism and was more willing to accept overt indoctrination in education in order to avoid the reproduction of the “herd instincts” he saw as leading inexorably to domestic and international conflict. In the mid-1930s Russell's attention was directed at the clear and imminent threats to peace represented by fascism, and less concerned about biological engineering in the future. His writing on educational and related issues plummeted after 1932, replaced by work more directly concerned with current events, and also with an attempted return to philosophical concerns.

Second, Russell was well aware of the challenge to the scientific and social assumptions underlying eugenics launched by progressive scientists in the 1930s, particularly by J.B.S. Haldane and Lancelot Hogben.⁹⁴ Haldane had quit the ES in 1920 and viewed ES enthusiasts as scientifically naïve and politically dangerous. Asked what he would do to stop the poor increasing, Haldane wrote in a very Russellian tone: “If you desire to check the increase of any population or section of a population, either massacre it or force upon it the greatest practicable amount of liberty, education and wealth.”⁹⁵ Like Russell, Haldane was convinced that eugenic measures, if properly carried out, held hope for the future, but also like Russell, Haldane in the 1930s was concerned that lack of real scientific knowledge about genetics and the simplistic claims made by mainline eugenicists made any eugenic proposal too dangerous to contemplate at the present time:

The application of the data of human biology to politics and ethics will probably be more complex than that of the data of physics to industry. It is very important, if the whole science is not to be discredited, that premature

steps should not be made, and that biology should not be harnessed to the car of any political party.⁹⁶

Hogben was a fiercer critic of eugenics than either Haldane or Russell, and his career took the peculiar turns that it did because of his campaign against the ES in the 1930s.⁹⁷ Commenting on Hogben's *Nature and Nurture* (1933), C.P. Blacker noted that the nature-nurture argument in this book was that of an anti-eugenic experimental biologist, who "contended that the influence of bad heredity could not be correctly assessed when such enormous disparities in social conditions still persisted."⁹⁸ For Hogben, first the environment had to be equalized, and the results examined, only then could any eugenic policies be contemplated. According to Elazar Bakan, in the 1930s the work of Hogben and Haldane, and to a lesser extent, Julian Huxley, was key in demolishing the lingering scientific racism of the late Victorian period, with Russell supporting this effort by writing blurbs for many of their key works.⁹⁹ Russell seems to have been convinced by these genetics experts – whose politics were akin to his own – that perhaps science was further from understanding the workings of human heredity than he had presumed in the 1920s. Until the science was on surer ground, Russell followed his own advice from *Sceptical Essays* and chose not to address the issue of eugenics, publicly, either for or against.

However, although Russell stopped writing or speaking publicly about eugenics in the mid 1930s, he seems to have never rejected eugenics as a positive possibility. Indeed, Russell's private correspondence in the 1950s and 60s included a number of exchanges on the topic of eugenics. Russell had written in response to a query from a Professor D. Gabor in 1960: "I think that eugenics properly administered could do an immense amount of good, but in any present-day community I think it would do harm because the type of human being that is admired is even worse in the average of what nature produces."¹⁰⁰ The most significant correspondence were connected with Julian Huxley, who remained a member of the ES long after other liberal and socialist progressives had abandoned the society, and who continued to push for positive eugenic ideas – "eugenics must obviously play an important part in enabling man to fulfill [his] destiny" – into the 1960s.¹⁰¹ On a number of occasions Huxley and Russell exchanged letters about Huxley's continued advocacy of positive eugenics, and on the proposals of other advocates of "progressive" eugenic measures. Russell's responses were consistent with the position he had come to in the 1930s. Writing to Huxley in 1963, Russell asserted:

You seem to think that governments will be enlightened and that the kind of human being they will wish to produce will be an improvement on the haphazard work of nature. If a sperm-bank, such as you envisage, had existed during the regime of Hitler, Hitler would have been the sire of all babies born in his time in Germany. Exceptional merit is, and always has been, disliked by Authority; and obviously Authority would control the sperm-bank. Consequently, in the degree to which eugenics was efficient, exceptional merit would disappear. I am entirely with you as to what eugenics could achieve, but I disagree as to what it would achieve.¹⁰²

