

# PROBLEMS OF THE BIRTH - RATE

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## PROBLEMS OF THE BIRTH-RATE

THE above title covers a very large field, and it rather suggests that I may weary you with many figures and particulars, but, as these may be found in the Registrar's Report, I want principally to consider with you one side of this large question, namely, how far we are morally responsible for the steady decline in the birth-rate.

For a good many years, as you know, the fall in the birth-rate of this country has been progressive. Recently, of course, this has been greatly accentuated by the war; the reduction entailed by it being 26 per cent. in England and Wales, this reduction being confined to the legitimate children. Since the Armistice, so far as figures are available, there has been a considerable rebound; probably 1919 will prove to have a higher birth-rate than that immediately before the war.

The figures given for the probable loss of births directly due to the war are 543,087 as compared to a probable loss to Germany of  $3\frac{1}{2}$  millions.

There has been a partly compensating decline in infant mortality, the smaller numbers born in a family tending to decrease the death-rate in certain classes. We might be inclined to think that if things have already begun to right themselves to a certain extent there is nothing much to worry about, but in the classes with greater prospects of bringing up their children under satisfactory conditions, fertility is found to be lower than among manual workers.

You cannot read your papers without having directly opposing views put before you, on the one side that a falling birth-rate is a sure sign of a nation's decline, and on the other side that a controlled birth-rate is an unmixed blessing where the search for employment and the price of living are ever-present problems.

One thing appears to be certain, that the class difference in fertility is a new feature. If the nation makes good its deficiencies after the war, it will be from the less successful classes.

The fact being beyond dispute that a large amount of

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restriction of the family is taking place, I think we should ask ourselves what are the chief contributing factors.

(Is it in most instances the real desire for the good of the children, and do we find that the child with few or no brothers and sisters tends to be a more useful citizen than the member of a large family? Again, how far is the housing question responsible? It is only too true that lodgers with children find it almost impossible to get a welcome, and we have all heard of the various subterfuges necessary in the poorer classes before they can secure a roof over their heads if more than one child is in evidence.)

(There is a general and, up to a certain point, laudable desire to have only the number of children that you can bring up and start in the world at least at the same social level as that in which you made your own beginning.) If one of your friends tells you that she wants to send her boy to Eton, and to do so she cannot risk having any more children, the first instinct is to sympathise and say, "Very natural." Yes, quite truly, very natural, but not in the least super-natural. Examine this reason for limiting the extension of Christ's Kingdom by the standard of the perfect character as shown in the Beatitudes, and you will find it as difficult to fit in comfortably as many another item that we are inclined to think will pass in a crowd until we apply that searching test.

The same thing shows itself in the lower middle classes in a slightly different form. They have been to a great extent brought up to worship respectability, and respectability not merely in moral behaviour, but in outward surroundings; that there should be no unused front parlour would be a matter of real distress.

(Then comes the purely selfish reason (perhaps it is unfair to say purely selfish, as all our motives are more or less mixed, even our best), the definite desire to escape the responsibilities of motherhood, so as to secure a "good time" first. I don't think this cause varies much in amount in the different classes, though it is given somewhat different reasons.) A short time ago a girl of nineteen, marrying with apparently every social and material advantage that it is possible to have, was given what might be called a complete outfit for the prevention of conception, coupled with the advice from her mother that she would be very foolish to take any risks of

becoming a mother and of so being unable to amuse herself first. Can a girl who starts married life with such advice as that ever realise what the Sacrament of Marriage is intended to be? Her child, should she ever see fit to have one, will never come to her as a precious gift of God, to be brought up to His Glory, but as a suitable result of her marriage and timed for her convenience. Wedded life to her must be to a large extent a means by which she can give way to self-indulgence with respectability and enjoy the companionship of the man she is fond of without the discipline of life.

In some cases the fault lies with the doctor; a woman is perhaps seriously pulled down by her confinement, and the advice is given that it would be unwise for another pregnancy to occur within, say, two years. What doctors are apt to forget when they order stimulants, is that while the bottle of medicine will be dropped as a matter of course in a week or two, years after you will hear: "Oh, the doctor said I ought to drink port or champagne," as the case may be. In exactly the same way you will find that, where the advice to avoid conception has been given, the two years grow into ten, and the once rather delicate woman has persuaded herself that she has been told she must never have another child.

