
Confronting the ‘Eugenic Agitation’: Herbert Spencer Jennings, the Biology of Democracy, and the American Social Welfare Community in the 1920s

Judy Johns Schloegel*¹

¹Independent Scholar – United States

Abstract

Session: Eugenics I & II (Double session. Part I, eugenic traits: Amir Teicher, Rob Wilson, Caroline Lyster. Part II, politics and eugenics: Judy Johns Schloegel, Aida Roige Mas, Gordon McOuat) In 1918, in the wake of the Great War and Russian Revolution, the American biologist and geneticist Herbert Spencer Jennings (1865-1947) began to contemplate the viability of a "biology of democracy" in the face of rapidly growing evidence that genetics, in association with eugenics, was an "aristocratic system." Jennings' philosophical reflections highlighted not only his recognition of the interlinking of politics and science, but more practically, his growing preoccupation with the competing demands for public engagement while simultaneously maintaining a dynamic research program. Jennings' contemplation of the dual obligations of social action and scientific research was itself framed by the philosophy of pragmatism. In extensive philosophical writings published over the preceding ten years, Jennings had worked out a pragmatist framework for the conduct of the biological sciences that had earned him the mantle of "biological philosopher." Up until this point, these writings had been primarily academic. Now, however, in the face of the rapidly growing eugenics movement, Jennings took his pragmatism to its next logical step when he began to speak and write for non-scientific audiences, including educators, social workers, community activists, and the broader lay public. This paper explores the American social work and social welfare community as a primary vehicle through which Jennings advanced his critiques of eugenics. I consider Jennings' relationship with the social welfare community as an ideal window for an expansive view of his critiques of eugenics and their foundation in a rigorous genetics research program conceptualized on democratic principles.

*Speaker