

# Euthanasia – the right to die? Part I: Race hygiene and eugenics in Germany and the United States 1859-1914

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**Abstract:** The article (Part I of 3)\* outlines the advent and development of social Darwinism from the mid-1880s until the outbreak of World War I. Based on Darwin's theory of evolution and the 'survival of the fittest' in the plant and animal kingdoms, German and American scientists adapted this theory to the human condition in the new science of 'race hygiene' in which the future of the species *homo sapiens* also depended on natural selection and selective breeding. This could only be achieved and maintained by the selection and elimination of the weak and 'unfit' through euthanasia. The ideas of such pioneering race hygienists as Ernst Haeckel, Alfred Jost, and Alfred Ploetz are presented, together with the ideology, proposals and demands of advocates for the new pseudo-science of eugenics. In time, the idea of voluntary euthanasia for the chronically or terminally ill and involuntary euthanasia for the mentally ill merged with the concept of the productive 'worth' of a mental patient to society. Those who were unproductive – the incurably mentally ill and therefore 'worthless' lives – were the candidates for involuntary euthanasia. The various demands by individuals and groups for State-sanctioned 'mercy killing' are mentioned, and the development of eugenics movements in Germany and the USA are outlined together with the differences in aims and interests.

**Key words:** degeneration, eugenics, euthanasia, race hygiene, social Darwinism, sterilization

\* Part II: Race Hygiene and Eugenics in Weimar Germany and the United States 1919-1929. Part III: Preparations for Euthanasia in Germany 1930-1939.

With the publication in 1859 of Charles Darwin's 'Evolution of the Species' outlining his theory of the 'struggle for existence' whereby through natural selection only the strongest survive among the species of the animal and plant kingdoms, scientists began to apply the Darwinian theory to *homo sapiens*. According to the scientists, human inequality was a fact and 'natural selection' in the form euthanasia should be administered not only to the chronically or terminally ill to relieve intolerable suffering, but also to all those who were 'unfit' through mental illness or physical disability. Such a selection would 'clean the gene pool' and prevent 'contamination' of future generations and produce a superior species of *homo sapiens*. Such a measure would inevitably also include racism and ultimately 'ethnic cleansing' by the extermination of 'inferior' races.

In 1806, fifty-three years before Darwin's publication, the distinguished Berlin physician Christoph Wilhelm Hufeland had already foreseen the dangers of selection of the weakest and the sick for euthanasia. He, and others, foresaw the dangers of the 'slippery slope' – that once euthanasia was instigated who should have the right to decide between life and death for a patient, and where would the practice of euthanasia stop? It was his opinion that physicians should and must do nothing other than maintain life, according to the Hippocratic Oath; it was not incumbent on the physician whether a patient's life is happy or unhappy, worthwhile or not, and should he incorporate these perspectives into his profession the consequences would be unforeseeable:

... the doctor could well become the most dangerous person in the State. If this line is crossed once, with the doctor believing he is entitled to decide upon the necessity of life, then it only requires a logical progression for him to apply the criteria of worth and, therefore, in other instances [1].

Almost two centuries earlier, Francis Bacon, who was responsible for the Latin transcription of the word 'euthanasia', had significantly modified the concept by according physicians the exclusive right to *alleviate* the suffering of the dying [2]. This did *not* extend, however, to terminating a patient's life, either passively or actively.

Following the publication of Darwin's discoveries, their adaptation by the scientific world of the biological and zoological model as a social phenomenon became the basis for a new science: social Darwinism, the breeding of the ideal human through selection, and thereby the solution to the social problems of the day. The biological sciences began to develop and resulted both in emotive debates as well as practical proposals for carrying out natural selection – euthanasia, on certain categories of people.

Paul Broca, an anthropologist, in 1861 pandered to the popular prejudice that males were more intelligent than females by asserting that there was not only a remarkable relationship between the development of intelligence and the volume of the human brain, but that mature adult men had larger brains than those of women or the elderly, and eminent men larger brains than those of mediocre talent. It therefore followed, he asserted, that superior races possess larger brains than inferior races [3]. Scientists constructed 'rank-order' or 'value judgement' hierarchies that placed human beings on a single scale of intelligence, thus incorporating popular prejudices into their

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theories and producing as ‘evidence’ carefully compiled but meaningless correlations between the size of the brain and presumed intelligence. It was concluded, without producing any actual evidence, that human differences were ‘hereditary and unalterable’. The biological sciences of that century therefore simply recorded, without any evidence, traditional prejudices about the intrinsic inferiority of certain despised groups. Science thus showed ‘the tenacity of unconscious bias and surprising malleability of “objective”, quantitative data in the interests of a preconceived idea’ [4].

