

# Friedrich von Bodelschwingh, Lecture in Lübeck on Questions Relating to Eugenics (1929)

## Abstract

---

Friedrich von Bodelschwingh (1877-1946) was a Protestant theologian and the son of the founder of the “v. Bodelschwingsche Anstalten Bethel” [v. Bodelschwingh Foundation Bethel], a charitable institution for the mentally ill in Bielefeld. In addition to medical and social care, the institution, which exists to this day, also offers education and professional training to people with disabilities. He assumed the directorship after the death of his father in 1910 and expanded the institute to care for orphaned children. Although he professed concern for the rising numbers of physically and mentally handicapped among the German population, he rejected the “life unworthy of life” [*lebensunwertes Leben*] arguments of the eugenicists who advocated forced sterilization and euthanasia. In a 1929 lecture, which is reproduced in excerpts here, he offered a spirited response to the supporters of euthanasia. In the early 1940s, Bodelschwingh made some efforts to protect the residents of his institution from Nazi sterilization and euthanasia policies, but he never engaged in outright resistance to the regime.

## Source

---

[...]

Life unworthy of living? – that is the topic that your association has asked me to discuss this evening. At the end of this topic is a question mark, and this question mark, it seems to me, is like a gloomy specter lingering behind the so-called culture of our age. Ever since Spengler introduced the notion of the decline of the West into our physically and emotionally shattered world, one question has constantly coursed through the various nations and through our people: Is this man correct, is our nation, is Europe, in a state of inexorable decline, are we already a degenerate or degenerating generation, and is this path unstoppable? As a kind of barometer of the incidence of manifestations of degeneration among our people, we are constantly reminded that the number of weak, sick, mentally broken, and inferior is constantly growing. As far as I can tell, today’s statistics can hardly prove whether this is actually correct in absolute numerical terms, for it is part of the trajectory of our times that misery has become more apparent through the consequences of the war, and also through the modern welfare system, and that it is increasingly emerging from its hiding places and coming out into the open. Nonetheless, it still appears that, relatively speaking, the number of those who are weak in body and mind, the inferior, is growing. Why? I shall merely mention one reason, which I will touch upon only with trepidation.

Ever since the practice of intentionally limiting the size of one’s family trickled down from the so-called educated circles to the middle class, to the skilled workers and to the countryside, there has been – if we look at the qualities, shall we say, of childbirths – a shift, possibly a dangerous one. At the top – if you allow me to abide by this “top” and “bottom” – at the top, there is an ever thinner stratum of the talented and the industrious, and at the bottom a perhaps ever thicker stratum. Looking at the enrollment numbers for the remedial schools [*Hilfsschulen*] in our neighboring province of the Rhineland, one finds that the families that populate the remedial schools still have an average of 5-6 children. And at the top?

I do not need to follow this line of argumentation any further. You can easily see what kind of catastrophic development looms if this continues. We cannot treat this matter seriously enough, and we must impress its seriousness upon the conscience of everyone, every father and every mother, in this district as well. It is surely the case that the war caused a deep rupture, also with respect to this issue.

---

The war called the industrious and the physically fit to the frontlines and let them die, while those unfit in body and mind remained at home. But my dear brothers and sisters, we truly no longer have the right, within our race, to blame only the war as the great mass murderer. After all, the United States of America loses more people as a result of automobile accidents every year than we did in the entire war of 1870/71, and today in all cultured nations the number of children killed before they are born is higher than the number of human lives devoured by the whole "World War"!

There lie the dark shadows, the dark shadows that also loom over this evening's topic of discussion. We have every reason to look them in the eye with the utmost seriousness. I fully understand why a serious American researcher held this mirror up to his people and maintained that we are descending to the level of subhumans, that is, to inferiors who are constantly gaining greater strength in number and importance, or why another German researcher declared that we Germans would also eventually be overwhelmed by a lumpenproletariat. It is already being estimated that 2.5% of all people in Germany right now are feeble-minded, and that about one-tenth could be grouped with the so-called psychopaths. If this trend continues, we will move closer to a scenario that Goethe already talked about: eventually the world will turn into a gigantic hospital where everyone is the caretaker of another. Can this development be stopped? Science (racial hygiene, genetics) steps forward as a helper in our fatherland and in the world. Over the last thirty years, work in these fields has made great advances, which we must consider with seriousness and care.

