

COMMENTS ON GENERAL OSBORN'S ADDRESS

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IN his address to the Planned Parenthood Federation General Osborn has criticized rather strongly some of the views I have expressed in my book, and I am glad of this opportunity for comment on his remarks, the more so as I have the warmest sympathy with much that he says. I wish that things might happen that way, and my disagreement is not with his wishes but with the prospects for their accomplishment. In my book I was not concerned with what we should like in an ideal world but with what I believe will happen in the actual world during the long ages to come.

The difference between us arises mostly from the fact that we are thinking about different things. Osborn is telling people what to do now, and I judge that he is giving good advice in the sense that it may make many people happier during the near future, perhaps even during the next century or so. I do not wish to dispute this, since it is not my concern; from my point of view a single century is unimportant. The policy he advocates would only become important to me if he could show that it would so change the biological forces governing humanity that a final position of stable equilibrium was reached that was radically different in all its qualities from anything that has been experienced hitherto. In putting it in this way I am of course including among the biological forces man's capacity for reasonableness and good sense, but that is only one of his qualities and it has to compete against selfishness, sentiment and unreasoning impulse. Osborn seems to expect that reason will inevitably triumph over these other qualities, but I cannot persuade myself that there is any evidence for this.

The new thing that has recently arisen is the possibility of easy limitation of populations through birth control, which might at first

sight be expected to be capable of keeping numbers down to a degree that would provide a secure living for everybody. That would be good sense, but I cannot see any grounds for expecting that man will show himself more amenable to good sense over this than he has in the past over many other things recommended to him on the basis of reason. There is nothing new about appeals to reason as the best guides to human conduct, but how seldom have they been successful? Thus for thousands of years all the religions and philosophies of the world have been steadily inculcating the importance of virtuous conduct, and yet we still require systems of criminal law, and police to enforce them. Even if the limitation of population is—as I believe it is—one of the chief things that will make for the good or ill of the world, it is hardly the one that from day to day impresses mankind with its importance. If then man has failed to amend his conduct in the all-pervading things of life, is there much likelihood that he can be persuaded to do any better over a matter that cannot *appear* to him of such cardinal importance? It will not appear so because it will not be perpetually with him, but will only arise on a few occasions in his lifetime. Some people of a philosophic cast of mind may recognize the importance of the matter, but not the majority whose conduct is mainly dictated by habit and their day-to-day experiences.

The developments of birth control in recent years are facts of great importance, but I cannot believe they will make any permanent difference when viewed in the perspective of the long ages of world history. It is rather as though a new drug had been placed in the hands of a doctor who was responsible for the health of an elderly patient; the drug might ease the patient's declining years, and it might perhaps prolong his life a little, but he would

die in the end all the same. It is to be regarded as a palliative, not as a cure. In considering the consequences of contraception in the long run, it is quite irrelevant that at the present time the available methods are neither convenient nor very reliable. Even now much work is being done to discover a contraceptive that it would be easy for everybody to use ; call it a "pill." In view of the wonderful developments of biochemistry it seems possible—I should say even probable—that at no distant date the pill will be discovered in a cheap form that would make it available for the whole of mankind, no matter what their level of intelligence or culture. In considering then the influence of contraceptives in the far future, we may as well assume that this discovery has been made, since, if it never should be made, the results would be even less important. The only difference that the discovery would make is that we should possess a rather more efficient palliative.

What in fact will be the effect of the pill? It may perhaps be accepted that even in the free world there would be an enforced administration of it to the feeble-minded and to hardened criminals. This would be a benefit to the quality of the race, but not a very great one, because the fraction concerned would not be very large ; it is even possible that it would not be worth while to face the odium of the compulsion for such small results. It is the effect on the rest of the population that calls for consideration. Making due allowances for the operation of pure chance, it would be expected that those who used the pill would tend to have smaller families than those who refused to do so. There is thus, biologically regarded, a strong premium in favour of refusal. It is true that the children of the smaller families will have the advantage of better upbringing in times of general prosperity, but the very fact of that prosperity will tend to preserve the actual lives of the others as well, so that a larger proportion of population will come from the large families than from the small ; in times of misfortune there will surely be disorders, and the mere fact of greater numbers will give them the advantage. In view of this it would seem probable that the most con-

spicuous result of the pill would be a tremendous reinforcement of any religious creed that regarded its use as immoral, because the faithful of such a creed would tend to have the largest families, and most children adopt their parents' creed and so would do the same again. However, setting this point aside, it is at least doubtful whether the universal use of the pill would tend to remove disparities in standards of life. Parents would use the pill when they were dissatisfied with the standards of life that they expected their children were going to experience, but there is no absolute standard to judge this by, and those accustomed to a hard life, such as prevails in backward countries, would regard as being tolerable conditions that would be regarded as insupportable by the inhabitants of more fortunate countries. It would seem then that to achieve any sort of equality of standards a great deal of compulsion would have to be used, and this raises the question of the contrast between a free world and one composed of autocratic slave states ; it is an interesting subject but I shall not go into it, beyond noting that autocracy seems to provide yet another biological mechanism which would be likely to work against the desired stability of population.

