

John A. Ryan and the American Eugenics Society:
A Model for Christian Engagement in the Age of “Consumer Eugenics”

Charles McDaniel
Baylor University

In September 2016, news arrived that gene editing of healthy human embryos was taking place at the Karolinska Institute in Sweden. That announcement was followed by a report perhaps even more startling: the birth of a child in the United States with the genetic traits of three different parents. Because of a Food and Drug Administration ban on mitochondrial transplants in 2001, the fertility technique was performed by a team of American doctors at a clinic in Mexico. The Jordanian parents sought this procedure because the woman carried a mutation in her mitochondrial DNA associated with a terrible disease called Leigh’s Syndrome, and they had already conceived a child with the disease. The process was successful and, despite the FDA ban, the child was born in New York City with no genetic signs of a horrible affliction that often forces parents to suction the lungs of a child suffering from Leigh’s on an hourly basis (Kolata 2016).

The technology that enabled this outcome is controversial because of its possible social and legal ramifications as much as the genetic consequences. Yet another controversy arose concerning the ease with which jurisdictional restrictions were overcome. The event demonstrated the power of markets to break down legal barriers to treatments that parents desire and are made available in new markets for human genetic services. Legal bans on these procedures are virtually impossible today because the global marketplace enables medical and other professionals to “compete” in ways that track toward the lowest common denominator respecting regulation of their services.

Monsignor John A. Ryan understood the power of markets to break down legal and cultural barriers. In his review of Ryan’s autobiography *Social Doctrine in Action*, University of Notre Dame professor the Reverend William Bolger identified the source of Ryan’s unique leadership skills—his professional identity as both an economist and moral theologian. That distinctive combination enabled Ryan to speak out authoritatively on the ways certain modern economic practices were infringing upon human dignity and reshaping social morality (Bolger 1942: 109-113). Ryan lived in an era when there were serious questions whether Christian virtues could coexist with the values and practices of a market-driven society. The “professionalization” of economics and the ascendancy of specialization and technique today limit such inquiries, even as the moral consequences to economic behavior expand.

Catholic intellectuals such as Ryan, Bolger, Bernard Dempsey, and others sought to bridge the divide between theological doctrine and economic principle through their advocacy of Catholic social thought. Many continue that tradition today; however, they increasingly are challenged by the pace of social and technological change and by a mindset that suggests the impossibility of constructing a common moral code to support a liberal and pluralistic global culture. Such assumptions, even by many Christian social thinkers, discount the need for deliberative and collective decisions involving morally sensitive issues that go beyond those values expressed through market action.

What alternately has been called the New Eugenics or Consumer Eugenics poses a unique challenge to religious conceptions of the human person. The elusive nature of the threat is found in the promise of genetic technologies to tackle diseases and disabilities that have proven incurable through conventional medicine. Yet delineating disease and disability from “genetic limitation” may well prove crucial to preserving the essence of what it is to be human. Society’s moral structure is being recrafted surreptitiously in laboratories that develop new genetic techniques as well as in that gray area that exists between medical treatment and human enhancement. Ryan’s commitment to Catholic social principles in debates over early eugenic practices and his sensitivity to the moral consequences of market behavior offer a model for Catholic engagement with a truly “new” eugenics in which motivations continue to evolve from the quest for racial purity to the desire for genetic advantage.

Ministerial Activism and the Loss of Moral Authority

American Christianity’s role in helping propagate eugenics policies and practices in the first half of the twentieth century was perhaps the darkest stain on its history. Christian leaders in that period held prominent places as public intellectuals and social thinkers that arguably have been devalued since that time. Their participation took various forms, from preaching the ideology and its associated themes of race purity, race suicide, phrenology, etc., to active participation in the many eugenics-themed voluntary associations around the country, to the publication of essays in journals such as *Eugenics* and *The Eugenics Review*. Clerical involvement offered an air of respectability to a movement that resulted in gross abuses of human rights.

Eugenics promotion was part of a much broader ministerial activism that characterized the early twentieth century. Religious leaders were engaged in labor movements, civic associations, social service ministries, prison reform, and other types of civic involvement with the intent of transforming American society. This predominantly Protestant enterprise was inspired by an energetic post-millennialism that dared conceive of a “kingdom of God on earth”; yet this common characterization misrepresents the theological motivation to some extent. Some of its major figures, such as Baptist theologian and preacher Walter

Rauschenbusch who ministered to the immigrant poor in the Hell's Kitchen section of Manhattan, espoused an "immanentist" theology that envisioned God working alongside His people: "All history," Rauschenbusch stated, "becomes the unfolding of the purpose of the immanent God who is working in the race toward the commonwealth of spiritual liberty and righteousness" (1913: 12; quoted in Evans 2017: 79). Ray Stannard Baker, a noted journalist in the Age of Progressivism, observed that American Christianity was capable of galvanizing myriad reform movements at work in the period into a comprehensive "social awakening" (Evans 2017: 78). It was about more than simply saving souls; Christianity could be placed at the service of society in helping to resolve complex cultural problems.

