'Fighting for the Good Cause': Reflections on Francis Galton's Legacy to American Hereditarian Psychology by Gerald Sweeney (review)

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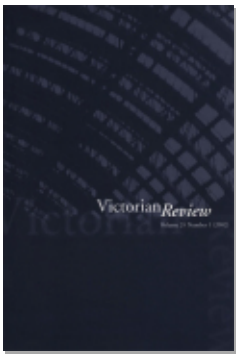

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Gerald Sweeney. *'Fighting for the Good Cause': Reflections on Francis Galton's Legacy to American Hereditarian Psychology.* Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 2001. x + 136pp.

Although Francis Galton coined "eugenics" in his *Inquiries into Human Faculty and its Development* in 1883 "to express the science of improving stock," his introduction of the idea of such a science dates back to the publication of a pair of short articles, "Hereditary Talent and Character," in *Macmillan's Magazine* in June and August of 1865. In these articles, and in his subsequent 1869 book *Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry into its Laws and Consequences*, Galton defended the claim that psychological abilities and tendencies were inherited along with physical characteristics, and were thus subject to natural selection.

Galton begins *Hereditary Genius* with the very same topic that his cousin, Charles Darwin, discussed in the first chapter of *On the Origin of Species,* that of domestic breeding, using it, like Darwin had, as the basis for an analogy. But whereas Darwin had focused on domestic breeding in order to introduce the idea of natural selection on analogy with the forms of artificial selection familiar from domestic breeding practices, Galton saw domestic breeding in farming communities as simply one form that artificial selection might take: "as it is easy ... to obtain by careful selection a permanent breed of dogs or horses gifted with peculiar powers of running, or of doing anything else, so it would be quite practicable to produce a highly-gifted race of men by judicious marriages during several consecutive generations" (*Hereditary Genius* 45). Pointing out that there were existing tendencies both to improve and to degrade human nature, Galton continues, "I conclude that each generation has enormous power over the natural gifts of those that follow, and maintain that it is a duty we owe to humanity to investigate the range of that power, and to exercise it in a way that, without being unwise towards ourselves, shall be most advantageous to future inhabitants of the earth" (*HG* 45). This idea of consciously directing the reproductive choices that people make – both "positively" by encouraging "judicious marriages," and "negatively" through discouraging or prohibiting those not so deemed –

has proved to be the most controversial idea associated with Galton. But, as Sweeney reminds us (33-35), the foundations of the idea were hardly Galton's own, going back at least to Plato's *Republic*. The idea that there are different, fixed *kinds of people* that make up a stratified *polis* is at the core of Plato's utopian vision of social and political organization. It was also an idea very much current in the Victorian milieu in which Galton wrote.

Sweeney's book aims to solve a puzzle: given that Galton's arguments for his views were weak, and his early defense of eugenics widely perceived to be a failure (ch.1-2), how are we to explain the influence that Galton exerted over many of the most influential figures within a certain sector of psychology in the first thirty years of the twentieth-century? Sweeney's answer to this question, in brief, is that Galton offered early hereditarian psychologists in America an anti-democratic political program masked as scientific inquiry. Drawing on Aristotle's distinction between open-ended dialectics and conclusion-directed eristics, and appealing to the Noble Lie that Plato introduces in *The Republic* as a justification for the existing differences between kinds of people, Sweeney concludes:

> Owing to their special apprehension of his [Galton's] deeper concerns and the fields in which he worked, this particular body of American admirers was able to appreciate the renowned inventor of eugenics as secretly operating eristically, as surreptitiously subordinating his declared goal, the perfecting of mankind, to the justification and establishment of an unimpeachable oligarchy, through the development and application of a modern-day Noble Lie (104).

Many of the issues raised in and by Sweeney's book are tantalizing, and there is much food for thought here. Yet I find not only little plausibility in Sweeney's chief conclusions, but see his preoccupation with the puzzle around which the book is organized as itself a puzzle.

First, who are the "American hereditarian psychologists" referred to in Sweeney's subtitle, or the "educational psychologists" he speaks of in his abstract to the book? Answering this question brings out a major limitation of Sweeney's study. Sweeney tells us little explicitly

about whom precisely he has in mind here, but does list Edward Thorndike, Lewis Terman, Lothrop Stoddard, and William McDougall in this connection in his short first chapter, and adds Robert Yerkes, Charles Davenport, and Frederick Adam Woods to this list elsewhere in the book. But of these, only Terman would seem to fit the descriptive label "American hereditarian educational psychologist under the influence of Galton" around which the argument of the book is developed. As an early (or perhaps proto) behaviorist, Thorndike opposed much of Galton's program, even if he discussed Galton respectfully and regarded him, along with William James, as the psychologist whose writings had influenced him the most (Thorndike 268), as Sweeney notes. As Sweeney is also aware, Davenport and Woods were biologists who wrote little on psychology *per se* even if they were enthusiastic eugenicists. Stoddard was trained as a political philosopher who was renowned for his racially eugenic views, chiefly through his *The Rising Tide of Color against the White-World-Supremacy* (1920). McDougall was one of the founders of social psychology with an ambivalent relationship to Galton and eugenics, coming to Harvard University mid-career from Great Britain. And Yerkes' chief passion was for comparative psychobiology, spurning the opportunities that educational psychology presented, going on to found primatology at Yale University; again, his relationship with eugenics was ambivalent at best. A better label for the group of people that Sweeney discusses here might be "American eugenicists." Under that heading, though, Sweeney's treatment would remain extremely selective at best, and the question of why Galton as the founder of eugenics had influence here would hardly seem to need an answer at all.

