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Book Review

Disappointing, self righteous, social constructionism [A Review of Roderick D. Buchanan (2010). *Playing with fire: The controversial career of Hans J. Eysenck*. Oxford University Press, New York, USA.]

An immediate giveaway is on page iv of the front matter where Sybil Eysenck states regarding this book about her late husband “the views expressed in this book are not shared by me”....June 2008.

The author, Roderick D. Buchanan, is a science historian who takes a hermeneutical rather than nomothetic orientation. That is, he spends most of his time attempting to discern the “motives” of scientists, and little if any in assessing the degree to which they were correct. It was a hopelessly unequal task for Buchanan to try and comprehend such a far ranging mind as that possessed by Hans Jürgen Eysenck (1916–1997), who saw it as his duty to search for the Big Picture and discern what was correct and disprove what was wrong, however well intentioned or widely entrenched the prevailing picture might seem to be.

Buchanan did not help himself – or more importantly his readers – gain clarity by presenting his biography topically rather than chronologically. Doing so lost him an enormous amount of historical perspective. The result is that by the end of the book Buchanan has almost succeeded in portraying Eysenck as a mere caricature, an arrogant, attention seeking, and combative individual just looking for a good fight with any left-leaning member of the establishment.

Had he followed a chronological presentation Buchanan would have seen that as early as the 1940s and 1950s the Old Left (with which Eysenck was loosely aligned) was already furious with him for his suggestion that Communists had similar tough minded personalities as Fascist Authoritarians. The Old Left’s fury at Eysenck had increased further by the mid-50s after Eysenck had excoriated the efficacy of psychoanalysis, demonstrating there was a 60% spontaneous recovery rate, and calling for controlled outcome studies. Many psychoanalysts of the time were émigré Leftists who did not take kindly to this second assault.

The Old Left really became stirred to righteous fervor when later in the 1950s and early 1960s, Eysenck, along with Elliot Slater, James Shields, and others, initiated a new biological orientation for the study of personality and its disorders, carrying out some of the first post WWII twin studies in Britain. (Heritability studies had of course been going on non-stop since Darwin and Galton.) A biological basis for personality was another anathema for those influenced by the ideology still pervading the Soviet Union that people were constructions of their social, political, and economic circumstances rather than their genes. A surprising number of British geneticists, like the three wise monkeys, turned a blind eye, deaf ear, and silent mouth, to the Lysenko fiasco so as not to undermine what they considered the many good points about the Soviet Union.

Eysenck was inevitably moved toward the political center because he felt obliged to join with Cyril Darlington and John R. Baker

and other geneticists rather than “suffer the slings and arrows” of left-wing dogma masquerading as science. Add the presence of Sir Cyril Burt as Eysenck’s PhD supervisor in the 1950s and their agreement on the heritability of IQ and its distribution, measurement and predictive power and he felt compelled to “take arms against this sea of troubles, and by opposing end them”.

As the 1960s saw the Old Left displaced by the chronologically younger and intellectually less respectable New Left, politics became more farcical and less reasoned. Eysenck must sometimes have wished he had followed his initial inclination to go into physics rather than psychology. If he had, of course, we would have all been the worse off. Much of the common sense and realism that has come to the fields of personality and individual differences, human behavioral genetics and psychometrics, is due to the efforts of Hans Jürgen Eysenck, the many psychologists he inspired, the many papers published in the journal *Personality and Individual Differences*, and presented at the meetings of the International Society for the Study of Individual Differences, the organization he founded.

The Biology of Personality is of course the central motif of Eysenck’s theorizing. In the 1951 *Journal of Mental Science* Eysenck published his first empirical study into the genetics of personality. It was an experiment carried out with his student Donald Prell in which identical (monozygotic) and fraternal (dizygotic) twins, ages 11 and 12, were given tests of neuroticism. Eysenck and Prell concluded: “the factor of neuroticism is not a statistical artifact but constitutes a biological unit which is inherited as a whole. Neurotic predisposition is to a large extent hereditarily determined”. One part of Eysenck’s research program culminated in his 1947 book *Dimensions of Personality*, continuing through to his 1959, *The Dynamics of Anxiety and Hysteria*. His innovative methodology incorporated behavioral measures such as body sway, in addition to the more usual questionnaire items.

Eysenck’s theorizing extended not only Pavlovian conditioning but Hull’s learning theory to individual differences as well. He proposed that extraverts generate what Hull termed reactive inhibition more rapidly than do introverts. From this assumption he derived a number of deductions, for which he provided evidence in his book. One of the most important of these was that introverts would form conditioned Pavlovian anxiety reactions more rapidly than extraverts. On the basis of this result, Eysenck proposed that children become socialised by developing anticipatory anxiety reactions to disapproval and punishment, and that this process would occur more rapidly in introverts.

This was a major theory. It embraced Pavlovian neurophysiological concepts, Hull’s behavior system, and the introversion–extraversion personality dimension, the social concepts of tough-mindedness and tender-mindedness, as well as political attitudes. Many top scientists such as Richard Lynn, Gordon Claridge, Jeffrey Gray, Peter Broadhurst, and Robert Stelmack, enthralled by Eysenck’s capacity for grand, integrative theory construction, began testing some of the deductions that could be made from it.

Although Buchanan acknowledges Eysenck's boldness and innovativeness, he unfortunately then discounts it by carping on the many mistakes Eysenck's critics allege him to have made. By the 1970s, a third major dimension of personality, *psychoticism*, was added to the Eysenck scheme, based in part on collaborations with his wife, Sybil B.G. Eysenck. (Sybil remains co-editor of *Personality and Individual Differences*).

The major strength of the Eysenckian scheme has always been to provide details about the causes of personality. For example, Eysenck proposed that extraversion was caused by variability in cortical arousal: "introverts are characterized by higher levels of activity than extraverts and so are chronically more cortically aroused than extraverts". While it seems counterintuitive to suppose that introverts are *more* aroused than extraverts, the putative effect this has on behavior is such that introverts seek lower levels of stimulation. Conversely, extraverts seek to heighten arousal to a more favorable level (as predicted by the Yerkes-Dodson Law) by increased activity, social engagement, and other stimulation-seeking behaviors.

Buchanan's biography could have been much better, fairer to all sides, and to the way that science actually works. Certainly there are many fascinating factoids that emerge from sometimes unlikely places here and there in this book, and they without doubt maintain the reader's interest. Unfortunately one has to read too closely between the lines and also behind the lines to glean all really important information. For myself, there is yet to be an improvement on Hans Eysenck's autobiography, aptly named *Rebel With a Cause* (1997). It too has many omissions, some of which are made up for by the coverage in Buchanan's book. Read both books and triangulate.

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