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CONTENTS

*Preface. The Improvement of the Human Race:
An Ancient Objective* vii

1. The Elementary Process: Parent Begets Child 1
2. The Collective Process: The Structure of
Populations and the Succession of Generations 17
3. Future Prospects for Our Genetic Heritage: Real
and Imaginary Dangers 33
4. Human Races: An Ill-Defined Concept 61
5. Evolution and Adaptation 85
6. Species Improvement: What Improvement? 107
7. Intelligence and Genetic Heritage 133
8. The Temptation to Act 159

Appendix 175
References 179
Index 183

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Human Races: An Ill-Defined Concept

THE MULTIPLICITY and complexity of humanity inspires the need to divide it into categories and groups, by assigning those individuals who resemble each other most to the same category. For this classification to have biological significance, those traits which allow one to see similarities must, of course, be hereditary and must also be to some extent stable from one generation to the next.

Initially, classifications could only be based on directly observable traits, the colors and shapes of individuals, for instance. Such classifications were often subtle and took account of complex parameters, but they were, of necessity, limited to the "realm of phenotypes." Taxonomists defined various races according to skin colors (black, white, or yellow), hair texture (curly or straight), the relationship between the length and breadth of the skull (dolichocephalic or brachycephalic), etc. Depending on the traits studied, the classes or "races" identified were different, and there were lively polemics between those who detected 4 principal races and 25 secondary ones and those who found 20, or 29, or 40 races.

The discoveries of genetics made it possible to outline the problem more precisely by giving a more objective basis to the concept of race: a race is a group of individuals who have a large part of their genetic heritage in common. This time, the classification is based on intrinsic characteristics of the various human groups, in-

