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Thomas Lemke

Faculty of Social Sciences, Goethe-University

Theodor-W.-Adorno-Platz 6, Campus-Westend – PEG-Building Room 3 G 027

60323 Frankfurt am Main, Germany

E-mail: lemke@em.uni-frankfurt.de

THE TYRANNY OF THE FUTURE: G.K. CHESTERTON AND THE PARADOXES OF EUGENICS*

“The old tyrants invoked the past; the new tyrants will invoke the future” [1]

Abstract: This article discusses G. K. Chesterton's criticism of eugenic programmes and rationalities in his essay *Eugenics and other Evils*, originally published in 1922. The first part of the paper presents Chesterton's analysis of central eugenic arguments, whose inner contradictions and lack of logical consistency he examines from both a humorous and a clear-sighted perceptive. Chesterton is additionally interested in the social driving forces and political beneficiaries of eugenic programmes, and argues that they were mainly used to control the workers and the poor. In the second part, I show that Chesterton's critical analysis of eugenic practices at the beginning of the 20th century contains important insights that can be fruitfully harnessed for the current debate on the social impact of genetic and reproductive technologies. The last part of the paper highlights some important continuities and breaks between eugenics in the past and current practices in reproductive medicine and human genetics.

Key words: eugenics, 20th century, reproductive medicine, human genetics

Non MeSH: G. K. Chesterton

At the beginning of the 20th century, the idea of steering and rationalising human reproduction was met with great enthusiasm both inside and outside of science. The question of eugenics – understood as a “science which deals with all influences that improve the inborn qualities of a race” [2] – dominated the intellectual and

* The following considerations are presented in more detail in my preface to the German translation of *Eugenics and other Evils*. I would like to thank Alan Connor and Franziska von Verschuer, who helped me with the work on the manuscript, and Gerard Holden, who copyedited the text.

academic debate and shaped the emerging discipline of genetics. The appeal of these ideas and ideals extended far beyond Europe and North America. After the first International Eugenics Congress was held in London in 1912, professional associations and magazines subscribing to the dissemination and practical application of eugenic thinking were founded in more and more countries. Genetic theories were popularised at fairs and exhibitions, and in Britain and the US articles on eugenic questions regularly appeared in the daily press [3].

Against the backdrop of this historical boom, G.K. Chesterton published his essay *Eugenics and other Evils* [4]. This essay marks the conclusion of two decades of Chesterton's critical engagement with eugenic theories and practices. Chesterton was a contemporary witness to the increasing acceptance of eugenic thinking that reached its peak in the 1920s.¹ Hardly anyone analysed the logical contradictions of eugenic programmes and their social consequences as bluntly and shrewdly as Chesterton. In his view, eugenics threatened both freedom and democracy. He saw it as an integral part of a more general social trend to disenfranchise people in favour of a dictatorship of state-medical experts that would eventually lead to a regime of oppression, in which individuals would be monitored and controlled right down to their daily lives and most intimate decisions. Chesterton therefore understood eugenics to be an element and effect of a "modern craze for scientific officialism and strict social organization" [4].

In this article, I discuss Chesterton's now entirely forgotten criticism of eugenic programmes and rationalities. The emphasis is initially on his analysis of central eugenic arguments, whose inner contradictions and lack of logical consistency he examines from both a humorous and a clear-sighted perceptive. Chesterton is additionally interested in the social driving forces and political beneficiaries of eugenic programmes, and argues that they were mainly used to control the workers and the poor. In the second part, I show that his critical analysis of eugenic practices at the beginning of the 20th century contains important insights that can be fruitfully harnessed for the current debate on the social impact of genetic and reproductive technologies. The third part highlights some important continuities and breaks between eugenics in the past and current practices in reproductive medicine and human genetics.

I.

