

The Racist Past of the American Psychology Establishment

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Editor's Note: In 1997 the American Psychological Association announced that it would bestow its most prestigious honor on Raymond Cattell. But charges of racism in Cattell's past led to an investigation. Before the investigation could be completed, Cattell requested that his name be withdrawn from consideration for the award. Here a prominent psychologist, one of three professionals who brought the allegations of racism to the APA, discusses the merits of the case against Cattell.

Every college student who has taken a course in personality psychology has heard of Raymond B. Cattell, the father of trait measurement. His enormous body of work has made major contributions to scientific thought about personality, human intelligence, and multivariate methodology. The author of 56 books, more than 500 journal articles and book chapters, and some 30 standardized instruments for assessing personality and intelligence in a professional career that spanned two thirds of a century before his death in 1998, Cattell ranked sixteenth in a study of "the most eminent psychologists of the 20th century." One component of the ranking process was frequency of citation in the professional literature, a measure on which Cattell placed seventh, just ahead of B.F. Skinner; the top two names on the citation list were Sigmund Freud and Jean Piaget.

The Award Controversy

In August 1997 the American Psychological Association announced that Cattell had been selected the recipient of that year's American Psychological Foundation Gold Medal Award for Life Achievement in Psychological Science, which would be presented only weeks later at the annual convention to be held in Chicago. Referring to the exceptional diversity of the honoree's "prodigious, landmark contributions to psychology," the accompanying citation placed Cattell "among a very small handful of people in this century who have most influenced the shape of psychology as a science." The Gold Medal Award — APA's most prestigious honor and one that had been presented only a dozen times previously — was clearly intended as a capstone to Cattell's remarkable career, and the 92-year-old recipient, now in ill health from a number of serious ailments that would lead to his death only six months later, journeyed from his home in Hawaii to Chicago to accept this great honor.

Then, only two days before the scheduled ceremony, APF distributed a statement at the convention, announcing that "presentation of the Gold Medal Award for Life Achievement in Psychological Science ... has been postponed due to new information presented to the APF board which requires further study." More specifically, the statement noted:

Concerns have been expressed during the past two weeks ... involving the relationship between Dr. Cattell's scientific work and his views on racial segregation. In order to provide full due process to Dr. Cattell, the Foundation will provide a Blue Ribbon Panel of senior research scientists to thoroughly review Dr. Cattell's research and writings and advise the Board on its further actions. The issues to be considered by this panel, and ultimately by the Trustees, include important interests of scientific psychology — the importance of protecting science, including politically unpopular science vs. psychology's opposition to the inappropriate use of science to promote destructive social policy.

The "concerns" referred to in the statement had been raised in the weeks before the convention by three academics, all of whom study the use of social science by racist movements. Professor Barry Mehler, a historian at Ferris State University in Michigan and the director of the Institute for the Study of Academic Racism, had written to APA, claiming that Cattell had a "lifetime commitment to fascist and eugenics causes." Andrew Winston, a professor of psychology at the University of Guelph in Ontario and a fellow of APA's Division 26, History of Psychology, had written to the chair of the awards committee, citing a number of publications that documented Cattell's "life-long commitment to eugenics and racism" and concluding that the "award to Cattell will be a moral stain on our discipline and our organization." I was the third academic to bring Cattell's political ideology to the association's attention, having written about his social philosophy in a book published three years earlier. A week before the convention I called APA's director of communications, and emphasized that I had no intent to tell the awards committee what decision it should make but wanted only to ensure that the decision was fully informed. At the director's request I sent to APA the relevant portion of my book along with a cover letter, pointing out that "this is not a case of a scientist who, parenthetically, happens to have objectionable political opinions. Cattell's political ideology is an organic outgrowth of his science."

APA's decision to postpone the award produced the sort of outrage that typically accompanies what is judged to be an excess of political correctness. Once again, it seemed to many observers, modern day heresy was being punished by oxymoronicly intolerant liberals, ever eager to suppress any sign of deviation from egalitarian dogma. One newspaper editorial called Cattell a "Victim of Liberalism." Some psychologists were also furious with the postponement. Douglas K. Detterman, for example, occupant of a named chair at Case Western Reserve University, an APA fellow, and a prominent researcher on intelligence and mental retardation, resigned from the association, announcing that he could not "remain a member after the way Raymond Cattell was treated."

Although a distinguished blue ribbon panel was indeed appointed in mid-November, it was disbanded only a few weeks later, after Cattell withdrew his name from consideration for the award. The withdrawal was accompanied by an "Open Letter to the APA," in which Cattell avowed his belief in "equal opportunity for all individuals" and his passionate opposition to "racism and

discrimination" as "antithetical to my life's work." The critics, Cattell wrote, had "twisted" his position by taking statements out of context and employing "all the little tricks that journalists use."

Cattell's Record on Race

So what was the concern about Cattell? From his initial writings in the 1930s until his death in 1998 Cattell espoused the importance of rigid racial segregation, not just between what one might call the major races but between many much smaller ethno-racial groups. There were a number of reasons for this insistence on his part.