The theme of Darwin’s ‘survival of the fittest’ was further radicalised in 1868 by Ernst Haeckel, biologist, philosopher and Professor of Biology at the University of Jena, who applied anthropological techniques to bolster and popularise in Germany the new theory of evolution. He enthusiastically believed that the idea of natural selection could be ‘steered’ and in his ‘History of Natural Creation’ (*Natürliche Schöpfungsgeschichte*) wrote approving of what he alleged to be the ancient Spartan practice of infanticide on their ‘weak’ infants. He additionally maintained that the death penalty was also a form of ‘selection’ whereby criminals were prevented from handing down their criminal tendencies [5]. He also fused the notion of euthanasia with the crude materialistic argument that such a measure would save a great deal of public and private money.

Haeckel invented the Biogenetic Fundamental Law (*Biogenetischen Grundsetzes*) in which he coined the phrase ‘ontology recapitulates phylogeny’, i.e. the development of an organism exactly mirrors the evolutionary development of evolutionary biology – human beings go through the chronological stages of evolution as they advance from embryo to adult. This ‘recapitulation’ could therefore be used to pinpoint a person’s position on the scale of evolution, and measurements would show at what stage maturation had ceased and resulted in hereditary defects [6].

Haeckel’s work was a turning point and given considerable authority, and thereafter the idea that heredity alone determined natural selection was readily accepted by German scientists. The new political catchphrase became ‘The Struggle for Existence’ (*Kampf um Dasein*) [7].

The 1861 hypothesis of Paul Broca about the relationship between the size of human brains and intelligence was put even more forcefully in 1879 by Gustave Le Bon, the founder of social psychology, who agreed with Broca:

In the most intelligent races, as among Parisiens, there are a large number of women whose brains are closer in size to those of gorillas than to the most developed human brain. This inferiority is so obvious that no one can contest it for a moment; only its degree is worth discussion [8].

Belief in inequality therefore co-existed with the principles of equality proclaimed by the American and French revolutionaries.

In the United States where social Darwinism was also widely accepted, the American race hygienists, like their German counterparts, studied genealogies and problems of racial degeneration, dividing populations into ‘superior’ and ‘inferior’ individuals. In this way they, too, hoped to safeguard the nation’s genetic heritage and viewed degeneration as a threat. Popular prejudice in the USA also accepted as self-evident the superiority of the white race over all others, with blacks placed at the bottom of the ranking order of races. The

American paleontologist E. D. Cope claimed to have identified four groups of ‘lower human forms’, including – along with women, non-whites and Jews – ‘all lower classes within superior races’ [9]. This American prejudice was reflected by the German anatomist Carl Vogt in 1864 when he stated that, ‘... the adult negro partakes, as regard his intellectual facilities, of the nature of a child, the female, and the senile white’ [10].

In 1881, Francis Galton, a British naturalist and mathematician, gave a name to the science of improving and strengthening the human race by selective breeding – eugenics, which gave rise to eugenic movements in Scandinavia and the United States of America. Recruited from the biological and social sciences (or what today may be called the ‘life sciences’) eugenicists firmly believed that the inheritance of social traits determined the ranking order of humans. Although the development of eugenics in Germany and the USA were similar there were also major differences. In Germany, university scientists with professorships had much greater prestige than their American colleagues, and played a more active role in the eugenics movement [11]. In the United States, where eugenics were used to justify unrestrained economic competition and the ‘survival of the fittest’ as a law of nature, in Germany the economic aspect was of a very different kind – growing resentment at the cost of supporting the ‘worthless lives’ of the asocial, the physically disabled and the mentally ill. These movements developed within the larger movement of social Darwinism, but in Germany reached new levels of support by fomenting a fear that approached paranoia of ‘racial degeneration’ due to a declining birth rate among the upper classes and a rise in the numbers of ‘inferior elements’ in society [12].