The increase in venereal disease during the war will also decrease the birth-rate. It is true that women infected with the spirochete of syphilis appear to be rather more prolific than less, but a very great number of the children conceived miscarry during the early months of pregnancy and would not appear in the registered births. On the other hand, a gonococcal infection is very often fatal to a woman's reproductive organs, and is a very frequent cause of sterility. It is suggested in one of the pamphlets written in favour of the use of contraceptives that they make connection safe for the woman if the man is infected, the fear being only as regards a diseased offspring; this shows a complete ignorance of the more frequent starting-points of the disease, and, so far as mechanical means are recommended for use by the woman, it is a most mischievous and misleading suggestion, and likely to give an additional danger to the public.

We hear often enough of the genuinely hard cases where the man shows no consideration for his wife whatever; but the cure for this lies much further back than the use of any

preventives. It begins in the nursery, and I am quite sure well-intentioned mothers have not the least notion of their personal guilt and responsibility for the lack of control in the average man due to faulty teaching, or more often to no teaching at all, in childhood, and the entirely wrong standard of a lower requirement of purity. Women are almost loth to believe that a man can be chaste just as well as a woman; they have quick enough intuition to recognise that it opens up a very different outlook for their own part. Once a woman owns to herself that there is an equal standard, how can she excuse herself for marrying, or allowing her daughter to marry, a man of known loose past if he has not given trustworthy evidence that he is capable of self-control? It is women only who can create the standard in men: while they are ready to condone as normal in their future husbands what would spell ruin for themselves, they cannot expect self-control suddenly because a man has legalised his union.

Until more recent years, and specially among women, the belief was quite genuinely held that perfect chastity was not good for a man. I believe Sir James Paget was the first of the medical profession to denounce the practice of taking a fee for giving the welcome but insincere advice to lead an immoral life. The necessity for such a denunciation is, unfortunately, not yet a thing of the past. In this connection I have in my mind the very strong view taken by the senior of the staff at Bethlem Hospital when as a student I attended the lectures there on mental diseases. He was careful to say that some men believed themselves incapable of self-control, and he said the only proper course open to them was to put themselves under voluntary supervision and restraint until they recovered themselves. The impression received was that, in his opinion, there *was* no such thing as necessity, and that if a man had persuaded himself that such was the case, he was not suitable to mix with other people until he came to a different mind.

Children of both sexes must be taught from the very beginning simple truths about their own bodies, and, above all things, they must never be put off with facts that are untrue. They need to feel that the person they can be perfectly open with is their mother, not, as frequently happens, to be constrained to say: "Mother is the last person I can tell anything to." The instinct of self-preservation from difficult ques-

tions is very strong in the mother, but to allow personal shyness to get the upper hand is horribly culpable. I think it is necessary to remember that it is sometimes the somewhat slow thinkers among the children—the ones we are ready to believe are safe—who run into greater danger; certainly it is the case with some of the bad habits of childhood and adolescence which make such a deadly handicap to self-control in later life. The child of quick feeling and intuition recognises at once that all is not well, and if of reasonably moral sense does not seriously involve itself; the slower child realises satisfaction only, does not question the reason, and may go far in the loss of self-restraint before the truth is forced or dawns upon him. The boy or girl who is left to chance as regards development of such habits, and who takes a wrong turn, is seriously handicapped when he or she comes to grown years and is called upon to exercise stern self-restraint under considerable temptation. Parents are often literally shamefully to blame in these matters, they are quite deliberately blind in many instances; and obviously such parents cannot hope to influence their children in sex matters when serious life begins.

I do not think that the fact that social purity is at such a low ebb—that it can bear no restraint—justifies the use of methods wrong in themselves. We hear of such so-called Neo-Malthusian methods even among the poor, but it seems to me difficult to recognise much of the teaching of Malthus in the matter. Malthus recognised that food production could not possibly keep pace with the birth-rate unless the latter were held up by various checks. Mostly such checks are disagreeable—i.e., war, pestilence, crime. His cure for the complication is extraordinarily different from the methods now openly advocated. Instead of wars, etc., Malthus says the real solution of the matter is through moral restraint, which he defines as chastity, continence, and postponement of marriage until the parents have reasonable prospects of being able to support a family. This is just what Neo-Malthusians appear to condemn. Voluntary restriction is now taking place on a large scale in all classes of society; so far as my experience goes, there is not so great a difference between the rich and poor as is generally supposed, though there may be less excuse for the former!