Still, this might seem like quibbling. Sweeney is certainly correct to think that Galton was a figure of considerable influence in early twentieth-century American psychology, and so a variant of his puzzle survives: given that Galton's conclusions were so inconclusively argued in his chief publications, how did Galton come to be viewed as such an authority within the developing science of psychology, particularly in educational psychology? Part of the answer to

this question surely lies in the overall contributions that Galton was perceived to have made to psychology. These included the development of techniques of composite portraiture, the introduction of statistical techniques for generalizing about groups of subjects, the systematic exploration of specific mental faculties (such as that for mental imagery), the pioneering use of twin studies, and the placement of the scientific examination of mental qualities in an evolutionary and anthropological context – all of which are discussed in his *Inquiry* of 1883. Galton was hardly alone in making these contributions, but together they allowed him to leave visible trails along the path of a developing scientific psychology. Galton did not make these contributions, of course, independently of his eugenic views, but in tandem with and sometimes as part of them. I suspect that it is precisely their perceived package nature that in part bestows a level of respectability on Galton's eugenics disproportionate to the strength of the evidence in favour of the hereditarian theses behind that program. I find it surprising that there is little discussion of these aspects of Galton's work in Sweeney's book.

Apart from Galton's general contributions to and stature within a still-forming psychology, there are more specific features of Galton's approach to psychological inquiry that can be seen to have special appeal within the American context, once we reflect on that context more fully. American psychology had a particularly intimate relationship with education from the outset, and this relationship shaped the course of both psychology and education in North America in the early years of the twentieth-century. Perhaps most pertinent in the current context is a shift from the conception of psychology held by some of the early giants in the educational psychology – G. Stanley Hall, James Baldwin, and John Dewey, for example – to that held by those influential with educational psychology during roughly 1910 to 1930, including Robert Woodworth, Joseph Jastrow, and Lewis Terman. The shift here is one from a psychology directed at individual subjects and with an emphasis on experimentation, to investigations that had as their units groups with an emphasis on collecting statistical information about such aggregate subjects. Galton's influ-

ence was paramount in effecting this transition, for it was through his statistical biometrics that a non-experimental form of inquiry that used methods of aggregate data collection gained its credibility (Danziger ch.5-8). There is no mention of this by Sweeney.

So Sweeney's failure here is not simply one of being too inexplicit or imprecise about just who he regards as "this particular body of American admirers," but one of ignoring the broader context in which those psychologists (whoever they were, precisely) developed their views. While Sweeney is relatively thorough in the primary literature about and by Galton, his coverage of the corresponding primary and secondary literature on American psychology in the first third of the twentieth-century is scant. I have already intimated that citation of the primary literature here is thin; of major publications in the secondary literature that Sweeney fails to draw on, Kurt Danziger's *Constructing the Subject* (ch.5-8) and Hamilton Cravens' *The Triumph of Evolution* are two of the more significant. Had Sweeney attended more closely to this aspect of his topic, then I think that both his puzzle and his resolution to it would have been seen in a very different light.

The shift from first-person, experimental inquiry to aggregative, statistical study that I mentioned above was mediated in America in part by the shifting relationship between education and psychology during the period on which Sweeney focuses. As Danziger argues, to that point the traditional role for education of providing a tangible application to psychological theory was magnified as education in the United States came increasingly under the control of managers and bureaucrats. Their demand was for measures that could be implemented cost-effectively in classroom and class-size contexts, and Galton's techniques were well-suited for this niche. Yet there remained a meliorative, individual-focused aspect to this interface between psychology and education that also reflects Galton's influence. The sorts of questionnaires that Galton had used in gathering information from over 9000 people at the 1884 International Health Exhibition in London were to become a model for those intent on developing measures to test both the efficacy of the rapidly expanding

educational system and the performance of those within it. (The mimicking of Galton's "laboratories" by Jastrow at the World's Fair in Chicago in 1893, and by Woodworth at that in St. Louis in 1904, are surely one sign of Galton's direct influence here.) Indeed, the cluster of ideas, techniques, and methods that we might think of as forming the Galtonian paradigm within psychology were of special use in the development of those exercises that came to be seen as offering a global measure of the person in educational and military contexts: intelligence tests.

