

article

Ethical Dimensions of Yousheng (Healthy Birth or Eugenics*): The Perspective of a Chinese Ethicist

Kailin Tang

Professor and Director
Hunan Normal University, Changsha, China

Abstract

Yousheng meaning eugenics or healthy-birth and youyu meaning good-upbringing are necessary requirements for the development of human beings and therefore of humankind generally. There are enormous ethical issues involved in eugenics. An important task or calling of contemporary bioethics and ethics of population is to discuss these issues in order for people, even people in different countries and cultures, to reach some basic consensus and have practical ethical guidance. Based on the practice of yousheng in contemporary China, this paper offers a Chinese perspective on ethical dimensions of eugenics. It will argue that individuals, as members of society, have a duty to provide society with healthy and normal children. Moreover, this paper examines the relationships between the aim and the means and conflicts between collective value and individual value, in yousheng.

The word 'eugenics' was first put forward by Francis Galton in 1883 (Galton 2001). Its original meanings were 'giving birth to healthy children' or 'hereditary health'. One of Galton's basic proposals was for men to marry selected spouses to reduce the incidence of individuals with bad genetic elements and so improve the quality of the population. Modern eugenics holds that there are two ways to improve and enhance genetic health: first, by preventing and reducing the birth of physically and mentally disabled infants; second by increasing

the birth of physically and mentally fit infants. Although what are usually called 'negative eugenics' and 'positive eugenics' differ in approach, their fundamental goals and intrinsic values are common or similar, viz. to seek benign scientific methods to improve the general physical and mental quality of humankind. Therefore there are rich moral dimensions in modern eugenics. As a result, an important task for contemporary bioethics and the ethics of population is to discuss these issues in order for people in different cultures and countries to seek some basic consensus and ethical guidance.

* Editorial Footnote

The Chinese term *yousheng* is usually taken to translate into the term eugenics. Literally *yougeng* means 'healthy at birth', which is close to Galton's original understanding of the term. There is literature to question whether we should translate *yousheng* as eugenics. Please refer to papers, which call it good birth, and argue against the term eugenics. e.g. Doering, O. (1998). China and Eugenics – preliminary remarks concerning the structure and impact of a problem of international bioethics. In N Fujiki, & D Macer (eds.), *Bioethics in Asia* (pp.86-91). Christchurch: Eubios Ethics Institute; Doering, O. (1988). Eugenics and China: Where is the ethical problem? *Eubios Journal of Asian and International Bioethics*, 8:3, pp.114-5. For further discussion of eugenics in China, see Dikotter, F (1998). *Imperfect Conceptions: Medical knowledge, birth defects, and eugenics in China*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Yousheng (healthy birth or eugenics) is a necessary requirement for both the development of individual human beings and of humankind in general. It facilitates progress in human civilisation. Current Chinese birth control programmes include two major aims: to contain the quantity, and to improve the quality of the population. The official slogan for achieving these aims includes: 'wanhun (late marriage), wanyu (late childbearing), and *yousheng* (healthy birth), *youyu* (good

childrearing)'. According to the official statement *yousheng* includes premarital medical examination, requirement for a permit to reproduce, prenatal diagnosis and screening, and care during pregnancy and birth. These practices are carried out under the 'guidelines' of the state and with the 'consent' of the individual. Based on the practice of *yousheng* in contemporary China, this paper offers a Chinese perspective on the ethical dimensions of eugenics. It will argue that individuals, as members of society, have a duty to provide society with healthy, normal children. Moreover the paper examines the relationships between means and ends and collective value and individual value in *yousheng*.

The Relationship Between Freedom and Responsibility in Eugenics

The first ethical question is whether contemporary humankind has a responsibility or duty to promote and carry out eugenic programmes. If there is such a responsibility how should it be defined? Human responsibility is closely related to the capacity to choose and the scope of human choices. To define responsibility we must ask about freedom. As we are now able to engage in eugenics in an informed scientific way we carry the responsibility for our choice either to engage or not to engage with such programmes.