Intense Christian activism, inspired by an elevated sense of purpose and buttressed by advances in the social sciences, was tempted to excess by an inordinate faith in the power of human reason. God's guidance, when reinforced by scientific method, was a powerful force that opened possibilities for the eradication of cultural problems—some old and some new—whose root causes were believed to be largely hereditary. In this respect, the eugenics movement was a logical though wildly utopian response to the convergence of theological and scientific currents of the day.

A review of the upstart *Annals of Eugenics* by the zoologist and eugenicist S. J. Holmes of the University of California appeared in the journal *Science* in 1926, lauding the scientific rigor and objectivity of the new journal. Holmes quotes the "very reasonable position" of contributors Karl Pearson and Margaret Moul that immigration should be restricted to "only those who can give us, either physically or mentally, what we do not possess or possess only in inadequate quantity" (1926: 232). Holmes then turns to the authors' data showing the contamination of Anglo stock by Jewish immigrants: "When it comes to bad tonsils and adenoids, heart disease, defective teeth, diseases of eyes and ears, and in fact most physical characters except stature and weight, the Jewish population is inferior to the average of the Gentiles" (1926: 232). The proliferation of such "science" in the early twentieth century and its odious advocacy by men of the cloth led directly to state abuses unparalleled in history.

The ministers and theologians most heavily involved in the eugenics movement overwhelmingly belonged to denominations of Mainline Protestantism. Of the membership comprising the Committee on Cooperation with Clergymen (CCC), a subgroup of the American Eugenics Society (AES), Sharon Leon observes that there were two Reform rabbis (Louis Mann and David de Sola Pool) and two Catholic priests (Ryan along with John Montgomery Cooper); the remainder were persons she describes as "Protestant luminaries." The chairman of the committee was Presbyterian minister Rev. Henry S. Huntington, whose brother Ellsworth was a well-known geologist and eugenicist (Leon 2004: 8). Many Protestant ministers were fully absorbed in the broader push to purify humanity. Complementing curricular additions of

eugenics-related subjects in the nation's schools and the sponsorship of popular competitions like "Fitter Family Contests" at fairs throughout the country, churches and associated organizations were compelled to add their own initiatives. Astoundingly, the involvement of ministers in the Old Eugenics included a "sermon competition" sponsored by the CCC beginning in March 1926 that rewarded pastors who could seamlessly integrate Protestant millennial theology with eugenics ideology (Leon 2004: 15-16). A passage from the winning sermon by Rev. Phillips E. Osgood of Minneapolis reveals the tone sought by the CCC: "The Refiner of humanity claims our cooperation. The dross must be purged out; the pure gold of well-born generations is the goal of the process" (1928: 11; quoted in Leon 2004: 16). Despite widespread marketing of the "contest" in religious publications, Leon notes there is no evidence Catholic priests ever participated during its three-year run (2004: 17).

An oddity regarding Christian support for policies associated with the Old Eugenics was their basis in theories that often divided Christianity itself by incriminating segments of the Christian population. Sean McCloud notes how in this period psychologists and sociologists attempted to explain scientifically how "certain religious beliefs and practices naturally attracted certain races and classes of people" (2007: 34). This was especially true in accounting for differences between urban and rural Christians in the U.S. According to McCloud, eugenicists who relied on social science to support their claims, such as Warren Wilson and Edmund Brunner, "suggested that the best racial 'stock' had left the country for the city, leaving 'morons' and other 'inadequate' and 'less favored' individuals who were attracted to emotional, ecstatic religious practices" (2007: 35). Much like Eastern elitists and their disdain for rapturous frontier Christians during the Second Great Awakening, eugenicists believed that revivalism and its emotive religious practices appealed uniquely to the "morons" of the countryside. Given these attitudes, one would suspect that rural Christians would have strongly opposed the eugenics movement. Among Protestants, however, except for some fundamentalists such as William Jennings Bryan and certain fringe Pentecostal denominations in which the races mixed rather freely, there is little evidence of resistance (Wilson 2014: 165-168).

It was not just rural Protestants who were labelled inferior by eugenicists. American Catholics were among those groups deemed "cacogenic" based on ostensibly "scientific" analysis of their member populations. For Ellsworth Huntington and Leon Whitney, such analysis involved counting the representatives of different denominations in a "*Who's Who* volume of prominent Americans" to determine those "most and least intellectual" (McCloud 2007: 38). Such a rudimentary process led inevitably to construction of a ranking order of denominations that positioned Unitarians at the top and descended to Pentecostals, Mormons, and Roman Catholics near the bottom. In the case of Catholicism, Huntington and Whitney offered three possible reasons for the cacogenic nature of the faith. To begin, Catholicism,

much like Pentecostalism, seemed to attract members motivated primarily by emotion rather than reason, an unfortunate collective trait that hindered the production of leaders. Second, the Catholic Church tended to cling even to its “poorest and weakest” parishioners while the upper-crust Protestant churches had informal but effective means of allowing its intellectually challenged members to simply “drift away” from the flock. Finally, Huntington and Whitney singled out the doctrine of priestly celibacy, which channeled the brightest American Catholic minds away from science and toward the priesthood, limiting their contributions to American progress and ensuring that the genetic lines of the most intelligent Catholics would end (McCloud 2007: 39).