The sort of "externalish" account of Galton's influence that Sweeney offers deserves some consideration, for I doubt that the "internalish" explanation that I have sketched above is fully adequate. The plaint of Sweeney's chapter four is to show that the political concern driving both Galton and his Victorian peers in Great Britain was a form of what I'll call *democraphobia,* a deep-seated fear of what extensions of the electoral franchise would mean for the industrial societies undergoing them. Perhaps then it is democraphobia that provides some sort of *ultimate* explanation for why the Galtonian paradigm took root so rapidly in early twentieth-century American educational psychology.

It is in his discussion here that Sweeney introduces Thomas Carlyle's phrase that serves as the book's title. One interesting feature of this discussion is that it brings out not just how many leading liberal figures of the second half of the nineteenth-century in Great Britain – of whom John Stuart Mill is perhaps the most pre-eminent – held reservations about democracy, but how their liberal views led them to such reservations. Since these reservations were stimulated in part by reflection on developments in American democracy, reflection initiated in an earlier generation by Alexis de Tocqueville, it is worth pondering how this social location of Galton's own views plays out in the American context in which Galton's influence was felt. And as a bridge to that, consider Galton's own conclusion to the penultimate chapter of *Hereditary Genius*:

> The best form of civilization in respect to the improvement

> of the race, would be one in which society was not costly; where incomes were chiefly derived from professional sources, and not much through inheritance; where every lad had a chance of showing his abilities and, if highly gifted, was enabled to achieve a first-class education and entrance into professional life, by the liberal help of the exhibitions and scholarships which he had gained in his early youth; where marriage was held in as high honour as in ancient Jewish times; where the pride of race was encouraged (of course I do not refer to the nonsensical sentiment of the present day, that goes under that name); where the weak could find a welcome and a refuge in celibate monasteries or sisterhoods, and lastly, where the better sort of emigrants and refugees from other lands were invited and welcomed, and their descendants naturalized. (1869:415)

There is much here, and in the more general views of Galton's that they reflect, with which we would (and should) take issue: the sexism, the hierarchical ranking of races and ethnicities, the liberal sprinkling of negative eugenics. But this passage also encapsulates a line of thinking that I suspect had a great influence when transplanted to the American context, an influence that is very much with us still.

Perhaps the most widely endorsed claims of Galton's in early twentieth-century American psychology were that mental abilities were "natural," and that they differed across individuals: they were primarily the result of factors innate to the individual, with manifest differences between individuals reflecting corresponding innate differences between those individuals. These claims underpinned the rise of intelligence testing – about which Sweeney has, strangely to my mind, little explicitly to say – and the perceived need for policies that would treat people differently in accord with their (in principle, measurable) innate differences. Although one would expect to find Sweeney pointing to the oligarchic political ideology that this generated in the American context, in order to support his general thesis, there is little such evidence adduced at the end of chapter four. I myself doubt that this was the way in which Galton's main influence was manifested on the American political scene. Rather than operat-

ing primarily through explicit political modes, such as laws or policies regulating voting, these views formed part of the texture of civil society, a form of laissez-faire capitalism structured to replicate the existing inequalities between "kinds" of people in the great American melting pot. In short, there was little need for explicit state intervention in restricting the basic rights of citizens when there existed an effective form of segregation in the very economic and social structures already in place. These were largely constructed along racial and ethnic lines in the United States – as McDougall discovered, seemingly to his surprise, when he published his originally-titled *National Welfare and National Decay* in the United States as *Is America Safe for Democracy?* around the time he moved to Harvard in the interwar years. There were, of course, the well-known immigration and sterilization laws of the 1920s. But I am suggesting that these were secondary manifestations of a deeper level of influence that Galton's ideas exercised on American soil during the period.

Finally, although Sweeney restricts himself to a handful of figures in American academia as putative objects of Galtonian influence and democraphobia, perhaps the figure whose profile most closely fits the line of influence that Sweeney proposes between Galton and his North American enthusiasts is not, say, Lewis Terman, but the much lesser known John MacEachran. MacEachran was the founding Head of the Department of Philosophy and Psychology at the University of Alberta from 1909, and went on to serve, in part as Provost of the university, as one of the most influential academic figures in Alberta over the next fifty years. MacEachran was a long-serving chair of the Eugenics Board of Alberta (from 1929 until 1965), overseeing the implementation of one of the few sterilization laws in the British Empire, the Sexual Sterilization Act of Alberta, that was continuously applied until its repeal in 1972. What is interesting about MacEachran in this context is his explicit appeal to Plato in justifying eugenic practices deployed primarily on children and adults who were unfortunate enough to find themselves institutionalized and directly or indirectly under the guardianship of the Province of Alberta (Wahlsten 1997). Since MacEachran himself published very little, it is not clear whether

he was directly influenced by the sort of democraphobia that Sweeney sees American psychologists as finding in (or reading into) Galton, or whether he arrived at the Platonic route to eugenics independently. To the almost 3000 people sterilized under the law, the vast majority of whom were sterilized while MacEachran was the chair of the board approving sterilizations, it perhaps makes little difference.

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