

Ethics of Nature Society.

NATURAL ETHICS

IN THEORY AND PRACTICE.

Extracts from Three Lectures given for the

Ethics of Nature Society,

BY

C. W. SALEEBY, M.D., F.R.S.E.

WATTS & Co.,
17, JOHNSON'S COURT, FLEET STREET, LONDON.
1912.

PRICE 2d.

THE ETHICS OF NATURE

SOCIETY is an Association for the Harmonious Development of Life through the practice of Ethics based on the Laws of Nature, and for the Propagation of the truth that the history of Life in its evolution provides a complete justification for asserting that there is such a thing as the Ethics of Nature. Morality therefore has natural sanction and natural criteria.

B3119
N602

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

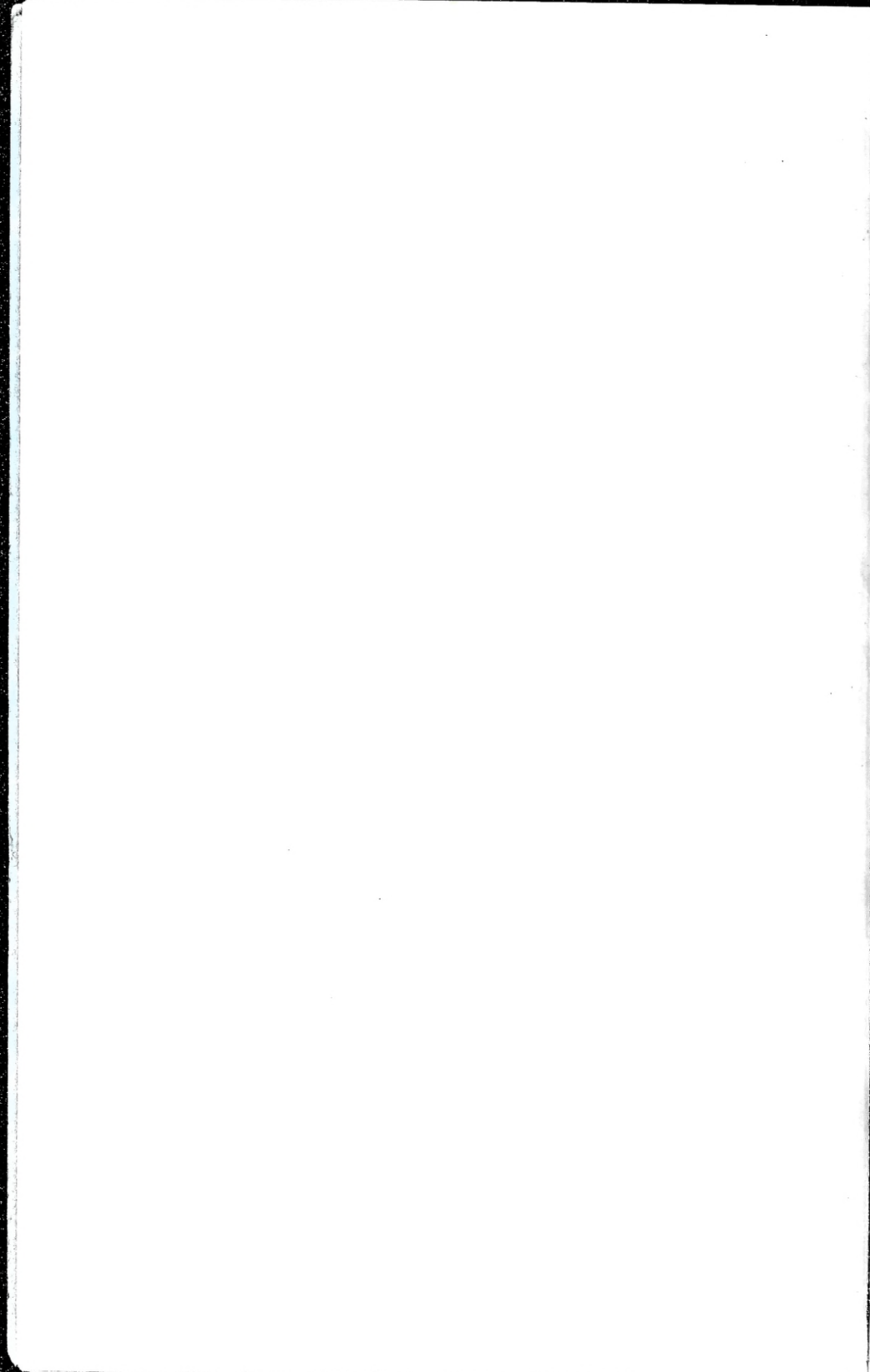
ETHICS OF NATURE SOCIETY.

