

The Genocide of Mental Disability:
An examination of the fine line between preventative medicine and
genocidal eugenics

Introduction

Whatever the technical definition of genocide may be, it manifests itself in action as the elimination of those groups seen as “undesirable”. Mental disability is a condition that is seen as undesirable, and there exists a group of people that have mental disabilities. In this paper I will try to argue that humanity is participating in a genocide of the congenitally mentally disabled. After establishing a definition of genocide I will work to show that a group of people I will call “the mentally disabled” are a group of people that is vulnerable to genocide. I will then; by pointing to prenatal medicine, abortion, and some older examples of (passive) killing, try to show that our actions toward this group of people are genocidal in nature. My intention here is not to be flippant with the topic of genocide, nor is it an appeal to change the way we perform medicine. Rather, I wish to explore the nature of undesirable attributes, how they inform our actions and perceptions of other groups of people, and illuminate the dubious nature of the commendable yet risky motivation to improve the human condition.

Definition

Genocide is understandably an emotionally charged word. It is one of the greatest evils known to man, and its wickedness persists like a miasma of pain for all those touched by its darkness. To divorce the word from its effects may be imprudent, but in the interest of philosophical analysis, a reasoned characterization of the act of genocide is required. The term genocide was coined in 1944 by a man named Raphael Lemkin and derived from the Greek word *genos* (race, tribe) and the Latin word *cide* (killing). Its first usage in *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe* included this explanatory passage.

By 'genocide' we mean the destruction of an ethnic group . . . Generally speaking, genocide does not necessarily mean the immediate destruction of a nation, except when accomplished by mass killings of all members of a nation. It is intended rather to signify a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of

essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves. . . Genocide is directed against the national group as an entity, and the actions involved are directed against individuals, not in their individual capacity, but as members of the national group.

This more inclusive definition is useful because it captures the entire scope of the devastating effects of genocide. Loss of life via mass homicide is what we typically envision when we think of genocide, but in some instances, homicide by one group of people against another may simply be considered war. Lemkin's definition shows why genocide is different, and why it is much worse. One characteristic of this definition that will be important to note, is that it is possible for a genocide to occur without any loss of life. Other definitions may help motivate my position such as those put forward by Helen Fein or Steven Katz, but for the purposes of this essay Lemkin's definition will suffice.

The Mentally Disabled as a Group

With the definition of genocide established, I will now work to show that the mentally disabled are a distinct group with relevant definitional qualities in regards to genocide. I see two possible ways of grouping the mentally disabled so that they are considered vulnerable to the crime of genocide. One way of defining the group could be a physical one; to say that inclusion in the group is denoted by some physical manifestation that is characteristic to all group members. Another way to define this group would be a genetic one; to say that inclusion in the group is by the presence of some genetic quality. Clearly genocide is possible when a group is targeted by their overt appearance; for example their race. But equally clear is the fact that the impetus for genocide of a group can be unseen as well; for example their religion, or their tribe. I will focus here on the genetic grouping for two reasons. The first is that grouping by physical manifestations requires consideration for additional, perhaps dissimilar, subcategories of

mental disability, such as those caused by substance abuse, accident, trauma etc. And second, because the genetic grouping is potentially exposed to more genocidal actions from society.

In a way, the distinction between physical characteristics and the genetics of a person is becoming moot, as science continually deepens our understanding of the intertwined relationship between these two identities. Currently there are still important differences between a person's genetic identity and their physical identity, but it seems possible that this distinction will become ever vaguer as genetic science progresses.

Persecution of group identities is most clear when those identities are physically explicit. And advancements in genetic technology have done just that: illuminated characteristics (and potential criteria for grouping) that were previously unknowable. It is now possible to deduce detailed facts about someone's ethnicity by analyzing their genetic makeup – we have been able to identify *ethnic groups of genes*. If a group of genes can itself be an ethnic classification, it would seem possible that any group of genes could be considered an ethnic classification – given that all constituent members share the same distinctive genetic qualities. Therefore, groups of genes who share the distinctive genetic quality of programming for mental disability could be an ethnic classification.

Society's Genocidal Actions

There are a few behaviors that society engages in that I would like to suggest are genocidal in nature. In America there were some high profile examples of infanticide that, if scaled and endorsed, would qualify as genocide. These cases garnered nationwide attention and inspired the "Baby Doe Law". Without going too much in to detail, the basic premise of these actions is that parents decided to withhold standard life-saving treatment for their newborn because the child had a mental disability. These cases are rare and subject to enough academic debate that I will focus the discussion in this section on other behaviors. But before I move on, I would like to underline the fact that these cases are genocidal in nature by virtue of

their selective (passive) killing. The mentally disabled group is being singled out as undesirable and those perceptions are informing the parent's and the medical community's decisions on medical care.

Developments in prenatal testing have allowed a soon-to-be parent to gather information about their baby relatively early on in the pregnancy. These tests can identify the sex of the child, its general well-being and also any if it has any congenital disabilities. One course of action that a parent might take in light of evidence of a disability is abortion. I will make no comment here on the morality of abortion in general, but I will argue that this type of conditional abortion (choosing to abort, or considering abortion because of a disability) could be a facet of a genocidal attitude, again because of the societal perception of mental disabilities.

One quality of Lemkin's definition that is important to remember at this time is the fact that genocide is directed at eliminating a group, not necessarily individuals. In fact, it is possible on this definition for a genocide to occur and not a single person perish. The genocidal act is in the coordinated, purposeful effort to eliminate the group as a whole. The first two cases I have presented illustrate a more active form of elimination, but it could easily be argued that these cases are not genocide because they lack the required intention. The parents in the above scenarios were dealing with very personal issues about their lives and the lives of their families. They may not have considered at all the implications for the mentally disabled as a group.

Even though the parents may not have been engaging in genocidal actions in those specific instances, they may be participating in a larger genocidal movement. Society views mental disability as an undesirable condition and we are actively investing time, money, and resources to improve genetic technology to eliminate its existence. Gene therapy is still a burgeoning science, but even some current reproductive procedures have the capacity to be of a genocidal type. Take for example pre-implantation genetic diagnosis. This procedure allows the parents or medical professionals to identify characteristics about

their human reproductive cells (most often sperm, but also eggs) and select which cell they would like to use for in vitro fertilization. This allows the parent to avoid certain detectable genetic disabilities in their child. In many ways this is a worthy goal. Caring for the mentally disabled can be crushingly burdensome. And if we believe that a person's (and a family's) quality of life would be improved if only mental disability were avoided, then it is quite understandable that we take action against that preventable harm.

One could argue that these procedures are not necessarily genocide but rather eugenics. I would not deny that this science is a kind of eugenics, but I would respond by saying eugenics is a tool that enables genocide, and so is murder, indoctrination, and oppression. What matters is the mindset and the intentions of the people involved. And the mindset of the people involved in this case is something like "it would be better if mentally disabled people were not mentally disabled". Modest in its scope, but even this attitude has the ingredients for a genocidal motivation.

Conclusions

What we have then is one group of people – namely society, actively and purposefully attempting to eliminate another group of people – namely the mentally disabled, through scientific intervention and sometimes more direct means. This is not a vindictive effort, or one that is seen as wrong in any traditional sense. In fact this is an effort of compassion. But it is still possible to *compassionately* actively and purposefully attempt to eliminate another group of people. This subject deserves more philosophical inquiry and ethical debate, but these are tough exercises however, because many of the representatives of the mentally disabled are unable to fully express to us their views. It is our responsibility then, before we make any "compassionate" decisions about any group of people to fully consider all of the moral implications of our actions.

Thank you for your time

Sources

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