

Courting Controversy

A review of



Playing With Fire: The Controversial Career of Hans Eysenck

by Roderick D. Buchanan

Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2010. 475 pp. ISBN

978-0-19-856688-5. \$65.00



Reviewed by

[Ian Nicholson](#)

One of the more unsavory books I ever read as a graduate student was an autobiography by the British psychologist Hans Eysenck (1997). The title alone was off-putting and rather preposterous: *Rebel With a Cause*. As a graduate student, I couldn't believe that any self-respecting academic would invoke such a hackneyed Hollywood cliché to encapsulate his life's work. I didn't have to progress too deeply into *Rebel With a Cause* to realize that Eysenck was not an "academic" in the conventional sense.

Eysenck was an intellectual celebrity, Britain's "Mr. Psychology"—a scientist with a seemingly authoritative view on a vast range of topics and a man who was absolutely convinced that he was right. His son and fellow psychologist Michael Eysenck claimed that his father had a "god complex" (p. 2), and in *Rebel With a Cause* there was ample evidence of an outsized ego that would have been well suited to Hollywood at its worst. More disturbing still was the tireless celebration of indifference to the feelings of

others—disguised as a commitment to truth. In a passage that conveyed the hypermasculine tone of the entire book, Eysenck boasted that he had

always felt that a scientist owes the world only one thing, and that is the truth as he sees it. If the truth contradicts deeply held beliefs, that is too bad. Tact and diplomacy are fine in international relations, in politics, perhaps even in business; in science only one thing matters, and that is the facts. (Eysenck, 1997, p. 119)

After finishing *Rebel With a Cause*, I never had occasion to give Eysenck more sustained consideration, but I often thought that his career would make a fascinating study. However, like many other historians, I felt that it would take a very brave soul indeed to write on such a well-published and controversial figure.

Eysenck is reputed to have been the most prolific psychologist ever, producing at least one book and 50 journal articles and chapters per year throughout the 1950s and 1960s. He was a publication machine with almost superhuman powers of absorption and a seemingly effortless proficiency at writing (it is claimed that he once wrote a book on crime and personality while strolling along the beach on vacation). By the end of his career, he had written over 80 books and 1,100 articles, the majority of which were sole authored—a truly mammoth corpus with which any biographer would have to grapple.

The task is made that much more challenging by the extraordinary variety of topics that Eysenck published on: personality, intelligence, psychoanalysis, smoking, psychotherapy, astrology, education, race, and much else besides. Coming to grips with just a portion of this work would require considerable background preparation; to try and take it all on would require an almost Eysenck-like capacity for writing and research.

I do not know if Roderick Buchanan would take any sort of comparison with Eysenck as a compliment, but his book *Playing With Fire: The Controversial Career of Hans Eysenck* is most certainly the work of a very accomplished scholar. The book is all the more notable given the enormous biographical obstacle thrown up by Eysenck's estate. In an egregious act of historical vandalism, Eysenck's second wife arranged to have all of Eysenck's personal and professional papers destroyed. The loss of this sort of material is always keenly felt, but its absence is especially disconcerting in the case of an individual like Eysenck who professed so insistently that personal considerations were unimportant—the “facts” were all that mattered.

Buchanan manages the dearth of archival records surprisingly well, and in places he is able to draw on archival documents from Eysenck's colleagues and critics to round out the published record. Buchanan also has a keen eye for the abundance of personal anecdotes and scholarly commentaries—many of them of the biting, ad hominem variety—that lend depth and drama to the story. He positions himself between Eysenck's numerous supporters and critics—a stance that apparently elicited an incredulous question from Michael Eysenck: “How could anyone be neutral about his father” (p. 6)?

Despite Michael Eysenck's skepticism, Buchanan succeeds in presenting a measured account, one that is largely free of the sermonizing tone that might well have characterized a work written by someone closer to the fray. Buchanan expertly surveys the vast disciplinary and popular landscape that his subject traversed while providing much-needed context for gauging Eysenck's unlikely emergence as Britain's preeminent psychologist of the 20th century.