NATURAL ETHICS

IN THEORY AND PRACTICE.

Extracts from Three Lectures given for the
ETHICS OF NATURE SOCIETY
BY
C. W. SALEEBY, M.D., F.R.S.E.

WATTS & Co.,
17, JOHNSON'S COURT, FLEET STREET, LONDON
1912.



THE ORIGIN OF MORALITY.

[Reprinted from the ETHICS OF NATURE REVIEW.]

Before turning to his subject for the evening, Dr. Saleeby spoke of the three delusions which are prevalent as to the origin of Morality—delusions which arise in part from a misunderstanding of the word Morality.

Of these three, the first and oldest is that Morality finds its basis either in some kind of authoritative power or definite law from on High (the Mosaic laws, the Koran, etc.), or in persons representative of someone to whom that power was given (the "divine right of Kings," the clergy, etc.). According to this delusion, Morality has no natural criterion, and cannot be judged by its effects, but by an authorised code of conduct only. The second delusion is that Morality has arisen without any definite cause or purpose, through Custom; and the third and most important, which is the common assertion of ecclesiasticism, is that there is no natural, spontaneous, inherent Morality in Man. Even John Stuart Mill, in his "Utilitarianism," lays it down that morals are not born in a man, but are acquired characteristics imposed on the individual by his surroundings, and having no root in his own nature—that man's is a purely selfish nature, acting by means of external pressure. It may be taken as an indication of the progress of the last five and twenty years, that this delusion is so rapidly dying out.

In turning to the true conception of the Origin of Morality, Dr. Saleeby gave a definition of the term which coincides entirely (as did indeed his lecture from first to last) with the views of the ETHICS OF NATURE SOCIETY, not only in sentiment, but in actual expression. "*Morality is that which makes for more life as against less, and for higher life as against lower.*" The definition grows clearest when we understand what Nature means by "higher" life.

Having definitely defined Morality in terms of life, we must turn for its history to the History of Life, which is purely

evolutionary. Past historians, past the history of churches, past human dogmas, we come down to the beginnings of Life as it must somehow have arisen on our planet. Already in the vegetable world, the marvellous structures devised by Nature for the nurture of the young plant, point to Morality, according to our definition, since they make for life. Passing to the animal world, as Herbert Spencer once said, in discussing the subject, even when the first single cell divided itself into two, there was the rude foreshadowing of Moral action—here was a being not wholly selfish.

Morality has thus its origin of origins in that great necessity of Life to reproduce itself—a necessity which arose in the presence and irrevocability of Death. The arrangements made in Nature for reproduction are connected from the first with Morality, and the sacrifices involved in the process increase steadily as the scale of life ascends.

Through the animal world, past the invertebrates, past the lower forms of vertebrates (fish, amphibia, birds) to the mammalia, from the duckmole and the kangaroo up to the remarkable monkey tribes, and thence to Human-kind, the scale of progress may be said to be uninterrupted. In due sequence with the general trend, the amount of care, labour, and life devoted by the parents (and especially by the mother) to the young, grows ever greater. More and more stress is laid on Morality, because there is more and more need for it.

From the historical level, we come to the level of positive interpretations, being confronted at the first with the query whether this Morality, which is an ever increasing thing in the history of Evolution, has arisen through a particular inclination of nature in that direction; and we conclude that this is undoubtedly not the case, since the natural law is universally the Darwinian law of the survival of the fittest—of those best suited to their particular time, environment, and circumstances.

Yet, though we see that Nature is strictly impartial, and will indifferently choose teeth and claws with murderous intent, or the most delicate of reproductive organs imposing absolute self-abnegation and personal risk, *it is always in so far as one or other makes for Life and Higher Life.* Nature's bias is vital, and Morality has consequently de-

veloped in Nature because of its superior survival value. Notwithstanding that Morality was handicapped from the first, it has won through by that value alone.

In order to appreciate what Morality has done for man, let us consider by what means a man survives in the world; not indeed by means of a defensive armour, nor by any offensive weapons, nor by reason of his strength or of his fleetness, but because of his Intellect, that great instrument of adaptability. And this instrument comes to him through Morality, since an intelligent being can only develop under maternal care, and will develop only as Morality continues to increase.

