The Right to Marry
What Can a Democratic Civilization Do About Heredity and Child Welfare

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The problem of heredity and the child resolves itself into two primary questions: that of marriage and prospective progeny, and that of the care of the child that is already alive.

Space forces me to limit myself to a very brief discussion of facts which it would take hours to master and to give my consideration mainly to the question, What is to be done about it all? What makes it worth while to give these matters the attention which we investigators bestow on them and which we bespeak from the intelligent and thinking public?

Every human being is the product of the fertilization of an ovum, the product of but two of the millions of generative cells of two parents. A little consideration shows that an act of fertilization leads necessarily to but one out of thousands of possible combinations. Hence the plain obligation of the parents to keep themselves constantly healthy and in good general condition.

We all recognize the fact of heredity in the resemblance in features, function and make-up, to the one or the other parent or possibly to a grandparent or aunt or uncle, but we also know that new results will spring up in every new child owing to the inevitable individuality of every new combination.

The most vital and distinguishing features of the new bud no doubt lie in the indubitably hereditary equipment
containing the factors which the parents themselves acquired from their ancestors. The further individual fate depends on individual growth and its opportunities, and opportunities of function and of training and associations, which lead to features not considered inheritable.

What we speak of as heredity in the sense of influence of the parent on the constitution of the child is oftenest the sum of three factors: (1) genuine heredity, that which comes with the germ cells and is itself inherited—a property of the chromosomes; (2) early growth and nutrition; (3) early training and habit-formation.

It is impossible to separate these three factors in man very clearly, owing to the long period of gestation and infancy during which the nutrition and training problems are combined. There is, however, at times a fourth factor, more like true heredity: i.e., germ damage at the time of conception, by alcohol, febrile disease and the like; or by temporary subnormalities of the parent, producing an inferiority of the stock, different from the transmission of “acquired characters.” In other words, the germ plasm can be damaged permanently or for many generations by poisoning the germ cells; whereas individual injuries or experiences do not influence the stock.

For such a discussion as ours the field may be divided into two parts: First, Who is entitled to progeny and who should be considered as unfit, and what can a democratic civilization do about it? Second, What advice should be given to, and heeded by, those who have children but who realize that their progeny do not enjoy an untainted stock?

First, Who is entitled to progeny? We pride ourselves on living under the sign of a generally and freely voiced responsibility to be well ourselves and to enter upon parenthood only when there is a fair chance of giving reasonable health to the child. There may be persons who do not care and who live blindly by instinct and tradition. There are, however, many who do some thinking and feel under obligation to use their intelligence in matters of parenthood. No parent today would consider it right to give origin to a child during sickness; nor during intoxication; nor in such rapid succession as to exhaust the mother and to make her unfit to be what she ought to be to a child. And we claim that some persons should not marry at all and others only into stock distinctly better than their own.

To give a concrete picture of actual problems, I have had put together the material of four interrelated family groups in one of our school districts. These families are represented at the public school by 35 children, 14 of whom were found to be defective. These families were studied as wholes (about 522 persons); and then specifically, the 104 children that constitute the products of 24 matings and among whom are the 35 children in the public schools studied.

It was deemed best to group the children according to whether both parents were normal, or only one or both abnormal. The parents of the first group thus are normal or at least afflicted only by characteristics which are acquired by association, i.e., likely to be the product of nurture rather than of nature. Thus we gave alcoholism and looseness of sex life the benefit of doubt, as a condition not necessarily denoting abnormal stock, but apt to be the product of unfavorable environment.

With this understanding, we found 11 matings to be those of practically normal parents; in 4 of these matings both parents were, however, tainted with defect—that is, having in the family cases of mental disorder or defect referable to stock and individual make-up, rather than to external causes, such as injuries. These parents show one or two defectives among their progeny, besides from 3 to 6 normal children. In the other 7 matings of normal parents, of whom but one was tainted, the result was correspondingly better. In other words, it is not enough that both parents be relatively normal; but if an individual be tainted by heredity, he or she should guard against marriage with another tainted individual.

In a second group of 9 matings, one parent was actually defective. Those married to normal but tainted persons
produced about equal numbers of normal and defective children; whereas the 6 defectives married to non-tainted persons produced 2 defective, 6 uncertain and 15 normal children. Here again, a tainted person aggravates bad parentage; a non-tainted mate reduces the risks.

The third group of matings consists of 4 matings where both parents were defective. The result was 21 defective, 1 sex offender, 4 uncertain, and 1 normal. In other words, prohibition of these matings would have meant the loss of but 1 normal person against the prevention of over 21 defectives.

As far as we know, the great-grandparents of these families, who years ago moved into the neighborhood studied, were practically normal people, but through unfortunate cumulative matings, ignoring combinations of taint, the result described above has been obtained.