Non-participation in the “sermon contest” and the fact that Catholics often were targets of eugenicists did not mean that Catholic clergy entirely opposed the movement’s agenda. “Positive” pronatal elements, including the duty of the well-born to breed with vigor, coincided with the programs of eugenics societies and commonly were supported. Archbishop Patrick J. Hayes of New York, for example, found common cause with a local eugenics conference on this issue, yet he was adamant that “negative” practices, such as sterilization and birth control, were unacceptable for Catholics (Hajo 2012). Two academics, Fr. Stephen M. Donovan of the Franciscan House at CUA and Theo. Laboure, O.M.I., a scholar in San Antonio’s Diocesan Seminary, argued in favor of “punitive sterilization” for certain criminals, contending that, in the words of Christian Rosen, “heredity was *the* crucial factor in transmitting insane and criminal traits” (2004: 48; emphasis author’s). Rosen also identifies a British priest, Fr. Thomas Gerrard, who attempted to develop something like “Catholic eugenics” by locating a principal source of gene purity in the heredities of saints (2004: 50-51). The great majority of American Catholics, however, both lay and clerical, opposed the movement in spirit if not in action. Of all Catholics who actively engaged eugenics in this period, Ryan and anthropologist John Montgomery Cooper, a faculty colleague at the Catholic University of America (CUA), were most steadfast in opposition and comprehensive in their condemnation.

What made Ryan and Cooper distinctive among religious leaders and theologians who were engaged in eugenics-related issues was that they used both Catholic moral theology and science in countering the claims of eugenics supporters. Indeed, they could challenge this “supposed science” on its own terms and with the aid of Catholic moral theology. An accomplished anthropologist who focused principally on Native American culture, Cooper responded authoritatively to the common attempts by eugenicists to construct ranking orders of races. Regarding the science of such efforts, he stated: “Neither the cultural nor the psychological evidence, as it stands today, is, when submitted to detailed critical analysis, sufficient or even near-sufficient to establish with any scientific probability the superiority of Nordics or of any other racial group” (1929: 20-21; quoted in Leon 2004: 25). In fact, Leon’s excellent article in the 2004 issue of the *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*

takes its title from Cooper's description of an AES program proposal that would, among other things, limit immigration in the U.S. only to those who could score above the median of Americans on intelligence tests. Questioning the science and objectivity behind this proposal, Cooper described the plan as "hopelessly entangled in Nordic pre-suppositions" (quoted in Leon 2004: 28). Ryan took the same approach, working to debunk eugenics as science but also pointing to violations of human dignity using principles of Catholic Social Thought.

Going Beyond Negative Liberty

As an economist, Ryan's willingness to champion cooperative arrangements among labor, management, and the capitalist class led some to label him a socialist. Despite the charge, he articulated clearly both the economic inferiority and moral deficiencies of socialism. Yet he also was insistent that exaggeration of the "diversity of interests between capital and labor" and the unwillingness of economists and businessmen to attempt to bridge the divide led directly to worker agitation. Denying workers participation in profit-sharing and similar arrangements perpetuated their dependency and amounted to an un-American "denial of opportunity," which contradicted the nation's "Democratic genius." If allowed to continue, such injustice threatened the rise of socialism through political destabilization (Ryan 1920: 385-386).

In this way Ryan offers an insight into political economy commonly overlooked today—the possibility that there may be *different paths* to socialism. For the Distributist G. K. Chesterton, the path was "but the completion of Capitalist concentration" as industry combines in larger blocks of producers who can exploit workers and centralize control in a few large institutions (1987: 134). For many Americans today, socialism is thought to result from incremental accumulations by an omnipresent state that absorbs more and more functions from the private sector and exerts its own control. Increasingly, however, it appears that the threat of socialism, just as Ryan surmised, is posed as much by societal inattention to disparities in opportunities among individuals. In this regard, the recent financial crisis perhaps posed the greatest threat of an American socialist revolution in our lifetime. Had the economy collapsed, given the injustices being perpetrated in such a critical sector, it is possible that a massive call for state intervention and possibly even collective ownership might have overwhelmed the nation's traditional commitment to the free market. And it would have been the disparity of opportunity between classes, and the perception that the financial class destabilized the economic system in their greed to get more even as they used taxpayers as insurance against the exorbitant risks they were undertaking that precipitated collectivist sentiments. Ryan was sensitive to such developments in ways many contemporary economic thinkers are not.