Morality is no invention of men, or of priests, or of amiable enthusiasts; it is the maker of man, and is as necessary to all further development as it has been necessary from the first to natural Evolution. Having existed from all time, being far older than mankind, and older in consequence than all churches and dogmas and creeds—Morality will doubtless survive them all.

NATURE AND ETHICS.

The subject is too large to be dealt with at all completely, and I propose expressing only my own attitude as a student of Nature, from the standpoint of the biologist. The subject, taken more narrowly, lies between Ethics and Biology, the Science of Life.

The biologist finds more particularly in the history of life, in its evolution, complete justification for asserting that there is such a thing as an Ethics of Nature; that Morality has natural sanction and natural criteria.

For Moral Education we generally have recourse to the method of former generations; we refer the questioning child, not to any ultimate sanction, but to an all-seeing and all-judging power; and in order to make our own commands complied with, we offer the old alternative of punishment and reward. So long as the right people are ruling, and so long as there is sufficient faith in the authoritative source which they plead, the problem is simple enough. But at such a time as this, when doubt is expressed not only as to what is right and what wrong, but even as to the actual existence of Right and Wrong at all, the matter of Moral Education and the moral basis is entirely changed, and become extremely complicated.

We no longer believe in the Fall of Man; we are beginning to understand the Ascent of Man. The fact is, we are clearly living in a moral interregnum; the original and older sanctions of morality have broken down; those who still profess them will be found to be acting in accordance with what we call "right," simply through their own nature, or custom and public opinion, and not by a real belief in the sanction which they assert.

We all know that there is a distinction between Right and Wrong; there are certain sentiments or instincts which do tell us, in crucial instances, how we should act, irrespective of rewards, irrespective of any sanction, irrespective of any thing outside ourselves. But this is not sufficient for all needs; we ask what moral anchorage there can be—not only what is right, but why it is right.

It is to meet this demand, to which Herbert Spencer gave expression in his "Data of Ethics," that some come forward to-day with what may be termed "Ethics of Life"—with what Ellen Key calls the Religion of Life. Her books are well worth reading; for hers is no mystic confession or creed, she simply lays down certain ideas, certain plans, for personal and universal conduct, which she refers to as the Religion of Life. She believes, as the Ethics of Nature Society does, that in Life and its laws are detailed information and direction as to what is right and wrong.

Professor Bergson's Philosophy of Life strengthens this theory immeasurably. He has, from his standpoint as a student of Biology, a clear feeling that in the very facts of Life are to be found certain data on which to build a moral code. It is extremely difficult to refer to facts of Nature without seeming to give implication of design, purpose, or intent. Looking at the facts of the living world (in both low and high forms of life), there is distinctly a "thrust" or impetus (as Bergson has it, an "*élan vital*") which seeks to achieve more life. This seems to me a perfectly just statement. Whether Life is to be considered as an almost conscious Entity, striving to realise its own partly idealised purposes, as our individual lives do, we can hardly say. But it certainly does appear so. Life is, above all, says Prof. Bergson, "a tendency to act on inert matter"—reminding one of certain biologists who have argued that life looks as if it were seeking to turn as much lifeless matter as possible into living matter. This argument of Bergson reminds one also of two passages in Shelley's "Adonais":

"Through wood and stream and field and hill and ocean
A quickening life from the Earth's heart has burst."
. . . "the one Spirit's plastic stress
Sweeps through the dull dense world, compelling there
All new successions to the forms they wear."

It is as though Life were something behind Matter, striving to express itself; it is as if that plan which Tennyson sums up as "More Life and fuller" were the purpose of living Nature. Above all, this may be seen in contemplating the history of Life. First of all we see no life at all, then we find traces of very simple life, and finally life as we know it to-day; through all the process there seems an almost irresist-

ible desire of Life to multiply, to magnify, to intensify itself. This is shown not only in the life of the individual, but in those ulterior purposes for which more and more the individual appears to be designed, and to which more and more he is devoted.

We are all acquainted with the great paradox of Weismannism, that the individual exists only for the race, to be the host of the immortal germ-plasm, so that all bodies are simply designed for the making of more life in the future, for parenthood, for the enhancement of life, and, above all, for its intensive culture—the making of forms less numerous, but with greater intensity of what may be called the living flame.