What holds for such defects as imbecility and epilepsy holds also for a number of other mental and nervous and other diseases. Only there is fortunately not the same inheritance of an actual condition but usually only of a disposition to abnormality.

We are, of course, concerned here mainly with the question of preventing further cumulative mischief by reaching the proper persons with our advice as to marriage or non-marriage.

Shall the State Step in?

Attempts have been made of late years to regulate this problem by legislation. The great question is, Who is to decide? A certificate exacted from a physician for two or three dollars, as was advocated in Wisconsin? Or the good sense of the community? Or a free and sensible collaboration of the responsible parties, the good sense and good will of the community, and when needed the help of the expert physician?

These are days of leagues of personal freedom and leagues of medical freedom and leagues protecting the privilege to get drunk and to get sick and to make others sick whenever and however you please. The worst enemy man has is his own unbridled passion and unbridled craving; and it is unbridled craving and childish fear of interference which under the glamor of freedom keep us all the more strongly in bondage. Opposed to these, there may be regulation leagues; but as intermediaries, we want at least to be sure to cultivate plain good sense and a fair chance to get and use it.

A careful student of the literature and of the facts of eugenics realizes the complexity of the problem and the reason why we should be cautious about pushing everything to the point of legislative regulation. It is in the interest of civilization to provide principles and customs rather than laws, and to give the plain sense of the individual a chance to develop and to become effective. Give the people the facts and some help to think and the right sources of advice, and there will surely be results.

Where matters are not as simple as in the case of plainly defective mentality, I urged in an address a year ago the following principle with regard to reasonable standards of the right to marry on the part of those not free from taint: We can do justice to the individual as well as to the race by making some practical conditions for such individuals to marry and have children; that is, if they can feel and give to their own sense and conscience (and I might add under the effects of three weeks' open consideration of marriage) reasonable assurance of giving a family of four children a wholesome, healthy environment and education, then even tainted persons might be allowed to marry, especially into untainted stock. If any unfavorable heredity should crop out, it would be highly probable that healthy and capable brothers and sisters would be able to assure the protection and care of the problematic abnormal individual. This excludes the marriage of imbeciles and of many psychopaths.

In its present stage of development, eugenics has no right to attempt to enforce a stronger negative policy than this. If it does so, it runs the risk of depriving the race of individuals who would be a benefit to it. I certainly should not like to miss some of the brothers and sisters
of certain of my patients from this globe, nor even a
good many of the actual patients themselves.
I am tempted to emphasize the fact that those who
have had trouble and conquered have often been the most
helpful and effective pioneers and the most thoughtful
agents of constructive reform. We need persons willing
to struggle and able to struggle. We must strive to avoid
wanton disaster; but we must also trust our ability to save
good traits and to provide against any possible mishap such
improvements of our marriage standards that the undesirable traits may be bred out as often as they used to be bred in.

Somehow, I cannot be a fatalist. I am, therefore, very
cautious about the advice to suppress nature’s promptings
for progeny unless I consider the mating doubly charged
and the parents unfit to create a home.

What might a helpful civilization do toward preventing
such disaster as we see on our chart? The first help is
protection of the foolish against playing with the holiest
of all sacraments—with marriage.

Under the heading of personal freedom we indulge in
this country in the acceptance of common-law marriage,
and marriage on marriage licenses which are, as far as I
know, a mere farce, since they evidently can be obtained
without any guarantee of control. The clerk can insist
on forms and on a fee, but cannot guarantee controlled
facts. The statements are made on oath, but I have not
heard of any prosecution for perjury on the part of the
state. Licenses without a provision of control have no
sense.

Why not provide methods which would make control
and advice at least possible? Personally, I grew up as one
of a people (the Swiss) which has had a republican form
of government since the year 1291—a time preceding the
discovery of this continent by 200 years, and antedating
the Declaration of Independence by 485 years. In that
country, which certainly does not foster paternalism and
disregard of personal rights, no marriage license is valid
that has not been posted for three weeks by the civil

authorities and published in the papers. Runaway matches
and marrying parsons have no place under such conditions.

Is it asking too much in Uncle Sam’s type of free
country to have the sense of the people so roused that
they prefer to have their personal freedom guided by
three weeks of calm consideration rather than by the mere
passion of a moment and false romanticism? In the
families cited above, there were one girl and one boy
married at fifteen years, the boy’s being a decidedly unsatis-
factory marriage.

Or if, in such a critical period as the consideration of
marriage, we should have no confidence in our families
and neighbors and in their good sense and good will, why
should we not, in the ceremony itself, put the proper em-
phasis on the real issue of marriage? Why not replace
the much-discussed question of obedience by the question,
put to both parties to the life contract: Do you want this
man (or this woman) and no other to be the father (or
mother) of your children?