But what is freedom? Freedom of action is the human 'capacity to decide by means of the knowledge of things' (Marx and Engels, 1972, p.154). In human reproduction the exercise of freedom involves knowledge of the 'necessity' of the laws of human life, including laws of genetics. Freedom of will in practicing eugenics is the exercise of the human capacity deliberately to apply genetic knowledge. Obviously humankind has only recently acquired this capacity or freedom. Following long term explorations we have discovered the primary secret of life and, in discovering the 'necessity' in genetic laws, we have obtained greater freedom in choosing to reproduce better offspring. This new knowledge is accompanied by recent advances in assisted reproduction, birth control and genetic diagnostics. This indicates that it no longer needs to be the case that humankind reproduces merely from instinct, by submitting to the will of heaven and fate, or to the whims of nature. The evolution and improvement of humankind can, henceforward, be more directly influenced by the efforts of humankind itself. As a result, given this new range of possible actions, we are responsible for their deployment or rejection.

The production of children has long been seen as a sacred and weighty responsibility. However traditional morals emphasised merely the responsibilities of birth and the rearing and education of offspring (Zhang and Li, 1990, pp.151-166), but not the responsibility to employ *yousheng* (eugenics). This does not mean that ancient people lacked a sense of responsibility. Rather they lacked the range of choice in reproduction open to us. This new knowledge brings new responsibilities for humankind because eugenics provides a means of preventing the deterioration of the human race and the opportunity to improve the quality of the population. Thus, it might be argued, we have a duty to employ these means.

In fulfilling this duty we shall encounter difficulties. For example, in some situations it is still difficult to determine whether the physical and mental incapacity of an individual is the result of genetic factors. This indicates that our freedom in reproduction might grow even more. For the sake of the future of humankind we have a duty to continue exploration and search for this higher degree of freedom in modes of reproduction. But we should be cautious in making policies and strive to make secure choices. For example, we should not limit carelessly the freedom to reproduce of people with physical or mental disabilities or with low intelligence, when we have not discovered a genetic explanation for their condition. But we should not rule out the possibility if such knowledge is gained. Great care is called for in determining the limits of responsibility. It would be wrong to put all people who give birth to children with genetic diseases into the category of people who lack a sense of responsibility in reproduction.

To emphasise and define eugenic responsibility we must be clear about the actual possibilities and range of eugenics. Although it is folly in modern times to attribute the birth of children with inherited deformities to the 'will of God' or fate it would also be folly to exaggerate the scope of eugenic freedom and think that, with modern knowledge and technologies, people are able to give birth to whatever kind of children they wish. It is understandable that people want to apply the power of science and modern technology to give birth to children with ideal standards in personality, physique, intelligence, emotional and physiological features. But this is impossible in reality. From the angle of positive eugenics, even though research has achieved some important breakthroughs and humankind has obtained the capacity and freedom to begin to control and change its natural features, social and personality features are another matter altogether.

The improvement of human social individual characteristics and spiritual quality depends mainly on the success of 'social environmental engineering' and 'social educational engineering'. From the angle of negative eugenics, even though humankind may obtain the capacity to prevent the spread of a harmful gene completely, it would still be impossible to avoid the birth of those with physical and mental disability altogether. It is also impossible to avoid completely the birth of such babies by means of better techniques of reproduction. Besides genetic factors which might cause physical and mental disabilities there are others such as environmental factors. Genetic factors might also be only contributory causes of disability. As a result eugenics, with its focus on the genetic factors, is limited in its scope and possibilities. Human freedom in procuring healthy births is thus relative and limited.

The focus of eugenics, as the capacity to choose in reproduction, is mainly a kind of 'collective freedom of will'. Thus eugenic responsibility is not simply the responsibility of the individual, but rather the responsibility of humankind as a whole – the responsibility of modern humankind for future humankind. A certain society or country might set up laws on healthy birth and promote the 'freedom of healthy birth'. For individuals the freedom to opt for healthy birth does not amount to having the capacity to choose the quality of offspring independently. Rather they would possess the necessary material conditions to have choices in reproduction and so realise their wish for healthy birth. If the society provides individuals with the essential conditions of achieving healthy birth then they have the responsibility to avail themselves of those facilities. It is their social responsibility and duty to actively seek healthy birth. That is to say, each individual as a member of humankind has a responsibility to provide normal and healthy children as far as is possible. If individuals voluntarily follow the policies or laws of the state on healthy birth by submitting to pre-marital examination, genetic screening and counselling, and prenatal diagnosis and commit themselves to deciding whether to reproduce or not according to the results of these procedures, then they might be said to be behaving morally and responsibly. If not they might be criticised from a moral point of view.