This view, which is more and more justified, is the biological statement of the functions of the individual as designed (if I may use the word) throughout all the process of evolution less for its own life's sake than for the making of more life, widespread. Of that age-long process we are the product.

What, then, of that aspect of living Nature which has been regarded as nearly murderous, not only as non-moral, but actually as anti-moral?

John Stuart Mill spoke of living Nature as a "slaughter house"; Tennyson pictured Nature "red in tooth and claw." We are all aware of the destruction of life, full-grown or immature, in the processes of Nature; many forms of life are designed to do murder, are ruthless instruments for death. Can the proposition of Nature's desire for Life and Morality be compatible with the enormous amount of futile death we see on all hands, and with the construction of creatures designed to give death? Certainly it can!

In the first place, when we point to the destruction and worse than waste amongst the immature (animals, fish, seeds, etc.), we forget that those who are destroyed serve for the food and life of other—largely of higher—forms. The waste is only apparent. We should first have looked to the causes of death before we called it so. If a fish produces one million eggs yearly, and perhaps only two reach maturity to replace their parents, it does not follow that there has been meaningless, futile murders of the others; for they have gone to serve Nature in another way, by giving food to other species.

Nature sets out to make more life and fuller; not to destroy. Animals that hunt and kill for their food possess teeth and claws which, though instruments of murder on the one hand, on closer inspection prove to be instruments for life, since by them life is sustained. This comment may to some extent remove the existing doubt whether Nature affords a sanction for moral conduct.

Moral conduct is that which makes for more life; and since Life is to be measured in terms of quality as well as in terms of quantity, we must make the further proviso that Nature works for intenser (we may safely say for higher) forms; that is, for more life confined in a narrower space. The tendency to subsist for that belief, to evolve from that, and to move upon that, forms the basis of the Ethics of Nature Society. Moral conduct on these lines will be either that which makes for more life as against less, or that which makes for higher life as against lower.

Lack of time prevents me from attempting, this evening, to meet, or even to name, all the difficulties which the subject brings up; they will be dealt with at future lectures, but I do want to repeat that if any of you think this is a thing to look into, you should read Bergson's "Creative Evolution," and Ellen Key's "Love and Marriage" (the book has an unfortunate title, but the moral and social conduct which she derives from that theory which it is difficult to avoid calling the Purpose of Life, is extremely valuable). These books I recommend to be read in association with M. Deshumbert's "The Ethics of Nature," which is entirely devoted to the statement of our present thesis.

The new theory of Morality, and of the nature of Morality, is based more and more on Biology, relying greatly upon the facts of our natural instincts, especially the parental instinct, and their function. Thus Dr. Mercier, of the Charing Cross Hospital, in his new book, "Conduct and its Disorders," has come to look at conduct from the point of view of Biology, and to controvert the old, wildly delusive doctrine that in man the instincts have disappeared, and that in place of instincts he has intelligence. Intelligence is not a motor, it is a pilot, and if we really had lost our instincts we should sit like Job motionlessly contemplating life, instead of which

we move and do. The springs of our conduct are those very instincts which a few years ago we were said not to possess. On all this subject, Dr. McDougall is the master and pioneer, in his "Social Psychology."

We possess just such instincts as animals in their essential nature, and they underlie all our emotions. Thus the emotion of wonder is the subjective side of what we call the instinct of curiosity. The parental instinct is correlative in us with "tender emotion." The more you examine the parental instinct, whether it be exhibited in actual, or foster, or non-parents, the more you see that it is the source of all the actions which, consciously or unconsciously, you and I call moral, or good, or right. You find it in the mother who lives, and if need be dies, for her child; you find it in the old maid with her cats; you find it in the doctor with his patient. Psychologists have argued that parental instinct is what I may call anticipatory gratitude; it is nothing of the kind. It is an instinctive feeling for life which is young or is in need, and which we can help; and it is by no means confined to our own species (where reward in some form might be anticipated), but is shown in other species, not self-conscious, which cannot anticipate future repayment. There is good reason to suppose that if you fuse this instinct with others in our nature, you will produce those qualities which we call moral. The ultimate justification for believing that these acts are moral, is that somehow or other they serve (or will, or can serve) the general life; we recognise in them, at least, an element of life-saving. It may be only serving an idea, it may be serving only one particular class. My particular cause for existence is to serve Eugenics, on the theory that we can do most for the general life by devoting our energies to the life that is still unborn.