First, throughout his life Cattell adhered to a claim common in the first quarter of the twentieth century — that the biological union of individuals from different racial backgrounds would produce genetic disharmonies in the offspring. As he wrote in his first book, for example, *Psychology and Social Progress*, which was published in 1933, "[i]n a pure race, adapted to its conditions by long ages of selection, the inheritance of impulses in each individual is bound to be well balanced. The innate forces which are the innate material of character-building must have reached a certain mutual compatibility and potential power of good integration. If two such races inter-breed, the resulting reshuffling of impulses and psychic forces throws together in each individual a number of items which may or may not be compatible and capable of being organized into a stable unit."

Of course, such pronouncements, now justifiably viewed as risible, were more common in the first third of the twentieth century, an era marked by many foolishly simplistic beliefs about the recently discovered effects of genes. However, more than half a century later, Cattell was still making similar observations though phrased with a bit more subtlety. In 1987, in *Beyondism: Religion From Science*, he complained of the "hideously wrong inscription on the idol in New York harbor." Despite the "praises ... sung to the Melting Pot," Cattell maintained that "the first requirement in successful plant hybridization is a rejection of perhaps 90 percent of the hybrids as unsuccessful," and, similarly, he pointed to "unfortunate [racial] combinations" as a reason for the immigrants' "higher crime and insanity rates in the U.S.A. than in the parent countries." Near the end of the twentieth century, a prominent scientist still believed that racial interbreeding was a genetic factor in aberrant behavior.

Yet even absent such genetic disharmonies, Cattell believed that racial separation was necessary to prevent the social conflict inevitably caused by the differing personalities of different racial groups. Whenever a nation was composed of different races, he wrote in 1933, shortly before immigrating to the United States from his native England, "we find a social life unnecessarily disjointed, weak and feverish" with "thousands of misunderstandings, produced by individuals working for different goals in different ways and at different speeds. Think of the English in Ireland. Examine more closely the contacts of English and Welsh in business, politics, and education. Think of the Jews anywhere." And although Cattell was certainly concerned with differences in intelligence, this desire to avoid racial conflicts stemming from personality differences was a completely separate matter. As he put it, "To treat alien individuals as if they belonged to the same race, simply because their intelligence is on the same high or low level, is a mistake, for constitutional differences of greater importance for practical life are being overlooked. An intelligent Italian peasant is not the equivalent of a moderately gifted Chinaman, neither could a less gifted Scot be replaced by an advanced member of the negro race."

However, for Cattell, the most important reason for rigid segregation was his view of race as the unit of evolutionary progress. That putative fact he then offered as the basis for a scientifically derived religion called "Beyondism," dedicated to facilitating the evolutionary process by determining which racial groups were best fit to endure and which deserved to fail, i.e. to be eliminated as obstacles to biological progress. Such decisions could only be made if racial groups were entirely separate from each other; if, as he put it, "the good and bad are linked up to sink or swim together," the less capable would benefit unfairly from association with the more capable, creating a "parasitism" that thwarted nature's plan of development. In England in the 1930s, according to Cattell, Jews were the parasitic intruder in the midst of many European nations, their presence producing a natural "hatred and abhorrence ... for the Jewish ... practice of living in other nations." But "because our unbiologically-minded civilization cannot perceive or appreciate any intellectual causes for these feelings," he concluded, "they are readily branded as 'prejudice' by would-be intellectuals."

In the post-war United States, however, Cattell was suggesting a different group as the main source of parasitism. In his 1972 book, *A New Morality From Science: Beyondism*, he considered the supposedly hypothetical situation in which one racial group "has genes more favorable to intelligence and ... [an]other to resistance to malaria." Although a society composed solely of the former would have to endure some deaths from malaria, nevertheless, he observed, it would "succeed as a society by virtue of its gifts of intelligence." But mixing the two groups, he warned, "would result in the intelligent maintainers of the culture being completely replaced by lower intelligences." Lest anyone have missed the implication — unaware that the sickle cell anemia gene, carried by many people of African origin, conveys immunity to malaria — Cattell immediately followed this example with another just as pointed: "Or again, in a welfare society, any tendency of a group to a birth rate less controlled by social standards — and this normally happens with the less intelligent and the less temperamentally foresighted — will result in that genetic subgroup inheriting the society." Supported by its "cultural momentum," such a society might continue for awhile, he predicted, "but eventually just like a great ceiling beam, which is eaten from within by death watch beetles and no longer what it appears to be, it crashes and has to be replaced." The insinuation of the effect of blacks on United States society could not have been clearer.

Nor was it the case for Cattell that, once segregated from each other, races would be left to their own devices unaffected by external interference. Indeed, the ultimate purpose for such separation in his moral system would be to test what he called the respective "validities" of different groups in order to determine which of them was better endowed to survive. The role of social science in this process, especially psychology, would be to define the appropriate variables and collect the data leading to the decision as to which groups were "successful" and which were not. And once science had come to an unequivocal conclusion, Cattell saw no reason to postpone the inevitable. "There are bound to be cases," he declared in 1933, "where it is time to call a halt to a certain line of evolution," a step that was once taken "violently and without an anesthetic," but that could now be accomplished by more civilized means. In "clearly established cases," he explained, "where it is obvious that the races concerned cannot hope to catch up in innate capacity..., the leading nations may attempt to reduce the numbers of the backward people by birth control regulation, segregation, or humane sterilization."