G.K. Chesterton is known first and foremost as the author of the Father Brown stories, in which a clergyman solves unusual criminal cases through a combination of empathy, wit and logic. His work is, however, in no way limited to this popular literary figure. Chesterton was one of the most prolific and versatile writers of the

1 Chesterton apparently completed a large part of the manuscript of *Eugenics and other Evils* before the First World War [4] (see 1987a: 294). As early as 1901, Chesterton vehemently rejected in a book review proposals for the "improvement" of the population through birth control [3, 5]. A bibliography of papers published in 1924 already contains thousands of entries [6].

first half of the 20th century. When he died in 1936 at the age of 62, he left behind an extensive oeuvre that, in addition to some poems and plays, included numerous novels, biographies and essays, many of which were a great success with the public.

Remarkably, this was not the case with his book *Eugenics and other Evils*, published nearly a century ago. The book met with little positive response, even though, or especially because Chesterton is one of the few intellectuals who explicitly turned against eugenic programmes and social *common sense*. But the essay is more than an objection to the zeitgeist of the time – in this slim volume Chesterton presents nothing less than an anatomy of eugenics. He dissects its premises and astutely analyses its inner tensions and paradoxes.

At the centre of the essay is Chesterton's opposition to one of the most significant eugenic laws in the United Kingdom: the *Mental Deficiency Act*, which came into force on 1 April 1914. In his examination of the law, Chesterton addresses an issue that concerns him in many of his works: how societies define insanity and how they treat lunatics—as they were called at the time. The inexact definition enshrined in law and the extension of the category of madness, coupled with the facilitation of incarceration are, for him, totally unacceptable and unbearable. For Chesterton, the *Mental Deficiency Act* embodies the domination of medical experts together with political elites. He sees “a medical tyranny” looming that turns the state into a “mad-house” [4]. If the definition of insanity is not limited and determined more clearly, it will result in “[bringing] all human life under the Lunacy Laws” [4]. Chesterton succinctly elaborates the paradox of this endeavour: eugenics attempts to eradicate feeble-mindedness by declaring everyone to be feeble-minded as a matter of principle; there is no longer any boundary between normality and pathology, and eugenic rationality is limitless [4].

Chesterton's rejection of the guiding principle of a “scientific civilization” [7] is known from his earlier essays. In *Eugenics and other Evils*, he relates this criticism of the tyranny of medical and scientific experts to issues of reproduction and sexuality. Chesterton refutes the eugenic premise, according to which it is possible and necessary to distinguish between different valuable forms of human life. He sees the basis of this concept in the entanglement of scientific authority with state power, a connection that paradigmatically he sees embodied in the Prussian state, long before the rise of National Socialism and its implementation of racial hygiene objectives [7]. For Chesterton, by contrast, marriage and the desire to have children are fundamentally a private matter. They are a matter only for those involved, not for doctors or politicians; marital unions between people should be self-selected and free, and not be judged and monitored from outside.

In *Eugenics and other Evils*, Chesterton presents a different interpretation in his criticism of a medical-state expertocracy than is contained in his earlier works. He now sees eugenics as the “control of the few over the marriage and unmarried of the many” [7]; it is not only part of a general social trend toward oppression and

disenfranchisement, but also an instrument and effect of bourgeois class rule. In this perspective, the *Mental Deficiency Act* is not just a “feeble-minded bill” [7] because it defines the category of feeble-mindedness and idiocy so vaguely that, in principle, everyone can be covered by it; it is primarily a law that is de facto directed against a specific group: the poor and the marginalised.