Readers looking for thoughtful discussions of all the major facets of Eysenck's long and distinguished career will not be disappointed. After a brief consideration of Eysenck's upbringing in Germany and subsequent move to Britain, Buchanan charts his subject's extraordinary climb up the disciplinary ladder. Leaving Nazi Germany as a refugee in 1935, Eysenck enrolled at University College, London, with the intention of becoming a physicist. Due to a bureaucratic mix-up, he ended up in psychology, but he remained deeply enamored with an idealized conception of physics and the natural sciences. Dismissive of psychology as a scientific backwater and lamenting the relatively undeveloped state of British psychology in the 1930s, the young Eysenck also sensed opportunity, and he thought the field was a place where "it would be quite easy to be a big fish in a small pond" (p. 40).

University College was an ideal venue for an ambitious person with a physics-inspired vision of psychology. Eysenck became a protégé of Cyril Burt, and he thoroughly absorbed his mentor's methodological and philosophical ethos—especially his commitment to factor analysis. Eysenck completed his PhD dissertation under Burt in 1940, and in a sign of the extraordinary output that was to follow, he included four published papers in the dissertation's appendices. All of this is explained very effectively by Buchanan, and Eysenck's training at University College is usefully contrasted with Britain's "other" school of psychology, Cambridge—a school dominated by an experimentalist tradition and with comparatively little emphasis on individual differences and statistical procedures.

Indeed, it is in these contextual asides that the book's considerable strengths are most apparent. Buchanan has an undergraduate degree in psychology and a PhD in the history and philosophy of science. He clearly has a "feel" for the discipline of psychology but enough distance from it to prevent the book from becoming a straightforward record of an individual life. Buchanan's grasp of the history of science literature asserts itself early on. In the introduction, he compellingly frames Eysenck's career as a study in the production of objectivity, noting the depths of meaning, complexity, and power involved in Eysenck's "rhetoric of rigor" (p. 10). Throughout the book, Buchanan draws on an impressive range of secondary literature in the history of science to critically examine Eysenck's self-presentation as a "rebel" and to highlight the challenges and contradictions in the many roles Eysenck embraced: scientist, theoretician, debunker, popularizer, and institution builder.

Eysenck's reputation as a serious scientist was based on a vast body of work on the dimensions of personality. Buchanan gives this work its due, and the book features a sustained consideration of Eysenck's research on personality factors and his subsequent attempt to determine the biological basis of personality. However, as Buchanan ably

demonstrates, Eysenck was not one to be content with the relatively low profile role of serious scientist. In the 1950s, he began to take on a much more public role—that of popularizer.

In a series of paperbacks, Eysenck took psychology to a mass audience and for a time he became the voice of the field in Britain. Eysenck enjoyed the life of an academic celebrity, and he maintained his program of empirical research while cultivating his image as a “public” scientist. Indeed, as Buchanan notes, “it was never clear with Eysenck where the ‘serious’ ended and the ‘popular’ began” (p. 266). It was an approach that was to cost Eysenck dearly.

In 1971, Eysenck brought his chatty, popular book format to the explosive subject of race with the publication of *Race, Intelligence, and Education*. The book was intended to shore up the legitimacy of scientific research on race differences, a field that had come under intense critical scrutiny in the wake of a controversial article by Arthur Jensen, who argued that low African American IQ scores were at least partially a function of genetics. Eysenck’s defense of Jensen was read by many as a defense of scientific racism, and it proved to be a public relations disaster.

Eysenck was widely vilified, and his talks were protested; in 1973 he was famously assaulted during a talk at the London School of Economics. The harassment was such that Eysenck eventually changed the family name to protect his wife and family. Although the furious denunciations did eventually abate, the controversy permanently damaged his reputation, and during his lifetime he received relatively few professional honors in the United Kingdom. Buchanan manages to convey this politically charged facet of Eysenck’s career with an evenhandedness that characterizes the rest of the book.

Playing With Fire is a remarkably thorough and judicious consideration of one of the most extraordinary psychologists of the 20th century.

Reference

Eysenck, H. (1997). *Rebel with a cause: The autobiography of Hans Eysenck*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Press.

PsycINFO