6 December 1932.

Dr. C.S. Myers, F.R.S.,
5k Montagu Mansions,

Dear Dr. Myers:

Many thanks for sending me the copy of the Herbert Spencer Lecture, which I am returning with this. I wish I had read it before, as it is a most stimulating talk, to me at any rate, though I do not pretend to understand the implications of the psychological investigations you refer to.

I want especially to take up the question you put to me, in your letter of 17 November, as to fertility, as this seems to me vital to the whole sociological aspect of what I was talking about.

I do not want in the least to rule out voluntary infertility, whether it takes the form of celibacy, prudential postponement of marriage, or contraception. In each case the stringency with which it acts must depend, not only on the environing circumstances, but on the individual's reaction to them, indeed this is part of what we mean by a thing being voluntary. If I want no
more children, that is my reaction to my environment, just as
definitely as though I had never wanted to get married, or as
though I had never been conscious of the reaction as a personal
choice, and the traits of temperament which influenced my choice
must be as heritable as other traits of temperament. Indeed I
imagine that by appropriate psychological tests applied, say, to
undergraduates, you could pick out the traits which make for early
marriage, and get a correlation with subsequent performance, in
the same way as with vocational tests, or directly with size of
family for that matter, though I suppose the women would be the
best subjects for this. So the voluntary causes of the variations
in fertility fall into line with the involuntary, and, being at the
moment (for all I know, generally) much the more important, they
add greatly to the force of the argument.

One may say that the richer classes practice birth-control
more stringently than the poorer because they are already flooded
with types of temperament likely to set a high value on its
advantages, and a low value on its disadvantages; whose parents
and grandparents have been promoted into these classes partly for
this reason. After all, it is not historically true, often as
it is asserted, that birth control started in the upper classes
and spread downwards. The early propaganda of the Neo-Malthusians
in the '60's and '70's of the last century was deliberately aimed
at the poorest strata of society, where the economic and moral case for limitation was strongest. What is true is that the practice spread quickly and far among the well-to-do, and slowly and not so far in the poorer groups.

You ask me what is "proved". I should say that undoubtedly Galton proved his case as far as the peeresses were concerned, and later peerage statistics show an appreciable positive correlation in the size of a peeress's family, not only with her mother, but with her paternal grandmother. There are also a good many other miscellaneous facts which do not square with the notion that the difference in fertility is due, even principally, to the difference of social tradition of different classes. For example the people in the American "Who's who" have been classified according to the extent of their education, and those with the best education have larger families than those with a poorer education. If it had been social tradition one would have expected those with a poorer education to retain some of the characteristics of the class from which they originated, in fertility as in other things. Actually what we seem to have is merely the more rapid promotion of less fertile than of more fertile strains. Again, in mixed schools, such as public elementary schools, drawing pupils from a wide social range, there is usually a negative correlation between intelligence and size of family,
whereas it appears from the Yale statistics that the children from families of 6 or more are the most capable, on a variety of tests, and the only children the least capable, that they get. Not, I imagine, because the most capable people have the most children, but because a lower measure of success will send an only child to Yale, than would be needed to send one of six or more. In fact, if you equalise the 'start in life', there should be a positive correlation between fertility and ability; and I do not think any other view makes sense of this.

I have recently had some very extensive material on the German nobility from a rather cranky man in Danzig; but what he finds seems to be of real interest, as showing perhaps what may have been an earlier stage of titled families in this country. If he divides the wives of counts, for example into three classes, as old nobility, new nobility, and middle class, according to their parentage, he finds at all periods the old nobility wives with the most children and the middle class wives with the fewest. The differences seem perfectly regular and reliable, and apply also to the contrast between old nobility and new nobility counts; and the material is very extensive. He ascribes the effect to heiress marriage introducing strains of low fertility into a class, which, up to a couple of centuries ago, seems to have been practically
self-contained; and I certainly cannot see any better explanation. Unfortunately he also wants to explain the general fall in the German birth rate to some mystical analogous cause, but this will not work on any terms. However I think I have put before you a sample of the kind of facts which influence me, apart of course, from the futility of many of the proposed physiological explanations of a lowered fertility among brainworkers — idlers — and what not. As far as the British statistics go, it seems that the class difference of reproduction is due to more celibacy, plus later marriage, plus more birth-control; and I should be reluctant in any case to postulate three different agencies in the social environment all happening to pull in the same direction.

Yours sincerely,