Chesterton’s assessment captures the reality of British society at the beginning of the 20th century: distinct class hatred was characteristic of British eugenics. In particular, paupers and the proletariat, whose offspring were often seen as deficient or degenerate, were targeted. At the end of the 19th century, 90% of the inmates of psychiatric hospitals were poor, a situation that remained unchanged until the mid-1920s. The *Mental Deficiency Act* was prepared by a commission headed by Winston Churchill, and was intended as a continuation and further development of Victorian legislation on internment. The theory of hereditary degeneration and the rhetoric of social Darwinism were also reflected in the commission’s report, which provided the justification and basis for the adoption of the law. The report declared the “first principle” to protect those who “cannot take part in the struggle for life” [8]. This “protection” consisted of interning social “losers” classified as “imbeciles” and “idiots” in special facilities to prevent them from reproducing. In her study on the history of the eugenics movement in the United Kingdom, historian Pauline Mazumbar therefore arrives at the assessment that, in fact, the law was directed against members of the lower classes [9].

Chesterton vehemently opposed the biologisation of social problems expressed in the law. He viewed eugenics as an inadmissible transfer of categories derived from evolutionary theory to society in order to legitimise and secure capitalist rule. According to this perspective, only those who have successfully competed in the social struggle for existence can be regarded as fit and healthy. Chesterton firmly opposes these assumptions and assertions, arguing that the poor cannot per se be held responsible for something that is clearly a deficiency of capitalism; for him, the social situation of the poor has nothing to do with their biological constitution. They are not a definable and uniform “race”, but victims of quite specific social decisions: “There are people of every physical and mental type of every sort of health and breeding, in a single back street. They have nothing in common but the wrong we do to them.” [4] In Chesterton’s view, the poor are exploited to make the rich even richer. If the children of the poor are less knowledgeable than the rich, this is not because of the heritability of intelligence but because their parents have less money for food, and they themselves have less time to study because of their long working days. In order to disguise their exploitative intentions –as Chesterton addressed his accusation to capitalists –they used eugenic laws “to get the grip of the governing classes on to the unmanageable output of poor people” [4]. The eugenicists’ credo was the expression of a world turned upside down: instead of solving the problem by redistributing wealth and thus halting the decline, the poor should stop producing more

mouths than they can feed and work harder.² Chesterton accuses the social elites of attempting to conceal their first failed experiment with an even crueller second one [4]. Capitalists immunise themselves against criticism by treating all those who criticise the system as sick: “They are apparently ready to arrest all the opponents of their system as mad, merely because the system was maddening.” [4]³

So in *Eugenics and other Evils*, a new theme emerges in Chesterton’s analysis and critique of scientific and medical authority. While he interpreted the social definition of mental illness and the treatment of the “feeble-minded” in his earlier writings as a universal control mechanism to which all members of society are equally subject, here they are conceived as an instrument of class rule [8].⁴

II.

Chesterton’s essay helps to dispel three misguided perceptions that persist even today in the scientific and intellectual debate on eugenics: firstly, that it is a prejudiced and ideology-led pseudoscience, secondly, that it is driven primarily by state actors, and thirdly, that it is mainly characterised by the use of violent or compulsory means.

As for the suspicion of ideology, Chesterton rejects eugenic thinking not only because he considers it to be a “false theory” [4] or a misguided scientism; he criticises eugenics even more strongly because it is deemed to be scientifically correct and appropriate and to represent the state of contemporary knowledge. So the object of his criticism is not so much the lack or absence of scientific knowledge, but rather an excess of scientific and medical authority. Chesterton points out that, with few exceptions, eugenic thought pervades the entire scientific and intellectual elite. He knew many followers of eugenic thinking personally, such as George Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells, and conducted a lively intellectual exchange with them. Chesterton emphasises the interpretatory flexibility and “ambiguity” [4] of eugenics and the fact that eugenic ideas are followed by very different social groups and political parties [13, 14, 15].

2 This “solution proposal” already appeared in the classical political economy at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century, in the works of Joseph Townsend and Thomas Malthus. In his famous book on the law of population, Malthus determined unequivocally “that when the wages of labour will not maintain a family, it is an incontrovertible sign that their king and country do not want more subjects, or at least that they cannot support them; that if they marry in this case, so far from fulfilling a duty to society, they are throwing a useless burden on it” [10]

3 Ironically, Chesterton’s diagnosis is confirmed by the reception of the book. The *Eugenics Review* commented the essay in the following words: “The only interest in this book is pathological. It is a revelation of the ineptitude to which ignorance and blind prejudice may reduce an intelligent man.” [11]

4 Historian Edwin Black’s book on the history of eugenics in the US [12] already incorporates in its title Chesterton’s idea (as well is its wording) that eugenic measures are directed primarily against social minorities and the poor [4].