The Relationship Between Aims and Means in Morality

As already indicated, the role of society in promoting genetics is to enhance the physical and mental quality of the population and

to improve the general genetic quality of humankind. Having achieved some ability to carry out eugenics humankind has a responsibility to strive to achieve the aims of eugenics. The fundamental task of eugenics research is to discover possible scientific methods of realising this aim. This inevitably raises the following questions: Should absolutely any means that can be discovered to achieve this end be used? What safeguards should be sought and put in place in realising the aims of eugenics? What steps in realising these aims are ethically acceptable? These questions about the relationship of between aims and means are ethically important in the discussion of eugenics.

In ethics, generally speaking, the relationship between aims and means is in essence the question of the justification of means. So it is in ethical discussions of eugenics. Do the means merely facilitate the aims? I should be admitted that if certain means can be used to serve the specific demands of a justifiable aim this is just one aspect of their ethical justification. In the ethical justification of a means there is another important element, viz. the need to accord with values which lie beyond the realisation of the aim. We know that in human life there are many values which can come into tension with each other. The means that can be employed to achieve a desired end may, in themselves, be of negative value. As a result it often happens that the method used to solve one problem becomes the cause of another. Therefore, when we choose the means to realise a certain aim if we only target the aim itself and ignore other values we might find ourselves denying values which are fundamentally important to us. Obviously we should strenuously seek to avoid such an outcome. It is therefore correct to assume that the dictum 'the end justifies the means' is morally unacceptable. Justifiable aims must be combined with ethically justifiable means.

With regard to eugenics, the criteria for evaluating means are as follows: first, the means will achieve the aim of preventing the spread of harmful genes in the population; second, the means must not threaten other fundamental values and human interests in society. That is, in summary, eugenic programmes should produce net benefit to humankind and in so doing they should not undermine fundamental human values.

The possible means of promoting eugenics can therefore be classified into three categories. First, means that can prevent the spread of harmful genes and enhance the genetic quality of the population, but destroy the most basic social and moral

values, result in a loss of human rights and threaten the value of life for a great number of people. For example, it might be effective but it would be totally inhumane to put all physically and mentally disabled people into prison or subject them to a programme of euthanasia. This would not only destroy the ideals of human life but it would also bring about serious social problems and, finally, undermine the eugenic programme. Second the means employed might achieve the goals of eugenics and basically satisfy the first criterion yet be used improperly, or without controls. This could be productive of further social problems or harms to other human values. For example, genetic prenatal diagnosis can examine the health status of the foetus and reveal its gender. If this kind of knowledge is employed without control it could lead to the serious consequences of an unbalanced sex ratio in a region or a whole country. Or again, as a result of genetic screening it might be decided to prohibit people with serious genetic diseases from reproducing. But to ignore the right of these individuals to decide for themselves by means of compulsory sterilisation would deprive them of many civil liberties. This would not only damage the principle of human rights but it might also bring about intense anti-social behaviours or social turmoil. Therefore in employing means of eugenics controls would be called for in their application. Third, the means might satisfy the first two criteria but might still threaten some individual people's interests and quality of life. Examples could include selective marriage, selective age of reproduction, and selective abortion. Yet means that fall into the latter two categories must be employed in any programme of eugenics.

There are two kinds of means which eugenics can employ: social and technical measures. The ethical issues in choosing social measures are mainly concerned with the nature of the measure chosen. The ethical issues in technical measures are concerned both with the value and scope of the employment of the measure. Therefore there should be different approaches in choosing social and technical means. In choosing social measures the emphasis should be given to the avoidance of both the employment of force to destroy unhealthy human beings in order to control the spread of harmful genes, and threats to the liberty and dignity of individuals. At the same time some necessary limitation should be imposed on the wilfulness of individuals, some individual responsibilities be set up, some methods of reward and punishment be adopted and some suitable social supervision be carried out.