Everywhere people are trying – this started in the plant and animal world – to trace the genetic germs and genetic lines in their peculiar development, in their changes. I have deep reverence for this research. After all, an entire cadre of American scientists, for example, has been working for years to track the life course of a small, tiny fly in all its wondrous genetic mixtures and genetic succession.

The hope is that one can move from this work to human genetics. The new helper, eugenics, awakens. It seeks to reveal these genetic connections in humankind, studies the favorable genetic lines to nourish and promote them, and thereby conveys greater knowledge to us, also about the mysterious interconnections between our becoming and our life. I praise this work with great enthusiasm. Time and again the hope is awakened in us that one day this may bestow upon us a new revival of humanity, an awakening from descent and decay, and that, in the end, we would see the fulfillment of what Nietzsche spoke of: the up-breeding of the human race!

[...]

Euthanasia – intentional dying! Hardly a day passes without someone saying to us: Why are you not taking the only sensible path? I have only a few counter-questions. First, from the general human standpoint: Where shall the measure be set? This life is preserved and that one is wiped out? Who shall decide? The state or the father and mother? And if they are not in agreement: If the father is of one opinion and the mother another? What is to be done then? The originators of this idea have calculated that one might be allowed to eliminate perhaps three or four thousand people in this way, which would be a savings of five million. But as far as I can tell, for their sake one would have to erect an apparatus of scientific observation, of control, in order to avoid as many mistakes as possible, and by my estimate it would cost twice or three times as much. And if one reached one's goal: Where is the doctor who would agree to perform this kind of last service – I don't want to label it more sharply than that. The institutions would have to continue. But then the confidence in them would crumble. I ask the mothers among you: What mother would entrust her child to an institution if she did not know whether it would be placed on the list of death candidates one day? And the following seems even worse to me: What destruction of the basic good that is the sacredness of life would take place in the consciousness of our people? Where would it lead if we, for humanitarian reasons, decided to let murderers live, while at the same time, for partly economic reasons, we killed innocent children? I see no solution down this path.

---

[...]

As many images as pass by us in Bethel, that is how many riddles confront us. Are there solutions? Do we eventually answer these questions as well with the verdict: Yes! Of course! We don't kill them, but the life that unfolds daily in a thousand shapes under our hands is, in fact, in the most fundamental sense, a life that is not worthy of being loved?

I say: No! And I want to further clarify this "no" with a few answers.

First: We remove these sick and weak individuals from the society of human beings, where they no longer fit, but we place them in a new community of life and work. If you ever wander through Bethel, you will see not only these dark external images, but also a community that is happily working with each other. We saw this immediately at the beginning of our work: The point cannot be only to provide care, rather every small individual power must be put to work. To be sure, people say time and again: It is impossible to insert weak humans unworthy of life into a productive process. But when I look at our community of work in Bethel, I say: Isn't this productive process perhaps normal, a cooperative work process, where one hand grasps the other, [is it not] a great Socialist – and, leaving aside all the taints of party politics, one could also say: Communist – community of labor, where everyone is in service to the whole, and where every power, however small, is deployed somewhere for the welfare of the others?

[...]

Source: Friedrich von Bodelschwingh, "Vortrag in Lübeck über Fragen der Eugenik (1929)," in Anneliese Hochmuth, *Spurensuche: Eugenik, Sterilisation, Patientenmorde und die v. Bodelschwinghschen Anstalten Bethel 1929–1945*, edited by Matthias Benad in conjunction with Wolf Kätzner and Eberhad Warns. Bielefeld: Bethel-Verlag, 1997, pp. 217–21.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

Recommended Citation: Friedrich von Bodelschwingh, Lecture in Lübeck on Questions Relating to Eugenics (1929), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/weimar-germany-1918-1933/ghdi:document-4497>> [March 16, 2026].