Ryan's discernment of how important opportunity is to the proper functioning of democracy underscores one of the principal threats of the New Eugenics. The possibility that competitive advantage may someday be achieved through genetic enhancement and that some

may be denied those opportunities for their lack of material resources, means that disparities in opportunity may rise to new levels. While medical professionals and research scientists focus on the potential eradication of diseases, enhanced production of agriculture, and other perceived goods, ethicists and theologians should begin to explore the ways in which emerging markets for human genetic services will impact social structures, and particularly the ways that “capabilities and functionings” (to use Amartya’s Sen’s term) will be impacted. In some cases, it will be the most fundamental of opportunities —the *opportunity to live* – that will be at issue for those who can afford genetic treatments that others cannot. In other cases, opportunity may someday mean possessing the resources and knowledge of available treatments necessary to enhance life prospects by modifying one’s physical, intellectual, or emotional characteristics. As Felipe E. Vizcarrondo has stated, “The new eugenics, although based on science, continues to pursue the same goal as the old eugenics, the development of a superior individual and the elimination of those considered inferior” (2014). The potential for a consumer-driven revolution in human genetics to radically alter the “justice equation” demands attention from ethicists, theologians, and social scientists to prepare for the likely development of *new forms* of injustice.

Ryan’s sensitivity to the ways that market outcomes can divide a people and to the need for collective guidance in certain kinds of decision-making takes on new relevance. As human genetic services expand, and with limited possibilities for collective input, the default outcome of goods distribution in this industry will be determined by countless individual exchanges and limited only by what is technologically feasible and economically viable. And due to the technical sophistication and likelihood of state regulation of this industry, it is more than possible that markets for these services will be asymmetrical in their concentrations of power.

These possibilities accent Ryan’s call for a wider distribution of social goods to enable more universal human flourishing. Regarding material goods, he had both practical and philosophical reasons to expand profit-sharing and other means of distributing capitalism’s bounty more broadly: “A society in which the majority of the workers were owners of capital, as well as wage-earners, would be an infinitely more progressive and more enlightened society than either Socialism or modern capitalism” (1920: 394). Thus, the goal for Ryan’s advocacy of a broader distribution of capital was more than simple fairness; it was a means to self-actualization, not merely for individuals but for institutions as well. He believed that spreading the distribution of goods could inspire a culture that is more than the sum of its parts, both in solving society’s problems and in directing its resources to ends desired by an enlightened multitude rather than an industrial elite. Society would necessarily function more harmoniously (and perhaps more efficiently) if greater numbers of citizens were educated and invested in outcomes that benefit all.

The Formation of Ryan's Social Philosophy

Early influences who helped shape Ryan's approach to social issues included James Cardinal Gibbons, Archbishop John Ireland of St. Paul, Bishop John Lancaster Spalding, the noted economist Richard T. Ely, and, most importantly, the popes who laid the foundation for modern Catholic Social Thought: Leo XIII and Pius XI. From Spalding he derived a most perceptive eye for the encroachments of materialism on American society and its potential damage. In his autobiography *Social Doctrine in Action*, Ryan quotes Spalding from one of Ryan's favorite books, *Education and the Higher Life*:

Is the material progress of the nineteenth century a cradle or a grave? Are we to continue to dig and delve and peer into matter until God and the soul fade from our view and we become like the things we work in? To put such questions to the multitude were idle. There is here no affair of votes and majorities. Human nature has not changed, and now, as in the past, crowds follow leaders. What the best minds and the most energetic characters believe and teach and put in practice, the millions will come to accept. The doubt is whether the leaders will be worthy—the real permanent leaders, for the noisy apparent leaders can never be so (1916: 28; quoted in Ryan 1941: 29).

Spalding's question of whether materialism can expand to a degree such that "we become like the things we work in" perplexed Ryan throughout his life. As a theological economist, he was concerned that influences emanating from the prolific American economy could eventually obscure the needs of the soul altogether and, with it, our humanity.

Ryan's relationship with Ely is perhaps most interesting to our purposes. His admiration for someone who without exaggeration might be called the patriarch of modern American economists was unquestioned. The University of Wisconsin professor was one of Ryan's principal mentors, a founder of the American Economic Association, an advocate of the Social Gospel, and a staunch opponent of the *laissez faire* economics—popular at the time—against which Ryan was a fellow combatant. Ryan quoted Ely in his autobiography that "the doctrine of *laissez-faire* is unsafe in politics and unsound in morals" and he observed with obvious agreement Ely's description of the state "as an educational and ethical agency whose positive aid is an indispensable condition of human progress" (1938: 136; quoted in Ryan 1941: 50). Their common opposition to *laissez-faire* led the two men to another source of agreement: the need for an "ethical school" of economics. According to Ely, this school would "apply ethical principles to economic facts and economic institutions, and test their value by that standard." The goal was to achieve symmetry between the economic system and other segments of culture such that progress is balanced across all aspects of human experience: "Political economy is thus brought into harmony with the great religious, political, and social movements which characterize this age; for the essence of them all is the belief that there ought to be no

contradiction between our actual economic life and the postulates of ethics” (Ely 1889: 128-129; quoted in Ryan 1941: 51). The points of agreement between Ryan and Ely are thus obvious; what is more difficult to parse out are the differences, a principal one which led to a marked division between the two concerning eugenics.

