

**We
need
to
talk
about
this**

About the new eugenics. Third edition.

Angelina Souren

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Third edition
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by

ANGELINA SOUREN

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"Congress acknowledged that society's accumulated myths and fears about disability and disease are as handicapping as are the physical limitations that flow from actual impairment."

– Justice William J. Brennan, Jr., School Bd. of Nassau, Fl. v. Arline, 480 U.S. 273 (1973)

5. Bias

In this chapter, I use the word “bias” in the sense of “rigidly sticking to one’s own skewed opinion, usually without being aware of it”, and particularly with regard to stuff that we all experience, the kind of stuff that essentially represents the huge range of diversity in the human population. In case you didn’t know that yet: We all have stuff.

Social media are helping us uncover how broad this range is, this range of stuff we call diversity. Would you have predicted that it is possible to disagree on whether a dress is black with blue or white with gold, for example? Did you know that for someone with a severe nut allergy, even one bite into a meal can lead to severe brain damage? That too, is diversity, as are gifts like synesthesia, altruism, compassion and even the lack of compassion.

Diversity is all around us every day and there is a heck of a lot more of this than we used to be aware of because we used to focus on mostly very obvious differences in outward appearances, including even the color of socks that you wear.

If you want to experience how bias on the basis of external attributes work, carry out a few simple experiments. It’s usually not only a great learning opportunity but also a fun experience. Change your appearance, big time. If you’re normally dressed in a relatively business-like or middle-of-the-road manner, get yourself an eye-catching coat, for example, one that is a shiny silver or a vibrant pink or turquoise if you’re a man. A huge one, with a lot of fabric, so that you really stand out. If you’re a woman and don’t usually do this, color your hair blue, purple, green or pink or get yourself a wig in one of those colors. You could also dress as if you are homeless. Get frumpy clothes from a charity shop and wear old white trainers if you’re in the U.K. You could get dorky glasses. Wear a beanie or a hat. Just wearing a hat or a cap can already change how people respond to you. Travel on trains, trams and busses. Go to cash machines, into banks, into theaters, museums, restaurants, all the usual places that you go to. Go have an espresso or cappuccino at Costa if you’re in the U.K. or walk into your local sit-down Krispy Kreme or Papa John’s, go shopping at the Bijenkorf in Amsterdam or

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walk into a jewelry store.

Diversity is seen as negative when it equals adversity – such as colon cancer or breast cancer affecting several relatives – or when it causes adversity as a result of stigmatization and discrimination as a result of extreme bias.

I can see two main reasons for the existence of bias:

- Living or growing up in a bubble, resulting in unfamiliarity with what else is “out there”;
- Insecurity, such as resulting from socioeconomic inequality.

Socioeconomic inequality creates a sense that there is not enough of a resource to go around. This makes people defensive, wanting to protect their own. It's biology. I learned that from Rebecca Saxe's talk (see Videos in Sources of information).

Insecurity can also come from upset with what has happened to someone else and not wanting it to happen to ourselves or loved ones, as I've explained in the previous chapter. That's why people can feel the need to look for blame, explanations that result in the reassurance that the same thing could never happen to us or to our loved ones because we would not do anything that might result in it or we would be smart enough or strong enough to avoid it or get away unscathed.

Equality – viewing everyone's lives as equally important – has a lot to do with respect. This is not the respect in the sense of being impressed by someone's accomplishments in an area or someone's socioeconomic status, but an acknowledgment that all beings share very similar needs and deserve to be free from certain things, such as violence and bullying. We all have certain requirements, such as for food, sleep and shelter, and we all deserve to live in peace and live our lives in a manner of our own choosing, provided the way we live does not harm others.

Bias can result in not treating other people with an equal measure of human respect. Bias also has to do with stereotyping, and ultimately stigmas and discrimination. Stereotypes usually contain an element of truth but do not allow much room for the variability within a group of people. An example could be something along the lines of “women are better at cleaning kitchens” and “men are bad at cleaning kitchens”. A related stigma could be that women are considered of no use other than

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for cleaning kitchens. Discrimination would then result in women not being hired for any jobs that do not involve the cleaning of kitchens. This is one example of how non-mainstream people can be held back by society and become “disabled” by society.

Another type of disablement by society occurs because we focus our society on people who are average and forget to take others into account. In real life, we tend to focus on people who are like us and we often simply forget to take others into account. We tend to value what we know because we don't know what we are not familiar with. It would be impossible for me to say whether it would be wonderful for people who use a wheelchair to live on the moon as I have never used a wheelchair and have no idea whether less gravity would make it easier or harder to use a wheelchair. Personally, I don't like electronic displays in green letters and numbers, specifically if they are at some distance because they are hard for me to read.

For centuries, we built buildings with steps and staircases, excluding and handicapping everyone who's unable to negotiate them independently. We still stuff neurologically atypical people in institutions where they are kept like prisoners and still too often abused. We deprive them of all opportunities because we still have a lot of learning and catching up to do on how to treat all beings with the respect they deserve and what this would look like in practice.