The following year (1882) there appeared an equivocally symbolic volume by the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche entitled ‘The Happy Science’ (*Fröhlichen Wissenschaft*) in which he makes a direct reference to euthanasia. In the section ‘Holy Cruelty’ (*Heilige Grausamkeit*), Nietzsche wrote:

A man with a child in his arms went to a holy man. ‘What should I do with this child?’ he asked, ‘he is pitiful, malformed, and does not have enough life to die’. ‘Kill it’, cried the holy man in a terrible voice, ‘Kill it, and then hold it in your arms for three days and three nights, so that you will remember – then you will never again have a child if it is not time for you to have a child.’ When the man heard this, he departed from there disillusioned; and many rebuked the holy man because he had advised cruelty in killing the child. ‘But is it not more cruel to let it live?’ asked the holy man [15].

The final question above was an argument used by many advocates of euthanasia administered as a ‘mercy death’.

In 1883, Nietzsche again wrote about euthanasia in ‘Thus Spoke Zarathustra’ (*Also Sprach Zarathustra*) in a section entitled ‘Of Voluntary Death’ (*Vom freien Tod*) in which he again makes it clear that he is an advocate of euthanasia: ‘I commend to you my sort of death, voluntary death that comes to me because I wish it.’ [16]. The laws extant at the time, however, prohibited ‘mercy death’. Nietzsche commented that many human beings never develop mentally and are ‘rotten and worm-eaten’ inside. Only cowardice on the part of others prevented an end to their worthless existence to which they clung for much too long:

I wish a storm would come and shake all this rottenness and worm-eatenness from the tree! I wish preachers of a *speedy* death would come! They would be the fitting storm and shakers of the trees of life! But I hear preached only slow death and patience with all 'earthly things' [17].

In 1889, Nietzsche became insane and rapidly degenerated physically into a helpless invalid. During that year the idea was put forward for the sterilization of 'degenerates' which one doctor described as 'a sacred duty of the State' and gained support in medical circles. Nietzsche, who paradoxically would have been a prime candidate for the euthanasia he advocated, died in 1900.

Nietzsche's 'preachers of death' appeared before the end of the century, proposing selection theories through which social Darwinism could be put into practice. But before this happened, throughout the late 1880s in Germany, a vociferous anti-psychiatry campaign was waged by public figures and former psychiatric patients. One of the outspoken champions of the latter was Court Chaplain Adolf Stöckel whose lobby was concerned primarily with medicalised infringements of civil liberties. Stöckel's theme was taken up in 1892 by the *Kreuzzeitung*, a conservative newspaper, which stated that 'in no other area of our legal existence is such latitude accorded to error, arbitrariness or evil intent as in declarations of insanity.' [18]. The outcome was the founding of a number of associations to promote reform of the mental health laws.

In the same year, August Florel, a Swiss psychiatrist, also proposed sterilizing the mentally ill, to which was added in the following year (1893) the proposal of Alexander Tille that 'misshapen people should not be allowed to marry'. Tille was not a psychiatrist, he was a farmer (!) [19].

Also in 1893, Paul Wilutzsky in 'Early History of the Law' (*Vorgesichte des Rechts*), introduced an unfavourable comparison between chronic human suffering and how humans dispose of sick or dying animals to relieve them of their suffering. This argument appears several times in subsequent debates which erased the distinction between voluntary euthanasia at the behest of the patient, and compulsory euthanasia for those whom many regarded as '*vita non jam vitalis*' ('life unworthy of life') [20].

In 1895, Tille wrote in his book 'From Darwin to Nietzsche' an additional demand, that all those who were 'unfit should receive less to eat as a result of which 'the unfit will unfailingly be destroyed' [21]. Tille's ideas were put forward at a time when the impact of 'scientific racism' in intellectual circles in Germany resulted in the advocacy of the idea of direct medical killing of the mentally ill. Central to this idea was the stress upon the integrity of the organic body of the people, the nation, as an embodiment of racial-cultural substance. With this focus in the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the idea assumed a biological form whereby the favoured group became an 'organism' whose healthy life has to be preserved. This could only be achieved and maintained by means that transcended the fate of individuals, i.e. by State-sanctioned euthanasia [22].

Also in 1895, there appeared two important publications in Germany concerning euthanasia: 'The Right to Death' (*Das Recht auf dem Tod*) by the jurist Adolf Jost and 'The Fitness of Our Race and the Protection of the Weak' (*Die Tüchtigen unsere Rasse und der Schutz der Schwachen*) by the Munich anthropologist Alfred Ploetz.