While not as actively supportive of eugenics as other Protestants such as the Social Gospeler Josiah Strong, Ely offered implicit support for the movement from his position as a notable academic and public intellectual. He was singularly influential in bringing one of his former doctoral students at Johns Hopkins, the sociologist and eugenicist Edward A. Ross, to the University of Wisconsin in 1906. The University at that time was a hotbed of eugenics theory, including contributions by the school’s president, Charles Richard Van Hise (Jones Miller 2013). A geologist by training, Van Hise’s book *The Conservation of Natural Resources in the United States* contained a section on “The Conservation of Man Himself,” which asserted that America has awakened to the limits of its resources and must entrust their care to those most qualified. According to Van Hise, the old individualism of the nineteenth century is no longer self-sustaining, but the evolution of the human species across millions of years had led to a miraculous moment in time where proper management of natural resources will “make possible to billions of future human beings a godlike destiny” (1918: 379). That destiny is only possible, however, so long as every man “shall surrender his individualism so far as is necessary for the good of the race. He who thinks not of himself primarily, but of his race, and of its future, is the new patriot” (Van Hise 1918: 378). Thus, for Van Hise, American natural resources extended to the very racial characteristics of the nation itself.

As for Ely’s “religious” credentials, none other than Walter Rauschenbusch identified the Wisconsin professor as one of “three men who were pioneers of Christian social thought,” the others being Washington Gladden and Josiah Strong (1912: 9; quoted in Ryan 1991: 523). Yet Ely was not strictly Protestant in the sense of the others. He was one of the few Protestants to genuinely appreciate Catholic Social Thought as a whole, heaping praise upon the encyclicals of Leo XIII and Pius XI and identifying the “sound economics in these products of the wise old Vatican.” Moreover, he compliments the encyclical tradition in a way that might serve as an indictment of Protestant shortcomings that contributed to failures regarding eugenics:

The merit of the encyclicals of the Catholic Church is that they stand for the whole body of Roman Catholics. This gives them a wide and spacious house in which to move about; it is a house with metes and bounds, and not the whole wide world to roam about in; the Ten Commandments still hold (1938: 94-95).

Ely believed the encyclical tradition provided a compendium of thought grounded in a theological tradition that has stood the test of time in addressing cultural changes inspired by

technology, ideology, and social movements that Protestant fideism and scriptural adherence alone could not.

For Ely, as for Ryan, the common denigration of the state by those like Herbert Spencer who were pushing their views on liberty to the point of “philosophical anarchy” represented a new threat (1902: 61-62). He understood the potential for state abuse but believed government action was necessary to advance the good society. Ely’s book, *Studies in the Evolution of Industrial Society*, was dedicated to Supreme Court justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, who penned the infamous line “three generations of imbeciles are enough” in his *Buck v. Bell* opinion, which upheld the constitutionality of forced sterilizations for institutionalized persons. Ely was more ambiguous about extreme measures to prevent the “unfit” from procreating, believing that society was adapting to the challenges in ways that were accomplishing the decline of such persons naturally. He included a section in his book titled “Social Progress and Race Improvement” that contended beyond medical and other “positive” eugenic adaptations that are making people fitter than ever before, the “degenerate classes” were in natural decline because of social changes instigated by the state. The principle of “modern penology” that criminals should be incarcerated “until thoroughly reformed” thus restricting their ability to reproduce, the institutionalization of “paupers and [the] feeble-minded” that accomplished the same purpose, and a dramatic increase in state regulations to ensure the physical, mental, and emotional quality of marriages were all combining to advance the human race in Ely’s view (1906: 173-181). As for his more hardline beliefs, Ely acknowledged the existence of certain incurables who were to be managed by the state, and he voiced qualified support for social scientists who contended that the “hopelessly lost and lapsed should not be allowed to propagate their kind” (1891: 407).

To the extent Ely’s comment implies acceptance of state action to remove undesirables from the gene pool, Ryan obviously could not agree. He certainly accepted Ely’s anti-Spencerian doctrine regarding the potential abuses of liberty, stating society is “something more than an abstraction, something more than the sum of its component individuals. And its function is not simply to guarantee equal liberty to all its members, in the sense of Immanuel Kant and Herbert Spencer” (1996: 166). State intervention is necessary in situations where the stakes to private transacting in market environments is too high, both in terms of excessive concentration of market power that limits free competition and in situations where the outcome of private enterprise might undermine a society’s fundamental values. Ryan quotes Pius XI from *Quadragesimo Anno* in this regard: “It is rightly contended that certain forms of property must be reserved to the state, since they carry with them an opportunity of domination too great to be left to private individuals without injury to the community at large” (quoted in Ryan 1933: 55). While Ryan understood there is danger to state control, certain kinds of property—genetic property would seem a classic example—are of a type that their

distribution and possible manipulation transcend questions of economic right and threaten social justice. The state, however, should defer to civil society institutions such as the Church, and government employees should give way to private-sector workers in all cases except where the latter had proven unable the job (Preston 1970: 36-37). Despite this deference, however, the state remained an essential institution in society's pursuit of the good.