A final question arises if one desires to make converts either for Eugenics or for the Ethics of Nature Society: the old question of "What has posterity done for me?" or, in the words of Shylock: "On what compulsion must I; tell me that." There is, of course, no obvious profit, and no obvious reason, but what does the astronomer ask, who spends his life in amassing stellar data which, in perhaps five hundred years or so, but not till then, will be of immense cosmological value?

We cannot promise on this theory any direct reward to be gained, but it will, nevertheless, be involved in the truth that virtue is its own reward. That is to say, if there be in any one of us a native, ineradicable instinct which is essentially parental, a vital instinct, a desire to serve life, we will get out of it just that same satisfaction which follows when we yield to the prompting of any other instincts, whose satisfaction satisfies them. Just as in the case of the astronomer, the labour given and the knowledge one day to be gained—so here, the life one day to be made or saved—these are the involved reward. Beyond such reward as this, the Religion of Life or the Ethics of Nature has none to offer. But has any other Religion or Creed the warrant to offer more; and is not this enough?

NATURAL ETHICS AND EUGENICS.

Reprinted from the ETHICS OF NATURE REVIEW.]

The object of this lecture was to show that the practical principles of Eugenics are not only compatible with, but are the actual outcome of the moral evolution described in the first lecture, and to explain the theory and practice of Eugenics in their relation to human life.

"By Eugenics I understand the project of making the highest human beings possible." The chief factors in this process, as especially named by Sir Francis Galton are "Nature and Nurture." The Eugenics which concerns itself with the natural or hereditary causes, is called by Dr. Saleeby the primary factor. The nurtural or environmental takes the place of secondary factor. This is inverting the customary order, where environment is generally represented as answering most, if not the whole of the question. But although neither of the factors could stand without the other, Eugenists on biological grounds insist that environment is distinctly secondary.

Primary Eugenics must again be separately defined and subdivided. From the point of view of heredity it is evident that—assuming the existence of this fact—parenthood must be encouraged on the part of the worthy. This is the first aim of the Eugenist, and goes by the name of *Positive Eugenics*. Secondly, it is quite evident that the converse of Positive Eugenics must be to discourage parenthood on the part of the unworthy. This is known as *Negative Eugenics*. And thirdly, the Eugenics which stands between healthy stocks and those prime causes of degeneration generally understood to-day under the name of racial poisons, the Eugenics, in short, which strives to keep the worthy worthy, is termed *Preventive Eugenics*.

Now as regards the relation of Eugenics to the theory and practice of Natural Ethics, Positive Eugenics, in the first place, is a process evidently approved by Nature, being simply the process of natural selection by which those beings who

are capable of reproducing their species survive and multiply. Only one point arises here, which has to be met: there are some Eugenists (and Mr. Bernard Shaw is amongst the number) who propose that this business of encouraging parenthood on the part of the worthy should be carried out by the abolition of marriage. Marriage—and more especially monogamous marriage—is strictly in keeping with the principles of the Ethics of Nature Society, being conducive, not to most life as concerns a high birth-rate, but certainly to most life as concerns a low death-rate. Also, marriage makes the father responsible psychologically and socially for his children; this aspect of monogamy has to be considered. Positive Eugenics will endeavour to work through marriage, which is a natural institution far older than any decree or church, and to improve it for the Eugenic purpose. The chief method of Positive Eugenics to-day, is education for parenthood. The education of the young should be from the very start a preparation for parenthood, and should not cease, as it now most commonly does, at that time when it is most needed; namely, at the age of adolescence.

Negative Eugenics certainly has a natural sanction. Natural selection might with equal truth be called Natural rejection. Now the question arises, are we to apply the principle of Natural Rejection to mankind, with the object of preventing the parenthood of the unworthy? It would certainly appear to be a natural proceeding. But here the Ethics of Nature Society says: We are not to kill, on the contrary, we are to fight for those who cannot fight for themselves; whereas Nature says these are to be exterminated.