Jost, in his polemic, drastically modified the 1806 idea by Hufeland and called for direct medical killing, merged the idea of 'assisted death' to end the chronic suffering of the terminally ill with the killing of the incurably mentally ill to relieve both relatives and the community of the psychological and financial burden. In direct opposition to Hufeland, Jost believed that the mentally ill could be killed involuntarily, regardless of the fact that in many cases patients were not capable of articulating their wishes [23]. That the health of the 'organism of the State' took precedence over the life of the individual was further emphasised by Jost in the fact that the State already exercised this 'right' in war, when thousands of individuals are sacrificed on the field of battle for the good of the State [24].

Ultimately, Jost's entire argument was biological: 'The rights to death are the key to the fitness of life,' therefore the State must own death – must kill – in order to keep the social organism, the State in the form of its people, alive and healthy [25]. This principle was disseminated by several other influential writers in Germany who advocated race hygiene.

Jost's concept of the right of the State to kill was in direct opposition to the tradition extant in the USA and Great Britain about euthanasia: in both countries the emphasis was on the right of the *individual* to die, or the right to his or her own death as the ultimate human claim.

Ploetz concurred with the ideas of Alfred Jost and outlined in his book an idea worthy of Nietzsche, that 'our way is upwards, from species to super-species'. He coined the term 'racial hygiene', advocating the 'selection, removal and elimination of the unfit from the nation' [26]. He maintained that a new born child who was weak and a 'misfit' should be brought before a medical commission that would also consist of members of the community, for a decision about whether to administer a 'gentle death'. Ploetz suggested a small dose of morphine [27].

Among others whom Ploetz considered as candidates for selection and final elimination there were also those with venereal diseases, tuberculosis, as well as 'asocials' and criminals. Ploetz's concern was also that poverty served as the reason for the denial of welfare benefits to the sick and the unemployed because they 'prejudice the fight for survival' [28]. The question of welfare benefits and medical and nursing costs were eventually to become a core argument in favour of euthanasia

There was nothing particularly Germanic about the ideas of Jost, Ploetz and their followers. The ideas originated among like-minded members of the intelligentsia and bourgeoisie in European societies at a time of rapid social, economic and political change that resulted in irrational fears about, among other things, nationalism, social Darwinism, and eugenics, against a political background of 'national' socialism vs. anti-Marxism and concerns about national degeneration and decline. In such a climate shaped by such often irrational fears about enemies within and without who allegedly threatened the future of the nation, social Darwinism and eugenics gained popularity and strength [29].

Although social Darwinism was also influential in the USA and Great Britain, it was in the German context that the populist radical right-wing politics acquired a level of support that inevitably presented a serious threat to individuals and minorities – especially at first to the mentally ill as a 'worthless' group, and then the Jews and Gypsies as members of 'inferior' races.

Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, an Italian physician, Cesare Lombroso, who became the father of criminal anthropology, introduced a new theory into the euthanasia debate. By using anthropological techniques he elaborated on Haeckel's idea about 'recapitulation'. According to Lombroso, recapitulation also explained human criminality: 'criminals are apes in our midst, marked by the anatomical stigmata of atavism', and because some criminals are 'born evil' and were incapable of change, punishment for such born criminals was inefficient – they should therefore be eliminated completely, 'even by death' [30]. Lombroso not only attributed atavistic criminality to individuals from the lower classes, but also portrayed entire groups as criminals. One such group was the handicapped, in particular those afflicted with epilepsy; he asserted that 'almost every born criminal suffers from epilepsy to some degree'. For Lombroso, epilepsy was 'a mark of criminality' [31].

From 1933, the Nazis used the language of Lombroso to target the same groups of victims – the mentally and physically handicapped and the criminally insane; according to the judiciary their killing was justified because their 'physical shape no longer deserved to be called human, they look like monstrosities from hell' [32].

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, scientists turned from weighing human brains to measuring human skulls and other parts of the body. Whereas previously they had ranked human groups according to intelligence and professed that inferior humans 'lacked culture', they now turned to Lombroso's new science of criminal anthropology and claimed that such humans were immoral, depraved and criminal. Lombroso's anthropometric techniques served to strengthen the new theory based on evolution [33].

Until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the term 'euthanasia' retained its original, classical meaning of a 'fine' or 'gentle' death, or in today's terminology 'the act or practice of putting to death painlessly, especially in order to release from incurable suffering.' In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it began to take on a more sinister meaning through increasing intensity of concerns about patient physical fitness, productivity, and financial savings, against a background of a society in slow decline.