Osborn has an interesting discussion on the demography of France, but I am not very sure what conclusions he draws from it. As is well known, the leading French demographers maintain that the complete acceptance of voluntary family planning will lead to the extinction of the race, as it threatened to do in the past, and they therefore oppose the facilitation of contraceptive practices. However, the grant of family allowances by the state has recently overcome this tendency ; it might reasonably be argued that this is only another form of family planning. The French experience does show the interesting fact that by a suitable taxation policy a country can do something to control its numbers, at any rate for a time. Osborn seems to approve of all that has happened in France, both the earlier decreases and the present maintenance of numbers, but he quotes with equal satisfaction the rapid increases in the United States which are

happening now, and which are apparently most marked among those who do practise contraception. If these two examples are adduced in evidence on the question of what the general effects of the widespread use of contraceptives would be, they seem to cancel out and leave us much where we were before. If they suggest anything, it is that in the long run it is not the use or the non-use of contraceptives that really determines population numbers. And when we look beyond these two examples, we must not forget that practically all the other countries of the world mark any increase in prosperity that they experience by a positively menacing increase in population.

Osborn later claims that the whole business of the regulation of populations will look after itself on a purely voluntary basis by everyone planning his family just exactly as he pleases, though he qualifies this by saying that "the task will require all the brains, all the sincerity, all the sense of purpose which you can muster." The two halves of his statement seem to me to contradict one another, in view of the very mixed qualities of the human character to which I referred earlier. The whole of the address leaves me with the impression that among all the things of life Osborn gives very much the highest value to individual liberty, and that everything else has to be forced to fit in with this. I too put individual liberty among my highest values, but in the past many things have happened that go against this value, and I reckon it certain that a great many more will happen in the future. It is, therefore, surely best in estimating the future as far as one may to forget one's preferences. So with regard to this part of the address I would say that I hope most warmly that he will succeed in doing all that he hopes to do, but that I can see hardly any reason to expect it.

In my book I referred to the probability of a slow change in human instincts owing to the developments of contraception. With this also Osborn disagrees, and I would like to make some remarks on the subject. If it should prove that contraception does not have the effect of limiting families—as apparently is the case just now in America—then my

argument falls to the ground, but if the French demographers are right, then it becomes important. It is, anyhow, a long-range forecast, applying only thousands of years ahead, and so it has a different quality from the more immediate questions that mostly concern Osborn. It has, so to speak, to be a "thermodynamic" argument, based on general principle rather than on immediate experience.

This is the argument. The higher animals have been endowed by natural selection with strong sexual and parental instincts for the sole purpose of ensuring the perpetuation of the race. Man has also got both these instincts, and even if we are not ready to go the whole way with the Freudian school of psychology, we have to admit the tremendous potency of the sexual instinct in nearly all the human race. The parental instinct is of course also strong; it is different in quality, and the two cannot be equated, but in its day-to-day emotional intensity it could hardly be disputed that the sexual instinct plays the stronger part for most people. The new developments of contraception have now rather suddenly freed man from paying the price of his sexual instincts, so that Nature's chief mechanism for ensuring the perpetuation of the race has broken down. As witness of this, consider how many people there are who are now content to have one or two children only. The parental instinct of such people is satisfied by producing a family that is below the replacement level. The ingenuity of man has defeated the primary reproductive mechanism of Nature, and it is to be considered what secondary mechanisms will arise to replace it. Among these the most direct, and so presumably the most effective, is the direct instinctive wish for children. It is already held by many people, but to very varying degrees, and those having it most will presumably have most children, so that there will be a bias all the time increasing the proportion of the population that have it. Unlike many of the operations of natural selection which are apt to be brutal and painful, this would be a painless process, which would pass almost unnoticed. It would be a little like the painless secondary sexual selection that has

endowed so many of our birds with their beautiful plumage. Such a development will only occur in so far as it is needed; if it should prove that, in spite of contraception, Nature's old mechanism still works, then it will not occur at all. But if the contrary is found, then the instinct for having children will be reinforced, and it will probably be done in the untidy extravagant way that Nature mostly uses—for example our sexual instincts would seem to be quite unnecessarily strong for the mere purpose of securing the perpetuation of the race. It is likely that the instinct would take the form: "It is time for me to have another child," and not merely: "I do not feel that two children are enough." In so far as it is permitted to express wishes in such a matter—and it is really quite irrelevant to do so—I may say that I regard as one of the deadliest menaces to the human race the danger that such an instinct should grow to an intensity something like the present intensity of the sexual instinct, for if it should do so it would destroy all prospects of general prosperity among the human race. However, it is unlikely that things will go as far as that, because a much smaller change

should be quite enough to maintain the race.

It will I hope be seen from what I have written here that I have the warmest sympathy with most of the things that Osborn wants to do. I would like him to succeed in them, but I am very unhopeful about it. Man's whole manner of living has altered several times since he was first evolved, and it will no doubt be altered again many times, but something very much deeper would be needed to bring about the changes that Osborn desires. It would call for the establishment of a new mechanism of Nature, if the result is to be a stable state of the world radically different from the one produced by the crude but efficient mechanism used by Nature hitherto. None of the proposals put forward seem to me to have this tremendous quality. So I am only ready to regard the things proposed by Osborn as palliatives, which may enable our present golden age to last rather longer than it otherwise would. I am afraid I do not think that will be very long, but I am all in favour of palliatives, and I hope that Osborn's efforts will be attended with success.