

Hans Harmsen, “Contemporary Questions of Eugenics” (1931)

Abstract

Hans Harmsen (1899–1989), a physician known for advocating eugenics, examined the issue of public welfare from the perspective of racial hygiene. This 1931 speech was the opening address at a conference of directors of charitable welfare institutions. Although he did not condone euthanasia outright, he supported “eugenically indicated” abortion as a matter of social welfare policy.

Source

[...]

1. Eugenics and Public Welfare

It must be emphatically pointed out that hereditary-biological health is not identical with “high quality.” Rather, universal experience has taught us that even the physically and mentally frail can be high-quality human beings in ethical and social terms. Structural changes in our population and quantitative and qualitative changes in population growth – which have resulted, above all, in the shrinking of the average family size among those groups who, in terms of hereditary biology, are industrious and socially productive – make it apparent that our approach to public and charitable welfare is in urgent need of a eugenic reorientation. Differentiated care must take the place of indiscriminating public welfare. Substantial expenditures should be made only for those groups of needy individuals who are expected to recover their full productive capacity. By contrast, for all others, welfare services should be limited to humane provisioning and preservation. To the greatest extent possible, those who carry hereditary traits that give rise to social inferiority and the need for care should be prevented from procreating.

2. Destruction of Life Unworthy of Living

This conference is unanimously agreed that the recently voiced demand to permit the destruction of “life unworthy of living” must be emphatically rejected, both from a religious and a national-pedagogical standpoint.

[...]

3. The Sterilization of Those with Serious Genetic Defects

The findings of family research, especially studies of identical twins, leave no doubt about the great importance of genetic factors in the whole development of life. Still unclear in many cases is the significance of environmental influences, including the question of damage to egg and sperm before their union and the problem of regenerative capacity. Moreover, it would seem that no culture is able to assess what is mentally valuable in that which is biologically worthless. That is why the implementation of negative eugenic measures, which aim to eradicate all genetic burdens, demands careful review and demarcation.

In mental institutions where in-depth observations have been made about the extent of the genetic burden on their charges, it becomes apparent that the genetic factor is largely to blame as the cause of the ailments. It accounts for up to sixty percent. Insofar as these persons are permanently

institutionalized, our institutions are performing a major eugenic service to the whole of the people by isolating these individuals. However, under the influence of the economic crisis, the definition of “in need of care” has been considerably narrowed. Today, in many instances, it is no longer the severity of the case that is decisive, but solely the question of cost. The failure to commit individuals with serious genetic defects is just as worrisome as the growing demand to release those in need of institutionalization. This conference points emphatically to the grave dangers associated with these sorts of measures, which, just like temporary leaves for the genetically-morally imperiled, will invariably have fateful consequences for the future. In accordance with the demands of eugenics, the option of institutionalization must be used more vigorously and must be supplemented by the passage of a custody law.

[...]

4. Eugenically Indicated Pregnancy Termination

Authorization for the medical termination of a pregnancy can only be given today on medical grounds. Broad circles are demanding that this authorization be expanded to include so-called socially and eugenically indicated abortion. In the latter case, immunity shall be granted for the termination of a pregnancy if there is sufficient likelihood that the child would be genetically burdened. When it comes to work on behalf of the mentally feeble, this question is also of no small importance within the setting of our institutions.

The conference fundamentally believes that there is a clear difference between preventing the creation of genetically diseased life and destroying life that has already been created. It rejects an expansion of the eugenic indication for the termination of pregnancy. Respect for life obligates us to bear this kind of adversity, too, as part of our overall burden. Should the termination seem indicated on medical grounds and in conjunction with other considerations, the conference recommends that the decision be put in writing on the basis of a concilium involving a consultation with a public health official or a university professor.

Source: Hans Harmsen, “Gegenwartsfragen der Eugenik” (1931), 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. 227–30.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

Recommended Citation: Hans Harmsen, “Contemporary Questions of Eugenics” (1931), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/weimar-germany-1918-1933/ghdi:document-4498>> [March 16, 2026].