At the turn of the century, the majority of scientists in the German eugenics movement were physicians, a medical education being the preferred career path for undertaking research in biology and anthropology; they tended to be academic psychiatrists trained in medicine and biology, and who staffed University Clinics and State psychiatric institutions. In the USA, however, it was the psychologists who played an active role in the movement [34, 35].

From the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Germany, the increase in the number of psychiatric patients incarcerated in mental institutions resulted in them being discriminated against by scientists and politicians and featured prominently in debates on social reform. Especially disquietening was the large number of the different groups of so-called 'asocials' and those who were unproductive for the economy in a time when labour was needed for fast-growing industry [36]. The psychiatrists concurred with their colleagues in the fields of biology, genetics and anthropology concerning their analyses about degeneration among the lower classes, but transformed the term 'degeneration' into a diagnostic concept by applying it to such diverse conditions among the 'asocials' as alcoholism, hysteria and homosexuality [37].

From the end of the century, too, the sterilization of the

'hereidarily ill' came once more to the fore as the subject of heated debate among medical specialists. Sterilization was associated with the biomedical vision of therapeutic and regenerative principles – with the 'purification of the national body' and the total 'elimination of morbid hereditary dispositions', and therefore a part of 'negative' eugenics. A legal prohibition on the voluntary or involuntary sterilization of German citizens did little, however, to prevent the illegal practice being carried in previous years on several hundred people [38].

On 1 January 1900, the German mega-industrialist Friedrich Alfred Krupp offered a prize to anyone who could answer the question: 'What do we learn from the theory of evolution within the meaning of the development of internal politics and issue of laws?' The prize was awarded to Wilhelm Schallmayer, a physician and staunch advocate for race hygiene, with his essay entitled: 'Heredity and Selection in the Course of the Life of the People: A Scientific Study based on the New Biology' (*Vererbung und Auslese im Lebenslauf der Völker: Ein Wissenschaftliche Studie auf Grund der neue Biologie*). The work was published in 1903 and until 1919 (the year that Schallmayer died) remained the earliest specialist book on eugenics [39].

In the meantime, also in 1900, came the discovery by Gregor Mendel of the Law of Heredity which was received by scientists into the scientific community. Through the Mendelian genetic laws, eugenics gained rapid impetus in the aim of improving the human race through better breeding. A clear distinction must be made here between eugenics and genetics: genetics began as a science with the recognition of Mendel's Law and was, and still is, a legitimate science, although with limited development at that time. Eugenics, however, within the next half century despite its evolutionary claims, was discredited and labelled as a 'pseudo-science' with no real scientific standing.

About the same time, there began to be developed in Germany the racial theories of the French aristocrat Arthur Count Gobineau who classified human beings into races of higher and lower worth – a theory which combined social Darwinism with racist elements in the form of race hygiene, as preached earlier by Ploetz and Schallmayer [40]. The result was the founding by Alfred Ploetz in 1904 of the Society for Race Hygiene (*Gesellschaft für Rassenhygiene*) [41].

Compulsory sterilization had existed in much of the western world, including the USA, where there was a history of coercive and at times illegal sterilization, applied primarily to the underclass of society in the form of a simple vasectomy. The practice started at a penal facility in 1900 [42]. In the same year in the USA, the political campaign of the eugenic movement in favour of sterilization was relatively successful in that the first Sterilization Law was passed in the state of Indiana. Three years later, Charles B. Davenport, the leading American eugenicist, advocated a programme of sterilization 'to dry up the springs that feed the torrent of defectives and degenerate protoplasm ...' [43].

In Germany in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, race hygiene became institutionalised and the German élite – the members of the educated and professional classes, increasingly accepted the ideology of human inequality; geneticists, anthropologists and psychiatrists advanced the theory of human heredity which merged with the racist doctrine of the nationalist ultra-right wing to form a political ideology based on race [44].

In 1904, the Monist League was formed, a small but influential group composed almost exclusively of university professors and socialists, chaired by the Nobel Prize winner Wilhelm Oswald, one of the founders of physical chemistry, who believed that certain races were superior to others and dedicated themselves to social, political and cultural change in Germany. In this, they were especially noted for their extremist views which were published in their journal 'The Monist Century' (*Das Monistische Jahrhundert*) and the League became one of the 'scientific' origins of Nazism. At this time there was still moderation concerning questions of race, which did not apply to people with a different skin colour. The German eugenicists, like their American colleagues, believed in 'the racial and cultural superiority of Caucasians,' [45] and although there were no non-Caucasians in Germany, Germans confronted other races in their colonies and German law permitted intermarriage between their citizens.