Equality is not about pretending that everyone is a beautiful male peacock. Equality is about acknowledging the beauty in everyone and for example noticing how gorgeous starlings are and how varied their song and what skilled fliers they are, even though they don't display a huge fan of impossibly gorgeous feathers, the way male peacocks do and admitting that there is nothing wrong with being a female peacock either.

Equality is about losing our obsession with male peacocks and with superlatives. Equality is about accepting that the art of being is enough, acknowledging that being alive is enough. Equality is about accepting that there is no such thing as a measure of worthiness, hence that everyone is equally deserving. It is not about forcing everyone to be the same. It is about enabling everyone to be the best they can be, as defined by themselves.

The wish to tweak our offspring and create designer babies of any kind is related to the lack of this type of respect in society. If every human being had the same opportunities, the same chance of ending up fulfilled and

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contented, if everyone would be allowed to be who they are, there might be no more wish at all for parents to want to give their offspring certain characteristics because it would make no difference. It would also mean that parents would be able to get all the support they might need.

It is sad to hear someone say something along the lines of “Yes, I have progressive MS and my life’s become pretty shitty but at least I have enough money to carry out any adaptations that I need.” Think of what it means for all the people with progressive MS who do not have the kind of money that makes it possible to adapt their living surroundings or move house and have the house adapted before moving in. This plays a big factor in the considerations of the new eugenics too.

If you read that a child with cerebral palsy who rides horses, plays music and does many other things has not been able to go to school for 20 months because none of the schools are suitable for the child’s wheelchair or an autistic child cannot go to school because the trip on the buses would take 90 minutes one way and no other transport is available because the child has turned 16, it is crystal-clear that society is still far from inclusive and that it is still society that creates many hindrances.

Even the factors of which we think that they make people more successful often turn out to be related to socioeconomic inequality. We seem to have forgotten that we began businesses and professions not to accumulate as much money as possible but to be of service to each other, and use one’s talents best to that end. Money and fame – earning power – became the measuring sticks along which we assess a human being’s true value.

At the same time, we started mass-producing products. We began rejecting products with flaws, not just at the end of the production lines but also in the fruit and vegetable aisles at the supermarkets. It caused us to begin assessing humans that way as well – as if we have to meet manufacturing specs – but there is no such thing as a standard for human beings that we all need to meet.

This view also still dominates among medical professionals. It is reflected in what insurance companies will pay for (surgery to make someone resemble that standard more versus anything that works just as well or better but that leaves people whole as who they are, that accepts that they do not fit the mold) and in the legislation that forbids people to

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implant an embryo that does not meet the specs.

It is highly significant that only a minority of deaf parents are interested in deliberately producing a deaf child and that this is usually called a “diminishment”. We should see it as enhancement because that is what it is in the eyes of those parents. There is no such thing as a “diminished” human being and to suggest that there is should give us pause. A person is either human or not. There is no such thing as being a diminished human.

So what shall we do with the new eugenics? Should we ban it altogether?

I don't think so.

But I do believe that we need to take a step back and take it slow and that we have to let it happen in conjunction with these other badly needed changes (greater inclusivity among humans, less focus on consumerism, better care for our environment, greater compassion for non-human animals). I also believe that we need to reach a global consensus so that we can legislate for the new eugenics globally, as national legislation is fairly useless if anyone can simply travel to another country to circumvent one's own country's laws.

And I want you to think about the following. Why not add genes that will allow you to walk on four legs and be as fast as a jaguar? Why not add genes that will make you grow wings? Would you want those of pigeon or those of a pelican? Would you like to be dependent on another human to remove the protective sheaths in which new feathers develop? That's what birds are doing when they preen each other. What are your arguments for and against doing any of these things? Why not surgically implant wheels under our feet to make us faster? Why not make everyone autistic? Why not implant fish genes that make our skin a fluorescent green or pink? It's been done to cats and other mammals. Wouldn't it be wonderful to pick your skin color in the morning? Would you like to go purple tomorrow, with golden specks and dashes of pink? Just for fun?

If you look at ongoing trends of emancipation (Chapter 11, Appendix C), you will see that some variations of humans have started to do astoundingly well, after we stopped depriving those people of regular human contact and other normal human life experiences. When we, as a society, stop disabling people but start enabling them, great things are possible. We've seen that happen with women, too. As we are nowhere near the end of that learning curve yet, it might be a bit too soon to start tweaking our offspring and correct “defects” that aren't defects.

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Some of the problems we may think we are solving with the new eugenics do not stem from the supposed limitations that human diversity represents. The problem is our collective failure to accept that humans who are not 100% like ourselves are equally worthy of life and are equally valuable. The problem is our inability to see beyond our own limitations. (That's bias, yes.)

But there is even more.

Many of the arguments given for doing away with a lot of variety among humans may dissolve in the future, for example, because science and technologies will come up with creative ways to make all people's lives easier. We already have people who use their brains to operate machinery (artificial arms) and we are developing exoskeletons that can make a huge difference for some people.

In future societies, we will also all have a lot more time on our hands as increasingly more of the "money-making" will be done by intelligent machines. That would take away a large chunk of the motivation behind the new eugenics in the consumerist, career-enhancing sense. It would also mean that we will have much more time to look after one another properly.