Despite their disparate eugenic views, there is no doubt that Ely respected Ryan both as an economist and dedicated Catholic who worked tirelessly to integrate his religious beliefs with his professional pursuits. Ely described Ryan's dissertation, which became the book *A Living Wage*, as "the first attempt in the English language to elaborate what may be called a Roman Catholic system of political economy" (quoted in Ryan 1906: xii). Ely voiced agreement with Ryan that the ethical foundation for any human system must be drawn to considerable extent from outside that system to keep from becoming self-referential and contextual, such that it was no ethical foundation at all. Norms and values must be seen from a higher standard than that conferred by the system embodying these attributes. For Ryan, that standard was Catholic Social Thought and the "papal encyclical tradition of Leo XIII and Pius XI" (Gaillardetz 1990: 110). But the obligation of CST is to engage real life circumstances and explore human conditions so that its pronouncements not only retained relevance but in fact offered something to the world that could not be obtained otherwise. In this respect, Pope Leo XIII represented the Church's rebirth to an enlightened papacy capable of engaging humanity on its own terms.

Thus, regarding their common advocacy of an "ethical school" of economics, both Ryan and Ely recognized the need for a common set of principles external to systems of political economy that could serve help discern the moral correctness of economic action. Yet Ryan's characterization of Ely's *Protestant* source of ethics underscores a critical difference that likely contributed to their divergence concerning eugenics. Ryan states that he rejoiced in Dr. Ely's "insistence upon the obligation of Christian teachers and believers to bring *their* religious principles into *their* economic practices and relations" (1941: 52; emphasis added). Ryan's description implies the more individualized Christian ethics of Ely's Protestantism vis-à-vis his own Catholic tradition. There is no body of thought, no collective doctrine to guide the development of ethical principles; there is simply the individual economics teacher or practitioner and their ethics, however derived, or not, from religious tradition or conviction that are brought to bear on economic issues. In the case of early twentieth-century eugenics, it has been shown that American Protestantism, with few exceptions, was at best indifferent and at worst supportive of eugenic programs and practices. The absence of a consistent tradition of social thought and ethical development likely contributed to the tendency of Protestant Christians, in harmony with social science and the rising rationalism of the day, to support the

eugenics movement to the extent it was consistent with their wider values. Ely certainly exemplified that tendency.

Ryan's Pragmatism and the "Inductive" Natural Law Approach

Ryan has drawn criticism for having straddled the fence between moral theologian and social reformer, often allowing practical politics to split the difference. He was chided, for example, for having stood against fascism *only to an extent*, seeing it as a preferable system to communism for its willingness to at least acknowledge the Church as a legitimate institution. He was also criticized for his unwillingness to decry the concordat between the Vatican and Mussolini's fascist government. Still, there was no doubt of his opposition to "the trains run on time" propaganda that promoted the hyper-efficiency of the fascists and appealed to many American apologists (Miscamble 1990: 527-530). Ryan's logic regarding the concordat was that by recognizing the Church's authority to a certain extent, Mussolini's government conceded at least some limitation on state power (Miscamble 1990: 534). Right or wrong, such pragmatism for a Catholic priest was, for some, unbecoming. In fact, his dissertation took a similar approach, building on Leo XIII's call for a "living wage" in *Rerum Novarum* and translating it into a policy prescription for the American economy. Some Catholic ethicists, such as Charles Curran, see Ryan as having undercut his position as moral theologian to enhance his credibility more broadly as a social reformer (1982: 86).

Increasingly complex cultural issues of Ryan's day required of the ethicist an exceptional work ethic, and Ryan was more than willing to do the groundwork. He criticized those writers of ethics manuals who were content to offer platitudes but unwilling to do the heavy lifting required in a society experiencing rapid growth not only in production but also in the moral hazards and externalities to economic action. Extensive analysis of on-the-ground conditions was necessary to come up with ethical prescriptions. Gaillardetz sums up Ryan on this issue: "proximate moral principles could not be derived in a moral vacuum because rational human nature itself is not lived out in a vacuum" (1990: 116). Yet the difficulty was that proximate principles must remain consistent with the general moral precepts of his religious tradition. According to Gaillardetz, "Ryan preferred to argue from human nature rather than from revelation or a more abstract concept of natural law, not because he did not accept these sources, but because he was committed to discourse in the public realm where discussions of sin and grace would be of little value" (1990: 117). Ryan's adoption of "the perfection of human personality" paradigm so prominent in his day among theologians such as Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich testified to that emphasis. He perceived natural law through human nature, and he came to view that nature as experiential even more so than rational or spiritual. Hence, Gaillardetz describes Ryan as an early "revisionist" who helped set a course for "recasting the

natural law tradition in the light of new insights in both personalist philosophy and the social sciences” (1990: 119).

Ryan’s natural law revisionism was far from John Rawls’ call for public reason, however. There was no setting aside comprehensive moral doctrine to achieve an overlapping consensus on contentious social issues. In fact, Ryan *began* with Catholic moral doctrine and proceeded to employ tools of social science to uncover new insights into the human person. He employed this method to help preserve the Church’s relevance to contemporary debates, insisting in Gaillardetz’s words “that the Church must enter into public discourse on a much broader range of socio-economic issues and must be unafraid to make concrete proposals, defending them in terms to which all people of good will might assent” (1990: 119). The contemporary Church is challenged to make a similar commitment as it engages the New Eugenics.

