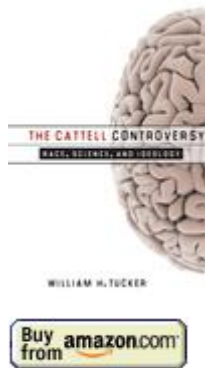


Eugenicism, Bigotry, and Stirring the Embers of a Troubling Episode

A review of



The Cattell Controversy: Race, Science, and Ideology

by William H. Tucker

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Reviewed by

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In 1997, the American Psychological Foundation (APF) awarded Raymond B. Cattell, a renowned figure in the field of multivariate analysis and personality psychology, its Award for Life Achievement in Psychological Science. Soon after, a small group of academics and publicists, deeply concerned by the ideological implications of his eugenicist writings, disseminated relevant extracts to the APF and other interested parties. They highlighted ideas in his eugenicist texts that they alleged contaminated his scientific achievements in other fields. William H. Tucker, author of *The Cattell Controversy: Race, Science, and Ideology*, played a salient, though initially muted, role in this initiative.

Stirring the Embers

The reproaches pro and con, which resounded through academia as a result of that altercation, began in the new century to recede into our fogged-over long-term memory. This book, written by an able historian, may well fan the embers of this ideological struggle back to life—and become controversial in its own right. Readers may not fault the author for writing a book investigating a domain in which he is an expert, for isn't it the role of such specialists to enable us to reexamine the difficult issues of the past and to dissect the motives, character, and skills not only of the principal protagonists of a socioethical issue but of the political institutions that were implicated? Some readers may find that this book is excessively judgmental and subjective and that it is less about Cattell and the APF than about Tucker having his own axes to grind.

The Cattell Controversy, in the latter perspective, can be understood to be principally a vehicle for advancing the author's views on eugenics, its enmeshment in other sciences, and the evolving forms it took during the past 150 years. No doubt, Ray Cattell is a vivid example of that facet of psychology. The book, however, is more than that. It is a complex reflection on the subtle enmeshment of tacit values and preferences with explicit and “objective” research findings, and a gloss on Cattell's paradoxical emphasis on the “eugenicist” value of intergroup competition in the course of the bloodiest century in human history.

The Crux of the Controversy

This book presents an excellent overview of the origins of trait psychology, specifically Cattell's architectonic system, which is widely respected and continues its useful and important knock-on effects in the field of personality psychology. But Cattell's trait psychology and his pioneering work in the study of human intelligence and multivariate analysis are in Tucker's view contaminated by his eugenicist doctrines. Indeed, the principal thesis of his book is that Cattell's eugenicism and his trait psychology are inseparable.

The book becomes increasingly polemical in tone, especially so in the last chapter, “The Cattell Convention: The Controversy Over the Award,” as Tucker discusses, not whether one must have an impeccable character to be given public recognition for signal contributions to the science with which one is identified but, rather, whether one should be praised, given awards, and provided visibility in that science when one has propagated views that are anathema to the majority of people—especially those who have a deep emotional and political commitment to eradicating them—and when such views are purportedly inseparable from one's science.

The gravity of the wider implications of contentious views is constantly changing; it's often a judgment call whether one's science is separable from one's related ideological convictions. Einstein is an example in point. Jeremy Bernstein, a respected physicist and science writer, wrote (1993), "I was browsing through a collection of Einstein's essays" and read the following about Einstein's opinion of women's aptitude for science. "In Mme. [Marie] Curie I can see no more than a brilliant exception. Even if there were more women scientists of like caliber, they would serve as no argument against the fundamental weakness of the feminine organization" (p. 177). Einstein's scientifically uninformed judgment on women's IQ (assuming he had given it serious thought) did not compromise his eligibility for a Nobel award, nor did it affect, presumably, the aspirations of apt female candidates for, or their admission to, graduate studies in astrophysics.

Some readers may find that Tucker builds a strong case for the inseparability thesis: the interlinkage of Cattell's sociophilosophical and eugenicist writings with his trait psychology. This may be true, yet Tucker himself states that

indeed, before reading his [Cattell's] voluminous writing on science and ethics, I knew only of his contributions to the study of personality, intelligence, and quantitative methodology and was both surprised and, at first, resistant to the conclusion to which the evidence eventually drove me. (p. 155)

This is not *prima facie* evidence of inseparability.

Beyondism

Treating Cattell's intellect like a palimpsest, Tucker uses his historian's imaging techniques to focus as microscopically on Cattell's teenage and young adult writings as on his later writings. Following detailed descriptions of Cattell's research methodologies, his contributions to factor analysis, and the early history of one school of eugenics (as represented by the British Eugenics Society), Tucker launches into Cattell's later attenuated, and politically more correct, eugenicist writings rebranded as "Beyondism." Frankly, I found this rehearsal of countless minutiae of an erroneous system tiresome—like spending hours studying ideas and data generated by astrologists or alchemists.

Although eugenicism was much more acceptable when Cattell first began in the company of Galton's disciples to propagate it, he pursued this side interest after World War II, when it was explicitly reprobated by most of the Western world. To examine Cattell's writings through a hermeneutical lens was surely necessary at this point, yet is not even alluded to until late in Tucker's narrative under the neologism "presentism" (p. 158).