Not until some question as pointed as this is, in all
cases, expected and squarely asked and squarely answered
as a matter of general and frank concern as soon as mar-
rriage is considered, will the rank and file of people realize
the needed obligation to deal fairly with the problem of
health and parental responsibility before the knot is tied.
Let it be a legitimate and obligatory question and more
couples will give some serious thought to what is often
enough passed over because of false prudery or for lack
of sense of responsibility.

Now the other point: Do not let us obscure the issue
by encouraging intentionally childless marriage. The more
I see of childless marriages, the more I feel their intrinsic
wrong. Nine times out of ten they mean that one of the
partners is exploited and condemned to forced sterility
and stolen away from less selfish compacts of life. How
are you going to help that?

By the community’s undertaking to make possible a
greater measure of economic security among all classes,
cal care and of vocational training, and by practical demonstra-
tions in the schools of the way in which the economic problems can be faced and family life made possible on a limited income.

A Chance for the Child of Tainted Stock

My second problem is: What is the duty of those who have become parents but with hereditary taint? Nobody can have absolute guaranty of healthy progeny. All parents need a good dose of preparedness to accept whatever fate may bring in their children. The progress of the world has done much to guide us if we are wise, and, fortunately, on the constructive side as well as on the preventive. Let us not forget that those who may have a tainted stock and some cause for worry may be able to make good and render valuable service to all. Those forewarned are more likely to be thoughtful about the child than those who play ostrich and make it their practical and even religious duty to be blind to the great facts of experience. And when the forewarned improve the chances of their own children, it will be for the good of all.

As far as the child itself is concerned, give it a chance to grow and to develop naturally, and consider it a duty to protect this growth and to guide rather than force it. Few realize what a hell a child’s life must be when it is continually cut into by the whims and momentary or untimely good intentions and peremptory expectations of adults. Heed the many sensible suggestions which are available in such valuable documents as the publications of the Committee of Mental Hygiene and the federal Children’s Bureau.

Advice to Tainted Parents

I want to limit my special advice to tainted parents to two points: First, Do not allow yourselves to cultivate any sensitiveness about learning the facts and facing the facts about your children. Do not assume an attitude of defense or offense when anyone gives you the helpful truth. You need not talk to everybody about your grief or fears; but do not let your own false pride or conceit stand in the way of helping yourselves and the child by means of proper advice. When you see that your own resources fail, why not go over the trouble with some one who knows more about it? Why not hand over a difficult child for a time to a trained person, a school or an institution, and why not be willing to take a few lessons in child management?

When you are in doubt, it should become less and less difficult to find a medical and an educational adviser with whom you are willing to work out a careful record of the assets and of the difficulties, and of the failures and the successes of various plans tried so far. You can then expect to guide your children toward what may be best for them at the time. It is in this connection that I should like to urge you to expect ever-improving services from our schools.

Our schools must become the places where the first attempts at grading and at standardization for life should be started. Civilization is not one simple scheme and rule, but depends on a wonderful co-ordination of the safe knowledge and wisdom of generations on a wide range of human needs. Among other things, real civilization includes a public morality and public spirit which looks upon schools not as part of a system of political favoritism and exploitation, but as one means of bringing order into community life, of training and trying out the child in the capacities of social behavior, and of learning and working under impartial standards.

The proper collaboration of home and school is less and less vitiated by false ideals of freedom and false fears of meddling. Parents are perhaps still too ready to consider their parental feelings hurt and to withdraw the child from school when they are tempted to attribute lack of progress to the teaching or to the school. Instead of having the matter looked into by a competent and impartial inquirer, the parents and the child still are too apt to rule the situation and to blunder.
I know of parents belonging to the intellectual aristocracy who would not let their child be given a Binet-Simon test; they do not want to know the facts and prefer to be led by sentiment alone. Children who become inefficient at one school are apt to be sent to another or to work; whereas it would be in the interest of the community and the children if they were standardized and advised and taught to be respectable members of the community on their own level.

Bureaus issuing labor permits may do excellent work on this point. If a child has the misfortune of being defective, there are still some ways to be effective. To be helped to bring these effective ways to the front and to find one's level is better than being forced by foolish parents to live on bluff. In these defectives we can also train ideals and a conscience and can give them satisfactions adapted to them, instead of letting them out-marry the marriagable and out-multiply the fit.

I am skeptical about the possibility of general segregation of all those who are defective and dangerous because they are apt to reproduce their kind. We can increase our training schools and colonies but slowly, in keeping with the growth of the confidence of the people. But if we have compulsory school attendance and compulsory standardizing at school, we can certainly learn to help more persons find their sphere or level in life. This does not mean branding the child; it does mean helping him to find a sphere in which he can attain his best level in perfect respectability.

Any civilization can offer jobs to the strong worker; it takes a well-organized civilization to take care of those less favored, and to give them a life of satisfaction without jeopardy to good sense and rational freedom.