Chesterton's booklet also promises relief in terms of the frequent fixation on the state in the analysis of eugenic programmes and strategies. His reasoning makes it clear that it is not only the state or some kind of state-medical complex that is responsible for the historical development and social acceptance of eugenics. Ultimately, according to his theory, eugenics serves to obfuscate and safeguard capitalist domination. For all his dislike of sociology and sociologists who frequently supported eugenic projects and ideas, particularly in Britain and the US,⁵ Chesterton's reasoning here is basically sociological. He seeks and finds the social driving forces "behind" or "under" the eugenic movement. He analyses these especially in the second part of his essay, which is entitled "The real aim". In brief, Chesterton comes to the conclusion that capitalism and the social distortions and problems it brings about form the material basis for the emergence of eugenic programmes. In simpler terms: "at root the Eugenist is the Employer" [4]. To paraphrase the famous dictum of Max Horkheimer, one could say: Whoever is not prepared to talk about capitalism should also remain silent about eugenics.⁶

However, Chesterton's critique of capitalism should not be understood as advocacy of the socialist alternative; on the contrary, he is far more concerned about showing that socialism does not represent an alternative model [4]. Chesterton was as critical of socialism as of capitalism [1, 17].⁷ In his opinion, both consider humans to be predictable and calculable and pursue the idea of improving them in terms of societal objectives. Eugenic ideas and practices were not limited to Western countries or liberal capitalist societies. After the successful October Revolution, the Soviet Union pressed ahead with the project of socialist eugenics, and many British socialists also agreed with the eugenic ideals that Chesterton dealt with in detail [18, 19, 20, 21].

Chesterton's analysis reveals the deep dimensions of a political rationality that both social formations have in common. In his analysis, he at times comes very close to what the French philosopher Michel Foucault dubbed "biopolitics" in the 1970s. With this term, Foucault describes the break in the history of political thinking and action: "the entry of phenomena peculiar to the life of the human species in the order of knowledge and power, into the sphere of political techniques" [22]. He postulates that, in the 18th century, a new form of power arises that has two "poles of development" [22], disciplining individuals and regulating the population. According to Foucault, sexuality and its control play a prominent role here, resulting from its position as a "pivot" [22] between both types of power. Sexuality represents a physical behaviour that is subject to normative expectations and open for disciplinary measures;

5 One of the most important articles by Francis Galton on the issue of eugenics, for example, was first published in a renowned sociological journal [2].

6 The original quotation reads: "Whoever is not prepared to talk about capitalism should also remain silent about fascism." [16]

7 Chesterton's economic model was Distributism, a kind of third way between capitalism and socialism in which the ownership of the means of production is very uniformly distributed in society and is neither concentrated in the hands of the capitalists nor centralised in the state.

at the same time, it is subject to population policy measures due to its importance for reproduction. In this way, it links the micro level of the physical body with the macro level of the population. Foucault points out that life and its preservation and improvement has become a central area of responsibility of the state, and that it influences current political action and thinking extensively [22].