The question arises, Does the use of contraceptives actually do harm, supposing you exclude such methods as are locally injurious? Experience in the out-patient department of a women's hospital would leave you little doubt. It is, perhaps, a case of beginning at the wrong end of the tale to suggest the type of patient, because it is when she really wants a child, and wants in vain, that she owns up without reserve that for years she has used preventive measures. Nature has been too badly treated; now she is asked to respond, she has lost the capacity to do so, a long course of false stimulation has broken down not only the nervous system of the patient, but her reproductive power. So far as I know, there is no means of proving this to be a fact; people will always be able to say: "Probably there would not have been a child in any case"; but where there is no physical defect in husband or wife, it is extremely likely. Patients themselves have no doubt as to the expected cause of present failure. In reply to the routine questions: "How long have you been married?" "How many children have you had?" the answer comes quickly if there is too great apparent disparity between the two facts: "Doctor, I have done nothing wrong." You will have to blunt the conscience of the poorer classes very considerably before they think the use of mechanical or medical preventive measures of conception anything praiseworthy, even while they are making use of them. The testimony of some doctors of experience and obvious honesty differs so extraordinarily from my own and others that I am inclined to think patients are unconsciously influenced by the outlook of the particular person they come to. I have been seeing patients of the hospital class now at the rate of, roughly speaking, 2,000 attendances a year for eleven years. About half this time the patients were suffering for the most part from the diseases of women. The majority of these people accept the doctor as their friend and intimate confidant. I can only say that for instances of mothers with large families coming with entreaties for relief I should have to get my evidence second-hand. This does not say that I have not often pondered myself on the selfishness of man, but complaints and the expressed desire to escape child-bearing come, in my experience, from those who could and should have children. My difficulty lies in another direction, how to make time to be

satisfactorily interested over the photograph of "my sixth, just short-coated," or "my eight all taken together." My out-patient nurse has learnt that it is safer never to leave my side if the right number are to be got through by a given hour. I know perfectly well that when I take the history of a patient, and the number of the children tends towards double figures, that I shall have none of the vague ailments and sundry ill-defined pains of the childless married woman; if such a real mother comes to hospital at all, she has probably got something the matter with her beyond strained nerves.

In books and articles written to advocate the advantages of the very small family it is almost invariably suggested that the later children in the family are less satisfactory; they are described as "enfeebled" or "numerous weaklings," or some such expression. This is not at all a true picture of the facts, unless the parents are alcoholic or diseased, when all the children are likely to be poor and ill-grown; the later children certainly do not tend to deteriorate before they get into double numbers, and not necessarily then. As it has been said, Nature is unmindful of the individual and only cares for the race; the mother may be overtaxed, but the child does not suffer.

Several years ago a lady joined with a group of men and women interested in eugenics in a scheme to try and find out which child in a family in point of view of place was the most physically fit. She was a doctor of science and did a good deal of original work in mathematics, by which I mean to imply that she was an accurate and thoughtful worker. They collected an enormous amount of information from all classes throughout the country by a system of cards recording different measurements. When they had completed their investigations it proved to be the fifth child in the family that was physically the most satisfactory. With the methods suggested for limiting families at the present time there will be no fifth child.

When it comes to be put into practice this limitation of the family is not found to be sound economy other than in name. Among even the labouring classes the number of children is not in proportion to the wages earned, but varies inversely.

There is another side of the question that I have not

touched upon, which personally I believe to be one of the most serious, and that is the spread of the knowledge of, and the sale of, contraceptives to single people of both sexes. The young man or woman, and especially the latter, who have no particular moral standard will hesitate sometimes in the face of possible trouble. Generally speaking, the girl who comes to you fearing pregnancy has little or no shame as regards the primary cause. All she really minds, in the great majority of cases, is the exposure of the same. But they do recognise the sin of criminal abortion, and a great many look upon it with horror; they will not have, and in fact do not have, any of this feeling with regard to artificial means of preventing conception; in this they differ from the married women of less modern type. People who recommend their use as being both religious and moral are inevitably increasing the number who look upon chastity as an unnecessary and old-fashioned virtue by an amount that cannot be calculated.