In choosing technical measures the emphasis should first be given to the avoidance of harm to human life and threats to its safety. Second, measures should be avoided which do not produce net benefits and exceed what society can tolerate. Third, it should be ensured that serious social consequences which could result from uncontrolled applications of the means are avoided, though not so as to exclude the employment of these technical eugenic measures. As a general principle priority should be given to those measures involving the least harm, lowest cost and greatest efficiency. Finally, society as a whole should design and adopt the series of measures which are structured to function best to produce the greatest social benefits.

Nevertheless, whilst we emphasise the ethical justification of the application of eugenics, this does not mean that we must only employ those means which have no undesirable side-effects or which are acceptable to everyone. It is understandable for people to wish for such an ideal. But this wish is neither realistic nor sensible. We know that eugenics itself means the exclusion and rejection of inferior individuals. It will involve therefore some conflict with various interests, needs, ideas, and wishes of a great number of people. Some of these will have to pay a price in its application, resulting in some social problems. Since the technological interventions are a kind of material force which impacts on human beings it is impossible to rule out undesirable side-effects altogether. To employ these technical means will thus inevitably have some undesirable social consequences. If we wait for the day when means are discovered which have no ill effects and are acceptable to all we shall have to endure the resulting deterioration of the general genetic quality of humankind and the suffering produced by genetic diseases as well as having to pay a heavy social price as a consequence. Thus adoption of the aims of eugenics is hardly optional though there will be limits to the measures which we choose to employ. We therefore have the stark choice between the sacrifices of some in the application of eugenics on the one hand and the healthy future of humankind on the other.

Conflicts of Values in Eugenics

In this section we shall discuss the issues of conflicts of values in a number of preventive eugenic measures: the selection of marriage partners; the choice of reproductive age; the prohibition of patients with genetic disease to marry; selective abortion. These often involve conflicts between social values

and individual values, or, correspondingly, between social controls and individual freedoms. Regulating this kind of conflict of values is an important moral task. From the angle of the needs to carry out a programme of healthy birth the resolution of such conflicts would facilitate the best realisation of the programme.

Conflicts of Values in Regulation of Marriage

According to both the principles of eugenics and the individual wish for healthy birth it should be prohibited for close relations to marry. Research has proven that reproduction between close relatives is a cause of births of individuals with genetic diseases and inherited deformities which lead to a decline of the genetic quality of the population (Tian, Lu and Cai, 1987, pp. 286-287). However in the vast countryside of China there are still close relatives who incline to marry on the false assumption that the 'marriage of close relatives makes people even closer'. All this is in conflict with eugenics. Generally speaking, the basic ethical approach to this conflict is that individuals should not be allowed to marry close relatives but should rather place the interests of society before their individual needs. In applying this solution society should seek to persuade the individuals concerned, so that the choice of eugenics would be autonomous. However, in the last analysis such marriages should be made illegal.

Conflicts of Values in Fixing an Age of Reproduction

Eugenic research indicates that for women to reproduce at non-appropriate times is another cause of bad reproductive consequences (Beijing College of Education, 1982, pp. 298-299). For this reason our society seeks to promote reproduction at appropriate ages. Individuals usually wish to choose to reproduce at the best age. But this wish is often in conflict with other individual interests and career development. Career orientated women face the conflict between fulfilling the social duty to ensure the healthy birth of their children and fulfilling other social duties or sometimes between the aims of eugenics and their own pleasure. For working women the conflict is usually between the requirements of eugenics on the one hand and family economic conditions or their own pleasure on the other. There are two ethical ways to resolve these conflicts. First, whenever other social duties conflict with the duty to reproduce at the appropriate age, in principle the former should be secondary to the latter. This should not preclude possible exceptional cases. Second, whenever demands of individual pleasure and other duties to family conflict with the duty to

reproduce at an appropriate age, one should subject the former to the latter. However society should not intervene coercively to ensure this.