Long before Foucault, Chesterton observes a new constellation in which issues of health and disease, the body and sexuality are under the threat of regulation and control by the state. He claims that a regime of oppression and paternalism is taking root to the extent that, on the basis of medical and scientific knowledge, state authorities are taking an interest in fertility and mortality, health standards, and the productivity of individuals, and are trying to control and improve these things. The consequence is a dictatorship in the name of physical and mental health and the prevention of possible dangers and risks. In Chesterton's words: "It is a principle whereby the deepest things of flesh and spirit must have the most direct relation with the dictatorship of the State. [...] Police administration will begin at home, for all citizens will be like convicts." [4] He very pointedly describes the consequences of this creeping expropriation of the body: "Thus our civilization will find itself in an interesting situation, not without humour; in which the citizen is silently supposed to wield imperial powers over the ends of the earth, but has admittedly no power over his own body and soul at all." [4]⁸

Chesterton points out that the resources used by eugenics collide with the objective of the higher evolution of humanity:

"The one objection to scientific marriage which is worthy of final attention is simply that such a thing could only be imposed on unthinkable slaves and cowards. I do not know whether the scientific marriage-mongers are right (as they say) or wrong (as Mr. Wells says) in saying that medical supervision would produce strong and healthy men. I am only certain that if it did, the first act of the strong and healthy men would be to smash the medical supervision." [7]

This brings us to the third point. Chesterton elaborates the violence and constraints of the eugenics discourse in detail. He denounces the "law of the jungle" expressed in social Darwinist rationales, and makes it clear who has to bear the cost of visions of eugenic improvement. His analysis does not end at this point, however. He is not so much interested in eugenics as a coercive apparatus, but rather in the "new morality" [4] it encourages. It is not the violent or compulsory mechanisms eugenics puts forward that are crucial, but rather its reliance on altered moral principles and

8 There are also striking similarities between Chesterton's analysis of social provision and treatment of madness and Foucault's reasoning on the "history of insanity" [23, 8]. However, there are also key differences between Chesterton and Foucault, one of the main ones being their assessments of Christianity. While Foucault examines Christianity from the perspective of a "pastoral power", which develops precisely those elements of a bio-political "government of men" that are the object of his analysis and criticism [24], for Chesterton the Christian faith is the antithesis and antipode of eugenic rationality.

societal norms that make the use of violence and coercion appear legitimate in the first place. This new discourse makes the concern for the quality of future children an object of moral unease and turns health orientation and disease prevention into primary social virtues. The moral reference point for eugenics is the life that does not yet exist [4], the unborn life. The concern for real people with determinable diseases is replaced by the fear of possible future illnesses, physical and mental as well as moral and social, and their “carriers”. And it is precisely this process of abstraction that allows eugenicists to present themselves as the guardians of a new morality, to develop a sense of moral superiority, and to immunise themselves against criticism [4].

Chesterton works out two important aspects of eugenic thinking at this point: the production of fear and the orientation towards the future. He interprets eugenics as an expression of the rich’s fear of the poor – a fear that is to a certain extent shifted and deflected into the future as a fear of degeneration and general social decline. Eugenicists emphasise the future orientation at the expense of a relationship to the present. They institutionalise a new morality, according to which the more immediate and present life is the lower and more animal-like it becomes. Conversely, the more life is oriented to the future, the more superior, human, rational and civilised it appears [25].

It is precisely this moral value judgement that Chesterton passionately contradicts. His criticism of eugenics also strikes at the heart of the logic of prevention:

“The mistake of all that medical talk lies in the very fact that it connects the idea of health with the idea of care. What has health to do with care? Health has to do with carelessness. [...] For all the fundamental functions of a healthy man ought emphatically to be performed with pleasure and for pleasure; they emphatically ought not to be performed with precaution or for precaution. A man ought to eat because he has a good appetite to satisfy, and emphatically not because he has a body to sustain. A man ought to take exercise not because he is too fat, but because he loves foils or horses or high mountains, and loves them for their own sake. And a man ought to marry because he has fallen in love, and emphatically not because the world requires to be populated. The food will really renovate his tissues as long as he is not thinking about his tissues. The exercise will really get him into training so long as he is thinking about something else. And the marriage will really stand some chance of producing a generous-blooded generation if it had its origin in its own natural and generous excitement.” [7]