Today, we may well disagree with, perhaps even be shocked by, Russell's positions and perceptions. On the face of it, there are some curious lapses in Russell's reasoning. For instance, eugenic arguments tended to involve, if sometimes tangentially, issues of race, and although for most of the 20th Century Russell was politically an active campaigner for racial equality, he nonetheless never systematically interrogated his own presuppositions and Eurocentric assumptions about the meaning of "race" and its implications for his views on eugenics.¹⁰³ Here he was swimming with the mainstream, but it ought to be noted that other intellectuals were challenging these very assumptions during his lifetime. Russell also accepted rather uncritically, arguments about the hereditary nature of feeble-mindedness even as he acknowledged that there was no scientific consensus on what caused or how one diagnosed the feeble-minded (an especially troublesome lapse given Russell's skepticism about the value of IQ tests and the prejudices that tended to accompany them¹⁰⁴). Given his own scathing criticism of people who accepted scientific technique uncritically – provided a "superstructure of statistics, decimal places, calculations, and tabulations, many [educated] Americans begin to think that there must be genuine science, and they therefore do not scrutinize so closely as they should the initial assumptions upon which this whole super-structure is based"¹⁰⁵ – it is hard to fathom why Russell simply accepted the authority of those biologists who made genetic claims about feeble-mindedness. Yet that is the conclusion one is left with. We have no direct evidence of Russell himself reading the key studies of the mental deficiency problem in the first three decades of the 20th Century which, while now methodologically discredited, were at the time widely accepted and the results treated as open to scientific verification, but he does allude to such studies.¹⁰⁶ Among the most influential were Henry H. Goddard's *The Kallikak Family* (1912) and *Feeble-mindedness: Its Causes and Consequences* (1914), both based on Goddard's observations while Principal at the Vineland Training School in New Jersey. Goddard's studies were popularized in Britain by William Bateson because Goddard

claimed to base his study on the newly rediscovered Mendelian genetic principles that Bateson himself championed in Britain.¹⁰⁷ Goddard's work carried a surprising amount of authority until the 1930s, despite the serious methodological problems that were identified and published in early reviews.¹⁰⁸

While the evidence and methods were contested at the time,¹⁰⁹ Goddard's theory became a touchstone in public debates about feeble-mindedness and a major prop for those advocating sterilization programmes, particularly for those within the British ES.¹¹⁰ Russell consistently argued that both environment and heredity had to be considered when seeking the origins of intellectual ability,¹¹¹ yet when it came to feeble-mindedness Russell accepted the position of geneticists like Julian Huxley and J.B.S. Haldane who themselves followed Bateson and Goddard in believing that feeble-mindedness was hereditary. This position was at least consistent with his view, expressed in *Sceptical Essays* (1928), that "the opinion of experts, when it is unanimous, must be accepted by non-experts as more likely to be right than the opposite opinion."¹¹² Perhaps Russell accepted the view of the experts in this case because, despite his flirtations with J.B. Watson's behaviourism, Russell always accepted that an individual's level of intelligence was innate even if proper nurture was important to its development.¹¹³ Similarly, Russell had long accepted that there was *some* connection between the high intelligence and the social status of family background, as suggested by Galton, although as noted above, he came increasingly to see environment and family tradition as being equally as important as heredity in the generation and maintenance of this link.