A Catholic Perspective on the New Eugenics

Ryan was indeed swimming against the stream vis-à-vis many of his contemporaries in the early twentieth century. Most were swept up in the progressivism of the age that rationalized collective actions in the interests of progress that today seem horrific. Even among his colleagues in the Historical School of Economics, such as Ely, Simon N. Patton, and John R. Commons, Ryan could not fully embrace their program in combatting the deterministic economics emerging as an offshoot of Darwinism. While essentially all members of the Historical School believed that human beings, as Ryan put it, “compose economic society” rather than being determined by it, his Catholic faith required that he also draw from sources beyond science to engage in such economic *composition* (Preston 1970: 28). His religious commitment required a transcendent reference to morally ground a system that could otherwise spin out of control. As Robert Preston noted, Ryan’s goal for labor reform “was deduced from his moral interpretation of God’s purpose for the earth, man’s possession of certain rights, and man’s dignity as a human being” (1970: 33). His starting point was Christian morality from which he derived social goals and then “used the social sciences to translate his moral goals into precise standards” (Preston 1970: 34). That formula offered something of an immunity to the disease of dehumanizing rationalism to which many of his colleagues in the Historical School were susceptible.

Perhaps most salient of Ryan’s ideas to the New Eugenics was his recognition of how quickly and dramatically economic behavior can reshape social values. It was an aspect of capitalism of which he was always wary and led to his insistence that Catholic Social Thought was indispensable to the moral sustainability of market-based social orders, even in religiously pluralistic nations like the United States. Ryan openly questioned whether new “advances” in material conditions necessarily were good in promoting the flourishing of individuals broadly conceived. And he was concerned about the moral and “expectational” consequences of those

changes. Starr takes on Ryan's perspective in speculating on how he would have viewed the extraordinary developments that took place in the twentieth century:

What was the 'new economic gospel of consumption' in the 1920s became the status quo of the second half of the 20th century, as the long wave of product innovations (television, large and small household appliances, microwave ovens, videocassette recorders, personal computers, cell phones, satellite TV, etc.) turned novelty into something expectable, and rising real incomes made 'optional consumption' into integral aspects of material life (2008: 17).

Ryan sensed the social and moral imbalances resulting from revolutions in both production and consumption that were taking place during his lifetime. His advocacy of a living wage was not intended solely as an economic technique to elevate those on the lowest rungs of the income ladder. He was concerned with just distributions as much for the wealthy in helping all to recognize that we are in this together; every citizen has certain responsibilities for the well-being of the whole society that go beyond maximizing one's self-interest. He also understood that "conspicuous consumerism" is a fact built into our economic infrastructure with real material consequences for all those in the production chain (Starr 2008: 19). As we advance today toward forms of conspicuous consumption capable of changing our genetic makeup, he would understand the moral urgency of this development and the indispensability of Catholic Social Thought for dealing with it.

In *A Better Economic Order*, Ryan articulated three ethical principles that he believed were necessary to help prevent the kind of moral drift in modern economies that we have witnessed recently. These principles have particular relevance to notions of "genetic property rights" that are forming dynamically in markets around the world, and with little ethical and theological reflection. The first "is that the earth and its potentialities belong to *all members* of the human race without distinction" (Ryan 1935: 148; emphasis added). To Ryan, this principle was founded on a concept of "moral equality" that itself must be the basis for natural rights. Human beings are ends not means, and as such, all have "equal claims to sustenance from the bounty of the earth" (Ryan 1935: 149). His second principle is that "men are morally obliged to use the goods and opportunities of the earth in accordance with the laws of justice and charity" (1935: 149). For Ryan, this principle corresponds not only with the concept of Christian stewardship over nature but also with Aristotelian wisdom: "it is better to have property private, but make the use of it common" (1935: 150-151). Ryan's third principle is that "industrial society is an organism, every part of which is subordinate within certain limits to the whole and is obliged to promote the well-being of the whole. Neither political nor economic society is a mere collection of individuals" (1935: 153).

Of the three, the third principle is likely most important to our exploration of the New Eugenics. The idea that every part of society is obliged to promote overall well-being implies an *intentionality* to advance the social good. Efforts to secure monopolies would seem an obvious violation of Ryan's principle. In cases of monopolizing genetic property, actions by Big Pharma and genetics companies are pushing the envelope in their pursuit of profits. Although the U. S. Supreme Court determined in June of 2013 that Myriad Genetics' patenting of two genes related to breast and ovarian cancer is unconstitutional, Robert Nussbaum notes how companies can still monopolize genetic *data* despite the ruling. In its testing of the two genes, BRCA1 and BRCA2, Myriad Genetics gained valuable information concerning natural variations that are related to cancer. Myriad created a database containing this information but has asserted its claim over the information as intellectual property, meaning that doctors are limited in their ability to assess variations in these two genes and learn how they relate to their own patients without engaging in a financial arrangement with Myriad. Even though the American Medical Association has called these limitations on the dissemination of medical data "unethical," companies still attempt to monopolize information in order to reap the associated profits (Nussbaum 2013). Ryan's third principle speaks directly to this type of behavior by positing that every subordinate segment of society is obliged to advance the well-being of the whole, not simply look out for its own interests.