One could summarise Chesterton by saying that the tyranny of the future prevails through the permanent reference to possibilities, chances and risks. Paradoxically, Chesterton’s lucid analysis and critique of prevention is itself informed by a preventive logic: it is a matter of clarifying the consequences of this thinking with regard to marriage and family in order to halt and reverse the problematic trend. His committed polemic is intended to mobilise opposition to eugenic rationality by shed-

ding light on the foreseeable consequences: “It is often essential to resist a tyranny before it exists.” [4]

Eugenics and other Evils appeared in 1922, the year in which Chesterton converted to the Catholic Church after years of warming to the religion. His criticism of eugenics was fed not least by the belief that it constitutes a civil religion that defines new catalogues of virtues and moral obligations, and within which it is a social “sin” not to orient one’s activities towards eugenic goals – whereby the notion of original sin takes on a whole new meaning. Chesterton therefore perceived eugenics as a “new kind of State Church” [4] and as a threat to the Christian faith [4]. This is presumably why Chesterton’s criticism of eugenics was so comprehensive and profound, because he understood it as a mode of guiding and steering individuals rivalling Christianity that, instead of being oriented towards otherworldly salvation, held out the prospect of healing worldly suffering – at least for the next generation(s).⁹

Because Chesterton’s Christian faith is an important reference point for his criticism of eugenics [4], it is worth stressing its unusual form. His faith is characterised on the one hand by a strong sensitivity to social injustice and poverty, and on the other by an unsentimental rationalism. For Chesterton there is a harmonious match between religious commandments and the laws of reason. His arguments make no appeal to the authority of Scripture, but are distinguished by a strikingly clear logic that allows no intellectual contradiction and which wonderfully combines stylistic elegance with a simple and accessible language [28, 29, 30].¹⁰

III.

Chesterton was not only an author who was able to accurately reveal the internal tensions and paradoxes of eugenics like no other; he often advocated conflicting positions himself. He was one of the fiercest opponents of British imperialism and a staunch patriot, he hated nationalist thinking, but was also a supporter of Mussolini. Chesterton criticised the hate campaigns against Jews in Nazi Germany, but sometimes used anti-Semitic arguments himself [32, 33, 29]. As sharply and clearly as he presented his arguments, his political-intellectual location remains strangely vague and diffuse.

9 The concept of a “genetic pastorate” is developed in more detail in Kollek and Lemke [26] and Rose [27]. On eugenics as a functional equivalent for religion, see [20].

10 It would therefore surely be wrong to ascribe Chesterton’s criticism of eugenics solely to his Christian faith. In addition, the Catholic Church can by no means be considered a haven for anti-eugenicists in the first half of the 20th century. Heredity issues, for example, were not only openly discussed in Catholic circles in Germany, but were widely accepted in the first decades of the new century. Catholics suggested, for instance, isolating “those afflicted by hereditary diseases” in homes, or issuing health certificates for marriages. Catholicism of that period thus broke with the premise of a fundamental equality of all men before God, and adopted the notion of different intrinsic values of human life [31]

However, this does not alter the ongoing relevance of his insights – even and especially when, today, “eugenics” no longer denotes a scientific programme and a political utopia but rather stands for a misguided ideology and a social dystopia. In addition to referring to the “racial politics” of the National Socialist State, the critical and negative relationship to historical eugenics which dominates today is closely related to findings in human genetics and innovations in reproductive technologies since the 1970s. While Chesterton was still able to write that we do not know what is hereditary and what is non-hereditary [4], this “veil of genetic ignorance” [34] has at least been lifted to some extent. Until the 1960s, couples with a familial risk wishing to have children could only be advised in genetic counselling to forgo biological children. This changed in the 1970s with the establishment of prenatal diagnosis and the introduction of new reproductive techniques, such as in vitro fertilisation. The availability of prenatal care and the ever-increasing reliability of genetic testing now made it possible to determine with a higher probability whether a couple’s offspring would be affected by a genetic disorder or disease. At the same time, the success of the women’s movement and the growing criticism of the authoritarian-patriarchal tendencies of the welfare state resulted in a substantial withdrawal of the state from reproductive issues and a (partial) legalisation of abortion in many Western countries.