**Tapping Sources of Medical Help**

The most difficult cases to help are those who distrust hospital and physician and adviser, we may say, constitutionally. Familiarize yourselves with what hospitals and training schools are doing so that you may feel ready to accept their help when you need it; and inculcate in the young the right attitude toward the resources our civilization offers us.

You have little idea how many people believe training schools and mental hospitals are for what they call "the really insane" or "defective" of other families, but their own children or friends are certainly not of that class. What do people know of "classes"?

We have recently read much about a poor girl who was kept at home in a small isolated room for years, supposedly because the parents did not think of taking her to a state hospital. Need we be surprised at such ignorance as long as an interested social worker who had been informed of our conclusion that the patient in question should be given the benefit of one of our state institutions, writes as follows:

"I am at a loss to know what is the best course to pursue in this matter. I fully appreciate that you have done all you could, but I am so anxious that nothing be spared that will possibly help this poor unfortunate girl. From a physician's point of view, would you advise further hospital treatment outside of an insane asylum? So long as she is perfectly harmless, would she stand a better chance in a medical hospital for a while longer, if we could place her?"

What does this helper of the public think of what she calls an "insane asylum"? Does she not know that our state hospitals are medical hospitals, intended to help the most hopeful and the most difficult alike and with the best medical means and judgment?

Go and teach yourselves and your children and your neighbors the fact that when anyone gets nervous and unequal to the difficulties of life, we have in our midst dispensaries and hospitals to help us on the right track, hospitals serving as asylums for those for whom the com-
munity offers too little protection, but at the same time hospitals from which fully 20 per cent may readily come out better entitled to be called normal than if they had missed the opportunities offered by our states, and from which many apparently hopeless wrecks emerge with a gain worthy of our open gratitude instead of our frequent desire to hide the facts and to swell the false traditions of stigma, the absurd relic of fear and superstition.

If I felt that I had to conceal the fact that my own mother had two attacks of melancholia from which she recovered, I should thereby tacitly corroborate the false efforts at concealment of many others who could not conceal the fact of mental diseases in their family if they tried. Why am I able to speak freely to my own progeny about it? Because I have a conviction based on experience and on facts that many a mental disorder is much less ignominious than more than 50 per cent of the other diseases for which people have to get treatment; that many a nervous or mental disorder is the result of struggling honestly but unewisely; that many a former patient becomes a wiser element of the community when restored than the luckier and possibly thoughtless fellow.

If there is some hereditary taint which causes you apprehension, try to prepare your offspring to live all the more wisely and to make themselves worthy of the healthiest mates. What we call insanity in a family must not be a wholesale warning against marriage. It means greater care in education and more appreciation of truly healthy strains and then either fitness to become attractive to the untainted or a choice of a life of usefulness outside of marriage.

After all, what we need most is to teach the child to wish to be well and to love the healthy. Love is very justly nature’s and mankind’s ablest matrimonial agent. Love plays many pranks and is said to be blind; but love, like any other capacity, can be made to grow better or worse. It certainly is taught badly or indifferently or wisely, through the way the parents love each other and through the ideals implanted in the child.

A Social Prescription

Let me state once more the main points of my appeal:

First, Help me in fighting the foolish game of trying to conceal the facts of heredity and of catering to the cruel notions of stigma. A man or a woman is primarily what he or she is, or can do; and the knowledge of heredity will help in guiding the understanding or management of inborn traits. All this secrecy about heredity only means that other people cannot mention the facts to your face, but behind your back will talk of the skeleton in your closet. By thinking more of the safety of this closet than of actual needs, you may cheat your own people out of their best chances of getting timely care in the beginning of any trouble, and throw at the same time a slur on hospitals and on other patients, and ultimately it will fall back with a vengeance on your own family.

Second, Let us not indulge in vague notions about heredity. If you want facts, let someone work up your family records as we have worked up those described in this paper. It will not do to go to a physician and ask: What do you think of heredity? But you must say: I want somebody put on the job of getting my family record worked out; and then I want your advice on various questions. No physician should prostitute himself by giving his opinion without having the family studied properly.

Third, The conclusions from heredity study cannot be codified in the form of legislation. We can, however, lead people to be more responsible and to do better thinking. My two suggestions are: Turn the marriage license again into something which calls for three weeks of sound and open thinking and which is worth more than a fee and an invitation to frequent perjury which the state tolerates, thus lowering the sacredness of an oath before an official.

The second suggestion would be regarding the marriage ceremony. Have it understood that in this solemn hour you have to answer the question whether you have really chosen the person whom you want to be the father or the mother of your children.
Fourth, Let parents who know that their children may have a taint—a latent disposition or actual defect—find their compensation in the conviction that theirs is the burden of being specially mindful of the saner and sounder education of their children; and especially also a saner and sounder education in the question of what and whom and how to love.

This is not a hopeless problem. It is the biggest and finest problem of humanity.