Ryan combatted the abuses of "systems" using the very tools with which others attempted to substantiate racial superiority claims, even before turning to Catholic moral theology. In 1929, he was asked by the journal *Eugenics* to reply to the veracity of using eugenics tools to restrict immigration. His response was as a social scientist and left no doubt as to where he stood: "I have decided that I am unable to comply with the invitation; for I regard the project of picking out immigrants on the basis of eugenic guess-working theories as not only futile but positively harmful." He goes on to say that he knows of no empirical tools capable of such an undertaking and expresses his belief that "prospective immigrants" should not be subjected "to the standards and prejudices of pseudo-science" (quoted in Leon 2004: 27). Ryan's position on eugenics as "pseudo-science" in 1929 exhibited courage; even mainstream scientific journals largely were positive regarding how eugenics could be employed both to limit immigration and control procreation by undesirables. Ryan, along with Cooper, provided an alternative perspective, grounded in science and reinforced by Catholic moral theology. That combination of disciplinary perspectives is much needed today in addressing the development of what amounts to new eugenic practices, the allure of which will be far more enticing than the eugenics Ryan and Cooper rejected.

Conclusion

In her provocative book *The New Eugenics: Selective Breeding in an Era of Reproductive Technologies*, Judith Daar observes the expansion of insurance coverage to more people to engage in various forms of assisted reproductive technology (ART). According to Daar, making these technologies widely available “will not end the new eugenics. It will simply dissolve the first barrier, affordability, and make the other social and cultural barriers more pronounced” (quoted in Hoffman 2017: 677). One cultural barrier that is likely to become more pronounced is the Catholic conception of personhood that is both ontological and transcendent but not functional. Extending the availability of ART certainly will not answer the ethical questions surrounding these technologies. Those questions only will be compounded as additional screens are added for genetic “defects” and techniques are created to deal with them. It is likely that as the science develops, what is a genetic limitation today will become a defect tomorrow, and the ability to address defects will become market rather than moral imperatives. To the extent insurance becomes available to more people, normalization of ART will accelerate as the market grows and the values associated with this technology become more accepted. That is when the real questions begin; yet ethicists often avoid the fundamental questions. Law professor Allison Hoffman, in a review of Daar’s book, criticizes the final chapter for “its lack of focus on [the] interrelation between social norms and their evolution and the new eugenics movement” (2017: 677). In fairness, Daar is far from alone in targeting those ethical issues—e.g. how income disparities impact access to ART—which are more easily subjected to empirical analysis at the expense of more profound moral questions.

As a social scientist himself, Ryan would recognize the injustice that Daar describes. As a Catholic moral theologian, however, he would be more concerned with the ethical consequences of a technology his Church consistently criticizes for interfering with natural procreation processes, leading to the destruction of millions of fertilized embryos. Although Ryan’s natural law approach has been described as “inductive,” as an ethicist he still believed in “first things first”—society must deal with the root causes of social problems before it can turn to prospective solutions illuminated by scientific analysis. He combined a unique set of talents characterized by Notre Dame historian Aaron Abell as “the ability to combine economics and ethics into a virtually new science of social justice” (1946: 128).

The division between scientific economics and moral theology is especially problematic in the context of emerging markets for human genetic services. We are not dealing primarily with issues of efficiency in these markets but rather trying to strike a delicate balance between effective treatments that enhance human well-being and overstepping boundaries that endanger traditional conceptions of the human person. Ryan understood the potential danger of losing our humanity in attempts to perfect the species.

Ryan's theory of natural law recognized the validity of concerns for both society and the individual, and in so doing it provided a safeguard against the drift to relativism that modernity encourages (Gaillardetz 1990: 110-111). That pragmatic quality and its sense of balance is vitally important if the Church is to involve itself in the New Eugenics in a way that can help allay competing interests and point the way to a greater social good. No development of recent memory has the potential to bring the interests of individuals and those of society into greater conflict as technologies spawned by new markets work toward "human perfection." The dynamism of markets has the potential to provide genetic services with alarming speed, yet the relatively slow pace of theological and moral responses will seem plodding by comparison, assuming there are responses at all.

The qualities that made Ryan a distinctive voice in debates over Old Eugenics' practices and abuses are needed as we enter even murkier waters concerning what genetic manipulations are permitted. Abell noted how "throughout his career [Ryan] was not only an academician but also an avowed propagandist, a ready controversialist, a veritable crusader for liberty and justice" (1946: 130). The challenges of the New Eugenics are such that academic studies and policy analysis will be inadequate to prevent abuses. These challenges are *nuclear* in scale and scope. We soon may be called to deny ourselves what is technologically feasible, and will be materially beneficial in some cases, to achieve a greater moral good. Ryan understood the tradeoffs in such decisions and he observed in Catholic social teaching an essential pillar capable of steadying society to engage the challenges.

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