Conflicts of Value in the Prohibition of Reproduction

According to the principles of eugenics, individuals who suffer from serious genetic diseases should have their rights to reproduce limited even to the point of being prohibited from reproducing. The most exhaustive method of achieving this would be compulsory sterilisation of these people. For such people the right to marry and the right to reproduce would be divided. Such interference is not what these people usually want. This presents a dilemma to policy makers: either to prohibit those people from reproducing for the sake of the genetic health of the population or allow the spread of harmful genes which would harm the genetic health of the population. In the face of this dilemma quite a few Chinese and foreign experts in eugenics and ethics (Qiu, 1987, pp. 101-103) advocate the sacrifice of the reproductive and even sexual freedoms of carriers of harmful genes for the benefit of the improvement of the genetic structure and quality of the population. Nowadays quite a few countries have laws and policies to prohibit such individuals from reproducing and prohibit the marriage of patients with serious genetic diseases and serious mental illness. This value choice is seen as necessary and is morally acceptable. However when making such a choice a society must make every effort to fulfil the following: first, make the social decision become the autonomous consciousness of the individuals in that society by means of thorough practical education and persuasion; second provide the individuals with the necessary social compensations, including necessary pensions and services; third, maintain the other rights of those individuals, rights such as equality, freedom and dignity and assist them with their self-realisation. Ideally these unfortunate people, as carriers of harmful genes, should voluntarily accept the social demands of eugenics and give up their right to reproduce. Nevertheless, for those who are able to give birth to normal offspring by means of selective reproduction, society should create conditions which enable them to procreate. For example, if the male of the couple has a genetic disease IVF should be made available to help the couple reproduce employing donor sperm. For those couples where both partners carry harmful genes but are able to give birth to normal offspring by the application of selection of pre-embryos society should create services and provide the opportunity for them to produce

normal offspring. In this way the eugenic programme will be promoted and the happiness of individuals ensured as far as is possible.

Conflicts of Values in Selective Abortion

Generally speaking, pregnant women with foetuses which have been diagnosed with serious genetic disease should follow the requirement of eugenics and have selected termination of those pregnancies to prevent the birth of babies with serious genetic disease. However, these foetuses are not simply human tissue, they have a special status amongst biological life. People thus face difficult conflicts when these sad situations develop and they are offered abortion services. On the one hand there are the demands of family and society to avoid the burden of a damaged child, the social demands of enhancing the genetic health of the population and the inability to provide the possibility of an independent and worthwhile life on the part of the child. On the other hand, is the value of the life of the foetus. In choosing the former one will terminate the pregnancy and deny the value of life of the foetus. In choosing the latter one will allow and even assist the birth of the foetus. The sound ethical approach should be to reject the latter and choose the former, for the value of family and society is higher than the value of the seriously impaired foetus. The misfortunes which result from the birth of seriously impaired infants are greater than those associated with terminating the gestational process. Moreover, the misfortunes associated with terminating the gestational process are smaller than those the child would face after its birth. Therefore to carry out selective abortion of a foetus with serious deformities benefits family and society and avoids suffering of the disabled child. The opposite moral view is not sound and should be questioned.

Conflicts of Values and Impaired Infants

Due to the failure of prevention and the influence of other disadvantageous factors, some infants with inherited deformities and genetic diseases will be born no matter what. Among these infants some will be seriously impaired and will die without life saving treatment. If the necessary treatment and medical care are given the infant might continue to live. What should be done in such cases? Should the children be allowed to die naturally or should we provide euthanasia for them? Or should we intervene with all the panoply of high tech treatments we now have available? Here is another

dilemma. In providing care and treatment not only will parents, family and society bear an enormous material and emotional burden but the infants themselves will have to endure the suffering entailed by both their disease and their treatment, and even so might still die quickly. Denying treatment and care and allowing them to die naturally or unnaturally seems to be a rejection of the value and right to life of these infants threatening the views held by many of the sacredness of human life. In the face of this dilemma a few bioethicists (e.g., see Engelhardt 1996, pp. 282-288) hold the view that, with the consent of the parents, the child should be allowed or enabled to die. We feel that this is a sound view which modern people should adopt. Certainly the consent of parents should be obtained before euthanasia is contemplated. What of damaged children who would survive given normal treatment, is it permissible to deny this to the child patient for the purposes of benefiting society and family? Parents find such choices very difficult to make and this will probably continue to be so. But if we face a situation in the future in which the genetic quality of humankind has so seriously deteriorated as to threaten fundamentally its well being or even its existence then such choices might be easier. In these circumstances it might be more evident that they are morally necessary. Nevertheless such a terrible day could be avoided if we carefully employ eugenics from now on.

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