The interaction of scientific-technological processes and political-regulatory changes led to a significant shift in strategies for managing and controlling human reproduction. It can hardly be overlooked that, in recent decades, a new prevention regime has come into being that tends to replace social forms of control with self-regulatory mechanisms. Even though current human genetic practices are not simply the continuation or extension of eugenic projects of the past, there are certainly more historical continuities than many observers assume. One important difference, however, is that biology today – unlike the eugenics of the first half of the 20th century – is no longer considered to be immutable and persistent. It no longer implies a matter of fate and a sphere beyond social control but, on the contrary, refers to a privileged field of intervention. In this respect, the body has ceased to be a solid and stable unit and is conceived as open to strategies and techniques of modification, adaptation, transformation and optimisation [35]. Genetic risks, for instance, appear to be easier to measure and control than social, biographical or environmental risks. This leads to a peculiar reversal: while institutional and social structures are largely considered unchangeable and “natural”, the biological nature of individuals appears to be open to modulation and intervention [36].

The fact that in life sciences and medicine today, strictly deterministic concepts and mono-causal models are no longer prevalent and the emphasis is more on dispositions, susceptibilities, and risks represents an important difference to previous eugenic practice. However, this difference may be just the condition for the extension and generalisation of eugenic ambitions. The scientific and medical focus on monitoring genetic risks creates the conditions for a shift of eugenic practices that are no longer only targeted against marginalised or stigmatised individuals and collectives,

but against each and every individual. In the light of risk semantics, every pregnancy tends to be a “high-risk pregnancy” or “tentative pregnancy” [37], where the decision to conceive and carry the embryo to full term becomes increasingly conditional on proof of “freedom from genetic damage”. It is, however, becoming more and more difficult to provide such proof, as the category of “damage” continues to detach itself from a specific describable affliction or an empirically observable symptom of disease; “damage” can mean the “wrong” gender, or “below average” intelligence [38, 39].¹¹

The problem of eugenics has therefore not been „settled” with the improved facilities for the diagnosis and monitoring of individuals’ genetic composition; on the contrary, it has become inescapable. To the extent that, in today’s society, reproduction is increasingly subject to individual self-determination and freedom of choice, society is inevitably becoming eugenic:

„The genetic manipulability of humans confuses the spheres of freedom and necessity. The freedom to manipulate nature, providing copies or designing human beings following genetic blue prints produces at the same time the necessity to ascribe even our non-manipulated existence to a decision.” [42]

Whether we like it or not, even the seemingly „non-eugenic” decision not to subject oneself to prenatal diagnostics and practise selective abortion becomes a eugenic one, since it is also based on a (normative) decision: the decision that it is better not to decide. The selection of a „natural” genetic make-up for an individual is merely one option and „selection criterion” among others.

Contemporary eugenics is therefore universal and unavoidable. It is of secondary importance whether we wish to hold onto the word, or consider it unsuitable to appropriately describe the present. It is important to recognise that the eugenicists Chesterton rails against in his book would undoubtedly have welcomed the numerous means to control reproduction that are available today, and which they could at best only dream of at the time.

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11 While Chesterton reproaches contemporary eugenics by claiming that “The Eugenist” has to treat everybody, including himself, as an exception to a rule that isn’t there” [4], thus eliminating the boundary between normality and pathology, Tom Shakespeare observed a similar paradox in relation to current human genetics some years ago. It promises to defeat and eliminate diseases, but to achieve this goal must ultimately make all those who require genetic monitoring and “treatment” sick and disabled. From this perspective, there are no longer any healthy people, but only “asymptotically sick” or “persons at genetic risk” [40, 41].

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