This apparent opposition between the natural and the moral course of action was dwelt upon at some length by Huxley, in his Romanes Lecture, on "Evolution and Ethics." In this lecture he describes cosmic evolution as being a ruthless process where life advances by means of a general slaughter, and where it is merely a case of "each for himself and the devil take the hindmost." Moral evolution, he said, is the absolute antithesis to the natural; Moral evolution is the care of the hindmost, and necessitates at all times a course exactly opposite to the model we have in Nature. There are different opinions as to Huxley's reasons for expressing himself in this

unjustifiable manner on a subject which he was obviously viewing at the time in a totally false light. And perhaps the simplest and clearest of all explanations is that this very Lecture was written at a period of unfortunate estrangement between Herbert Spencer and Huxley, and may have been meant deliberately to set at defiance the principles and tenets of Herbert Spencer, who maintained that "there is a natural evolutionary basis for Ethics."

Darwin, in his *Origin of Species*, confesses that we keep alive numbers of persons who, by natural selection, would certainly have been exterminated; but, he adds, in this case we cannot follow the natural model. And there Darwin left it; there was this antinomy between the "natural" course and man's higher nature, and although it was obviously a wrong thing to let the degenerate multiply, Darwin felt that we must be content to let him multiply, because we are under a moral obligation to keep him alive.

There are Eugenists who want us to throw moral evolution overboard, as being mere sentimentalism, and to go straight for the destruction of the unfit by means of exposing degenerate babies, as the Spartans did, by means of lethal chambers, and by reverting to all the horrors of our grandfathers' time, the gallows, chains, and death by starvation for the feeble-minded. These are the Eugenists who take the sacred name of Eugenics in vain. Eugenics has nothing to do with killing anybody at any stage of life whatever. Human life, such as it may be, is a sacred thing, and cannot be treated with contempt at any stage whatever of its development. What the Eugenist may do, however, is this, he may distinguish between the right to live and the right to become a parent. And this is the simple solution which both Huxley and Darwin missed. In this simple solution the antinomy which both Huxley and Darwin saw between cosmic and moral evolution disappears.

Negative Eugenics is going to proceed, first of all, along the lines of killing nobody, and secondly, of taking care of the unfit under the best possible conditions. The distinction between the process of natural selection and the process advocated by Eugenists, might be put thus: Eugenics replaces a selective death-rate by a selective birth-rate. From the

point of view of philosophy and the Ethics of Nature Society, this course of action furnishes the solution of the apparent antinomy between cosmic and natural evolution.

Passing to the third division of Eugenics, it seems that whilst we try to encourage parenthood on the part of the worthy, and to discourage it on the part of the unworthy, we must be prepared also to oppose the degradation of healthy stocks through contact with, or as a result of, racial poisons.

Of these poisonous agencies, there are some which we are certain of; how many there may be that are yet unknown remains to be proved. Alcohol, lead, arsenic, phosphorus, and one or two diseases are decidedly transmissible to the future, commonly by direct transference from parent to offspring. These are the poisons which Eugenists must fight against, and they are false to their creed and to their great mission, if they fail to do all they can to root them out. The chief, most urgent, most important task seems to be to interfere with maternal alcoholism.

Eugenics has nothing to do with decrying attempts to improve environment. But unfortunately many Eugenists have merely taken it up as an alternative programme to social reform; also, in these same hands, it has become a new instrument for the resurrection of snobbery, on the totally unwarranted view that certain classes, sections, or sets of society are biologically or innately superior to others. No one has yet adduced evidence to prove that what we call the "better" classes are naturally better, though they certainly are better looking, better fed, better rested. Nor has it yet been ascertained what would be the results of giving the food and sleep of the better, to the lower class children. Nurtural advantages are responsible for most of, if not all, the physical superiority of the upper as against the lower classes.

As to psychological superiority, evidence is absolutely nil. It is said that a man's way of spending his leisure gives the man in his true light; and judging by the way in which the "upper" classes spend their spare time, there is certainly no indication of superiority.

Eugenics must not be taken as an alternative to providing the needful factors for a child, born or unborn. Only that society is truly moral and well organised which makes

provision for every child. Adequate provision and adequate nurture for every child, would be no great tax on our purses, for it would bring as a natural consequence the abolition of many prisons, hospitals, and asylums. It is curious that, whilst it is not Socialism to spend money on hospitals for the care of tuberculous, rickety, or otherwise diseased children, it is Socialism to spend a fraction of this money on those children at an earlier stage of their lives; though it is obviously much cleaner, cheaper, and pleasanter to follow this method, than to continue in our present method of vainly attempting to cure what might and should have been prevented.

In closing, Dr. Saleeby added that he considered the Eugenic programme to consort completely with the canons of the Ethics of Nature Society.