In the same year as the founding of the Monist League, Germany waged her first war of ethnic annihilation in the German colony of South West Africa (Namibia) against the indigenous Herero and Hottentot tribesmen, a war that lasted three years. These colonies also served as a favourite laboratory for German race hygienists to carry out anthropological research [46].

Ideas about race hygiene and selective breeding merged in 1906 with the founding of the *Mittergarthund*, an association concerned with the future breeding of the German race [47], and race hygiene was widely advertised at the 1911 International Exhibition on Hygiene held in Dresden at which two prominent race hygienists, Ernst Rüdin, Professor of Psychiatry at Munich University, and his colleague, Professor Max von Gruber, presented in the exhibition catalogue their views on the 'national degeneration' – 'the burden of the vast number of the inferior, the weak, the sick, and cripples' – who were threatening the culture of the German people [48].

By 1913, after 50 years of increase in the number of State psychiatric institutions – from 93 in 1877 to 226 in 1913 – psychiatrists were suddenly faced with a drastic decrease. In the private sector, over 100 institution were forced to close, others were taken over as convalescent homes, nursing homes for tubercular patients, or as hostels for refugees. The number of patients treated up until 1913, however, had risen from 47,228 to 239,583 [49].

In the same year, 'The Monist Century' published an Open Letter from a man who was slowly and painfully choking to death from a terminal lung disease, and for whom the means to 'final peace and salvation' were just outside in a pharmacy, but which was forbidden by law. The patient, Richard Gerkan, wrote on behalf of all the terminally ill who wanted to be granted a 'gentle death': 'Why, instead of permitting us to die gently today, do you demand that we embark upon the long martyr's road, whose final goal is certainly the same death which you deny us today?' Instead of being 'put to sleep' like any suffering animal, he was a 'a human being and must endure to the end because that is the way things are' [50, 51].

Gerkan enclosed with his letter a draft law on euthanasia which submitted principles and a policy which, although flawed, caused a serious debate in the Monist League, not only about the desirability of euthanasia in extreme cases like that of Richard Gerkan, but also about what Monochist League chairman Wilhelm Oswald referred to as the 'codifying of secular ethics'. This was an aspect of the euthanasia debate that was not investigated until the 1930s.

Dr Wilhelm Börner, an Austrian philosopher, pedagogue and writer, presented to the Monist debate the most vehement argument against Gerkan's draft law, in particular drawing attention to the 'slippery slope' of where to draw the line in euthanasia – a vital topic not explored by Gerkan. He also argued about the subjectivity of pain: 'People suffering from cholic, neuralgia, or gallstones might be in extreme pain, but one would hardly comfortably accord them the right to die on this basis'. Börner also questioned Gerkan's stress on the probable outcomes, because the course of an illness could not be irrefutably predicted, and like others before him, also referred to classical cases of 'mercy death'. With this, he distanced himself from the Christian insistence that each one of us must 'bear his cross', arguing instead that the Monist ethic towards the sick would 'fan the small Promethean flame residing in all of us.'

Despite his strong criticism of the proposed draft law, Börner did concede that the effort by Gerkan in writing such a letter while the very act of breathing was a chronic agony, made him a Monist hero [52].

The Monist chairman, Wilhelm Oswald, was a supporter of Gerkan and attempted to systematically refute Börner's arguments and specifically stated that 'in all circumstances, suffering represents a restriction upon, and diminution of, the individual and capacity to perform in society of the person suffering.' He pointed out that instead of Börner's recourse to classical cases, Galileo would have been a much better example because the continuing survival and acceptance of much of the astronomers 'heretical' teachings was far more important to society [53].

These rather academic concerns were discussed by others, among them the Bielefeld judge Alfred Bozi and a Dr M. Beer, who both also noted the dangerous potential inherent in Gerkan's proposals. There was no limit to the 'slippery slope' by which incurably ill mental patients who 'pass their lives without profit to the community' and who were unable to express their wishes, would be included in any euthanasia legislation. This would simply be a revival of the race hygiene ideas of Tille, Jost and Ploetz whereby the interests of the State transcended the rights of the individual – a State absolutism for which there was no foundation at that time [54]. Dr Beer, echoing the fears of Christoph Wilhelm Hufeland in 1806, and many others since, commented:

Once respect for the sanctity of human life has been diminished by introducing involuntary mercy killing for the mentally healthy incurably ill and involuntary killing for the mentally ill, who is to go to ensure that matters stop there? [55].