Ultimately, it is apparent that Russell's acceptance of certain eugenic arguments rested on his openness to their scientific possibilities. He reserved his final judgment because the science had not, it seemed to him, yet been proved or disproved. And here we must remember that until the horrors of Nazi *Rassenhygiene* were revealed, eugenics was respectable across the scientific and political spectrum, and the turn against eugenics was as much based in politics as it was based in science. Prior to the late 1930s radical and left-leaning thinkers like Russell shared the belief that eugenics, and indeed, science more broadly, promised progress and human liberation.¹¹⁴ Indeed, for many British intellectuals, across the political spectrum, eugenic views were attractive because Victorian social reform strategies seemed to have failed, or were at least insufficient by themselves, to bring about great improvements needed in society. Eugenics provided a "modern" way of talking about social problems that could be selectively appropriated by individuals and groups with very

different goals and beliefs. Thus in different ways, eugenics gave scientific authority to both progressive agendas for social change and to conservative social fears and moral panics. For good or ill, the language of eugenics lent respectability to prescriptive claims about the social order, and a patina of objectivity grounded in the supposed workings of nature.¹¹⁵

Russell's anti-clerical instincts were no doubt also roused by the fact that the most active opponent of eugenics in Britain was the Catholic Church. As is well known, in the interwar years, in particular, Russell railed against what he saw as the irrational, reactionary attitude of the Catholic Church to social and scientific issues. Yet it is also clear that Russell was always wary of the uses to which eugenics might be put and he rejected the dangerous ideological connections commonly made between biology and socio-economic status by the more conservative enthusiasts of the Eugenics Society.¹¹⁶ Indeed, Russell's doubts about the feasibility and desirability of eugenics increased over time, largely because of the social and political arguments that tended to frame them in public discourse.¹¹⁷ His big fear was the uses to which the state and its representatives might apply eugenics to society as a whole. It is noteworthy that Russell's fear of the abuse of eugenics was mirrored in the 1990s anxiety about what the genetics revolution might bring.¹¹⁸

Lastly, it is important to note that the vast majority of Russell's writing and public speaking about eugenics took place between the First World War and the early 1930s. After *The Scientific Outlook* he seems to have stopped making public pronouncements about the possibilities of eugenics. As noted above, in the 1950s and '60s Russell did comment privately when questions about eugenics were raised by others, but he did not initiate them. The reasons for Russell's particular interest in the 1920s undoubtedly has to do with his intellectual commitments in this period, and to the political and scientific context of Britain and the United States in those years. Firstly, throughout the 1920s Russell was concerned with children and education. Many of his writings on childhood, schooling and education in this period are attempts to weigh the relative importance of environment and heredity to the intellectual and character development of children - both his own and those he observed and taught at his school, Beacon Hill. This educational experiment was itself the product of his relationship with Dora Russell, and his evolving ideas about marriage and sexual morality, ideas that were intimately tied to eugenic concerns in the first decades of the 20th century.¹¹⁹ Secondly, as noted above, it was in the 1920s that the British BS pushed hardest, though unsuccessfully, for eugenic legislation, particularly the sterilization of the feebleminded. Russell also travelled to the United States numerous times in this period,

and many US states had actually passed eugenic sterilization laws just before or during the 1920s. Russell was confronted with the issue on every trip, and his perception of the value of US eugenic policies went from generally positive in 1927 – “Our only hope now lies in America, which has already started artificial sterilization of the feeble-minded in the States. That is already a great step forward in the right direction”¹²⁰ – to his generally negative view expressed in *Education and the Social Order* in 1932.¹²¹

Russell seems to have self-consciously stopped writing and publicly speaking about eugenics at just about the same time that a) he gave up on his marriage to Dora and Beacon Hill school, b) the Nazi regime established itself in Germany, and c) some of the leading progressive geneticists in Britain began to openly criticize the ES and mainline eugenics in Britain. The convergence of personal interest, political imperatives, and scientific authority in the middle years of the 1930s seems to have convinced Russell not to address the issue further. Russell’s personal correspondence after 1945 reveals, however, that Russell retained his belief that eugenics might be a good thing – the science remained unproven – but that more than ever he did not trust those in authority to use the science for the positive good of all humanity. Thus like Huxley and Haldane,¹²² Russell never gave up on the idea that if the ideological element could be removed from its application, and the science could be applied ethically, the idea of improving the overall human condition through biological manipulation was sound. In his position on eugenics, then, Russell must be classified as thoroughly modern rather than Victorian or Edwardian,¹²³ his view was and is, after all, the very premise that underpins the current science of human genetics.