Readers might regard as bias Tucker's inference that Cattell's later, more moderate writings simply euphemized his language to satisfy political activists.

The Cattell Convention

The assault on Cattell and the APF board that decided in 1997 to award the eminent nonagenarian a Gold Medal (and then to postpone that award) is recounted in a separate chapter titled "The Cattell Convention" (pp. 139–166). The emotional character of the assault is captured in pages 144–146. The American Psychological Association had invited Elie Wiesel, a Nobelist renowned for his work promoting human rights, to keynote its annual convention.

A group of academics, including Tucker, alerted Wiesel to the fact that the APF had decided to award a Gold Medal to Cattell and showed Wiesel a sample of some of Cattell's eugenicist articles (see p. 142). They also distributed a press release to *The New York Times*, CNN, the Anti-Defamation League, the American Jewish Committee, and other organizations and individuals, including, of course, officials of the APA and APF. Pursuant to other initiatives taken by Tucker and several colleagues, the board of APF decided to postpone the award, pending review by a blue-ribbon panel.

Describing Wiesel's well-attended keynote address, Tucker states the following:

Alluding obliquely to the postponed award, Wiesel refrained from mentioning Cattell by name but congratulated the APA on its willingness to reconsider conferring honor on a supporter of odious policies. "Theories that are so close to Nazi theories," he observed, "are to be repudiated, not honored." Though brief, the reference to the award was done gracefully. (p. 144)

Tucker's observation that the audience must have been bewildered by Wiesel's allegation of a terrible impropriety by his host institution (the APA) in conferring an honor on an unnamed supporter of theories that are close to Nazi theories is an understatement. Readers will pass their own judgment on whether Wiesel's commentary was "graceful" or even appropriate, given that the preponderance of the audience didn't have a clue as to what he was talking about or to whom he was referring.

One can imagine the sense of outrage that the allegation inspired in the officials of APA and APF whose reputation had just been publicly besmirched by Wiesel. Tucker continues: "In a bizarre coda that only added to the audience's bewilderment, as soon as Wiesel's talk ended, Joseph Matarazzo seized the microphone to deliver an impromptu lecture on due process and the difference between accusation and truth" (p. 151). Many would applaud Matarazzo's unscheduled intervention. When an error—worse, a

calumny—has been disseminated in a public forum, is one justified in immediately correcting it? (As the venerable principle has it, serious error should be corrected as soon as it begins to be disseminated.)

Matarazzo's remarks can be construed as immediately rectifying a perception, propagated by the speaker, that reflected on the integrity of the host institution as well as specific officials within it. Public officials also have human rights. Beyond this episode, the chapter appears seriously weakened by the *ad personam* attacks directed specifically at individuals we can only presume were doing what they considered just and right.

Cattell's Personality

Cattell, Tucker admits, was a charming, respectful, wise, and genial mentor to his students and a friend to his colleagues. In contrast, he juxtaposes this portrait of Cattell to the Nazi doctors who were sensitive and caring fathers and husbands, kind to friends and acquaintances, yet engaged in the grizzly and horrendous task of exterminating large numbers of human beings. "In no way," Tucker continues in this narrative, "is this meant to argue that Cattell was involved in or responsible for anything remotely comparable to the atrocities in the [death] camps" (p. 168).

Of course not. But simply analogizing Cattell to Nazi exterminators is overreaching and undermines the book's credibility. The thesis that Tucker proposed at the start of his book has a plausible ring. As he progresses in this book-length argument, it becomes moderately persuasive, and possibly for some even convincing. But "proving" too much by half and resorting to rhetorical devices such as this weaken the cogency of his argument—and this suggests that comparable distortions have entered earlier chapters.

Conclusion

There is an ancient moral aphorism stating that a person (or a thing) is bad by virtue of any significant defect; "goodness arises from an integral cause, evil arises from any defect whatsoever" (Doyle, 2009, ¶9; the principle can be used to deter, say, stem-cell research or abortion involving gravid nine-year-old incestuous rape victims). Tucker applies that principle with severity to Cattell. Despite his important contributions to the science of personality psychology, his professional reputation is sullied by his ethnicism and racism, which, Tucker insists, must have seeped into his trait psychology—although he himself admits he only belatedly became aware of it (p. 155). Eugenics is a basic and professional field of inquiry, and there are several varieties. What does seem evident is that consequent to

the genocidal horrors perpetrated by the Third Reich, Cattell slowly reworked his personal conceptualization of the field into a less politically and ethically repugnant system.

This book is not only a cognitive and analytic assault on the Cattell oeuvre, it is also a highly charged, emotional one. One can sense a visceral animus whose target is not only Cattell but members of APF and APA. The emotion does not seem to have subsided since 1997. Tucker has devoted a large part of his professional life to studying and (rightly) discrediting the reprehensible elements in the voluminous sociopolitical and eugenicist writings of Cattell. For this we should thank him. The reader may wonder, however, why he has let Cattell's eugenicism continue to preoccupy him, for, unlike Cattell's signal contributions to trait psychology and multivariate analysis, his eugenicism seems to be fast receding into oblivion. I suggest there are many other noble objectives that qualified historians can also address.

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