German eugenics before World War I had focused mainly on class distinction, and race was not a paramount issue; whereas in the USA before the war, race and ethnicity were of political importance. In the USA (and elsewhere, including Germany), the eugenics movement pursued two main policies that were interconnected: 1) the classification of individuals, groups, and nations on a scale of human worth; 2) proposals for biological solutions to social problems, and lobbying for their implementation. The eugenic research, was designed to isolate and record individuals with inferior intelligence and other social disabilities, through anthropological fieldwork and psychological testing. The eugenicists claimed that this research, carried out on families as well as individuals,

proved the inferiority of entire groups of people, and ascribed degeneracy not only to class but also to race and ethnic group [56]. Hence, American eugenicists claimed that ‘the darker peoples of southern Europe and the Slavs of eastern Europe were less intelligent than the fair peoples of western and northern Europe’ [57]. This was ‘proved’ by the low test scores achieved by Jewish immigrants who landed at Ellis Island in New York. The fact that there were also highly intelligent Jewish immigrants was explained away by Carl C. Brigham, a psychologist at Princeton University: ‘... the able Jew is popularly recognised not only because of his ability, but because he is able and he is a Jew, ... our figures, then would rather tend to *disprove* the popular belief that the Jew is highly intelligent’ [58].

Thus convinced that certain other races were inferior and even criminal, the American eugenicists aimed to maintain the purity of the American pioneer stock by opposing marriages between people of different races. In this, they preempted their Nazi eugenic counterparts by several years.

Among the various eugenic societies and research groups in the USA, the most prominent and influential was the Eugenic Research Office (ERO) at Cold Spring Harbor on Long Island, New York, founded by Charles D. Davenport, a leading eugenicist. Funded by money from Carnegie and Rockefeller, the ERO was under the directorship of Harry H. Laughlin who employed biologists, engineers, geneticists, psychologists, and sociologists who aimed to introduce rational social planning into human affairs, which would be achieved by biological manipulation [59]. Laughlin himself compared human racial mixing with ‘mongrolization in the animal world’ and maintained that: ‘immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, especially Jews, were racially so different from, and generally so inferior to the current American population that any racial mixture would be deleterious’ [60].

The American scientists in considering mental disability as innate and immutable qualities running in families according to the Laws of Heredity of Gregor Mendel, interpreted their research findings to ‘prove’ the validity of popular prejudices, in much the same way as their colleagues in the German eugenics movement. In this way, American psychologists joined scientists of a like mind from the biological sciences in the growing eugenic movement in the USA [61].

In 1914, Henry H. Goddard, psychologist and director of research at the Vineland Training School for Feeble-Minded Girls and Boys in New Jersey, who regarded handicapped individuals as ‘immoral beings’ who were totally unable to control their sexual urges, stated his position which reflected a world-wide eugenic opinion according to Mendel’s law:

If both parents are feeble-minded, all the children will be feeble-minded. It is obvious that such mating should not be allowed. It is perfectly clear that no feeble-minded person should ever be allowed to marry or become a parent. It is obvious that if this rule is to be carried out, the intelligent part of society must enforce it [62].

It was Goddard who coined the term ‘moron’ to denote an adult with the mental age of an 8-12-year-old child, which was then added to the other categories included in the IQ tests devised by psychologists: imbecile – an adult with the mental age of a 3-8-year-old child, and cretin – a state of mental deficiency associated with body malformation or stunted growth as a result of congenital thyroid deficiency

[63]. In Germany, the highest grade of feeble-mindedness was equivalent to ‘moron’ – ‘*Schwachsinnig*’, but in medical circles the term ‘*Debilität*’ was also used, while the other two classifications – ‘*Blödsinnig*’ and ‘*Geistesschwacher*’ – are interchangeable in German.

In 1914, the German Society for Race Hygiene founded 10 years earlier had only 350 members, the majority of whom were university professors, and within such extreme right-wing circles until the outbreak of World War I the emotive subject of the sterilisation and elimination of the hereditarily ill and others suffering from illnesses contributing to the degeneration of the health of the nation remained only at the discussion level.

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