How should the present condition of things be dealt with? I think that we must recognise at once that there are many present sufferers to whom we can give no great hope of relief from the selfishness of which they are victims, but even they must not lightly put the blame on others, because in the vast majority of instances they could have obtained a better standard of existence if they had never been willing to condone a low one. But they can make their contribution to the rising generation by teaching the young from infancy upwards that purity in the boy is to be expected exactly as it is in the girl. They must teach their children simple truths of life so that they may hear them first from a clean source, and they must be allowed to feel that they can ask questions without shame. Question they most certainly will if they are of ordinary mentality; parents must not put them off with some ineffective answer merely to save their feelings, and especially they must never make false statements. Parents often ask how much they shall tell. I do not think a hard and fast rule can be laid down. Some children jump instinctively to the truth of facts with only a slight suggestion, others must have things put in more or less plain language. If you can save them from falling into bad ways from the lack of knowledge when they are young, when they have reached marriageable age they will have gone a long way in the exercise of self-control. It is

frequently said that self-control between married people living in the same house is a much greater difficulty than it is for the single. This is only very partially true, except for those recently married, and they have not been justified in marrying if they do not intend to have children, because habit tells as much here as it does in everything else; it is my impression that their danger lies principally from outside, in some sudden attraction. But with this difficulty, as with all others of the nature of temptation, there is sufficient escape provided by the comparatively safe time when a woman is not prone to conceive, if it is really desirable to exercise care. But let it be understood that this method of safety can be used immorally like any other when the husband and wife intend to escape parenthood for no valid reason.

I do not know if you have come across a difficulty that has been urged by otherwise well-intentioned people during the last few years. It arises from a superficial knowledge of Freudian theories that the mass of our nervous and even mental troubles come from suppressed sex impulse. People come to me who have read books and articles the technical terms of which they do not understand, much less the special meaning they have in the language of psycho-analysis, and they are tempted for the first time not to act up to their principles as regards the use of contraceptives. Freud's theories, like most others strong enough to make a big stir, have been the means of opening up great new lines of thought, but the war came at the right moment, the so-called "suppressions" due to fear soon showed themselves to be even more redoubtable; we are already getting a series of these "suppressions" associated with the name of the last thinker who has gone a step forward. It is difficult to explain; but for your comfort, if you have come across these theories, it is only when these "suppressions" have been incomplete or unresolved, as a psychiatrist would say, that they give trouble later on in the sub-conscious mind. So far as I understand it, there is not the least reason to suppose that the present indulgence of the impulse would be of any benefit whatever.

Speaking to people brought up in the Church, I should like to remind you that when all is said and done we are not free to follow our personal feeling in this matter more than in any other should it be contrary to the teaching and spirit of

the Communion to which we owe obedience. If possible, we are even worse judges of what is good or bad for our souls than our bodies; if either are sick we are bound to lose our sense of proportion.

You cannot take this subject of the limitation of the family and separate it out as being only your concern about which you accept responsibility; if one member of the Church suffers, all the members suffer with it. Much is talked about the advance of knowledge and of the Church being old-fashioned, but human nature is the same now as it has always been; modern theories will come and go, each generation being equally certain that it has advanced in wisdom; it is at least conceivable that the Church, watching and seeking for the guidance of the Holy Spirit through 2,000 years, may know best what is good even for our natural bodies.

Let me read you the resolution passed at the recent Lambeth Conference—a Conference, I suppose, unique in our lifetime for the strength of the consciousness of the indwelling of the Holy Ghost.

#### LAMBETH CONFERENCE RESOLUTIONS.

*Paragraph 68:* “The Conference, while declining to lay down rules which will meet the needs of every abnormal case, regards with grave concern the spread in modern society of theories and practices hostile to the family. We utter an emphatic warning against the use of unnatural means for the avoidance of conception, together with the grave dangers—physical, moral and religious—thereby incurred, and against the evils with which the extension of such use threatens the race. In opposition to the teaching which, under the name of science and religion, encourages married people in the deliberate cultivation of sexual union as an end in itself, we steadfastly uphold what must always be regarded as the governing considerations of Christian marriage. One is the primary purpose for which marriage exists, namely, the continuation of the race through the gift and heritage of children; the other is the paramount importance in married life of deliberate and thoughtful self-control.

“We desire solemnly to commend what we have said to Christian people and to all who will hear.”