Although Cattell offered no specific example at the moment, it was not long before he was willing to name names. "The negro," he wrote in his 1937 book *The Fight for Our National Intelligence*, "has established a stable culture both in Africa and America, but has contributed practically nothing to social progress and culture.... All the social and religious notions which have been sedulously grafted upon the negro have been forcefully adapted by him, made more simple and crude and emotional." And a year later in *Psychology and Religious Quest* he drew the practical conclusion, as unavoidable in Cattell's view as it was unfortunate: A race "such as the negro, which hardly seems to compensate for its lack of mental capacity by endearing qualities of humour and religiosity," had to "be brought to euthanasia" — not by war or brutality, he emphasized, "but by gradual restriction of births, and by life in adapted reserves and asylums."

This ardent desire to eliminate races deemed unworthy by scientific examination remained at the core of Cattell's thought for the rest of his life. In 1972, even their placement in "reserves" no longer seemed to him a satisfactory method for removing "maladapted" groups, because the "more vital species" would no longer tolerate setting aside portions of the earth for "museum 'storage'." At the same time Cattell sought to distinguish his own methods from "genocide," suggesting that the term "genthanasia" would be more appropriate for the "phasing out" of a race "by educational and birth control measures, without a single member dying before his time."

Science and Politics

Having united science with a highly politicized belief system, and in the process having provided an intellectual justification for a combination of apartheid and non-violent genocide, Cattell became the favorite academic within the ranks of the neo-Nazi movement, regularly cited as the scientific authority for plans of racial balkanization in the United States. Nor did their interest in his work go unreciprocated. In the preface to his 1987 book, Cattell acknowledged those theorists whose ideas, as he put it, "proved happily integrable into the Beyondist viewpoint." Among them were the four most important canonical authors among contemporary Nazis:

- Carleton Putnam was a leader of the 1960s resistance to integration and civil rights on the grounds that blacks were genetically inferior and that behind the movement to attain racial equality was a cabal of Jews who sought to weaken white society by encouraging widespread "amalgamation" with blacks.
- Wilmot Robertson viewed the defeat of Hitler, the "defender of the white race," as "shattering to Northern Europeans, both in Europe and America." Robertson's book proposing that the United States be partitioned into a number of racially homogeneous "ethnstates" for African-Americans, Hispanics, Jews, Asians, and other ethnic groups was reviewed in *The Beyondist*, a newsletter edited by Cattell, where it was called "a timely supplement" to Cattell's own ideology.
- Revilo P. Oliver was a classics professor and indisputably the most erudite contemporary Nazi until his death a decade ago. He liked to sport a white rose in his jacket buttonhole on January 30, the date of the Nazi seizure of power, and believed that if the Aryan race ever "recovers its lost vigor and ascendancy, a future religion may recognize Adolf Hitler as a semi-divine figure."
- Roger Pearson made two unsuccessful post-war attempts to establish a Nazi international society and has produced a steady stream of publications insisting that racism is a biological imperative, necessary to protect the integrity of the gene pool from such perversions as interracial unions, which he compared to caged animals who inappropriately attempt to "mate with animals of other breeds." Many of these articles appeared pseudonymously in the *Mankind Quarterly*, a journal edited by Pearson and founded soon after World War II as an outlet for the views of American segregationists and neo-Nazi intellectuals who still wished to promote the racial concepts that had informed policy in the Third Reich. Late in his life Cattell became a board member and frequent contributor to the journal, publishing articles on his ideology that would not have been accepted elsewhere.

I don't mean to suggest guilt by association here but rather what Andrew Winston calls "guilt by collaboration." Cattell offered the thinking of these individuals as compatible with his own scientific morality.

Perhaps it is naïve on my part, but I believe that if the blue ribbon panel appointed by APA had in fact completed its deliberations, it would have recommended against giving the award to Cattell. At the very least the panel would have found

ample reason for concern about his record, especially at a moment when APA was undertaking its own anti-racist effort; the 1997 APA meeting included a "Miniconvention on Psychology and Racism." In addition, the official mission statement for APF, the non-profit philanthropic wing of APA that confers the Lifetime Award, includes, among other objectives, the advancement of psychology as a means of promoting health and human welfare, and one of its major emphases is the use of psychology to "eliminate prejudice." Even for those who wish to argue that scholars' disciplinary contributions should be separated from their politics, in this case they are linked by both APA's and APF's organizational goals.

Thus, the Cattell controversy leaves the puzzling question of why the postponement of his award elicited such outrage when the case for doing so was so compelling. It is highly unlikely that more than a handful of APA members actually sympathize with Cattell's thinking. However, some scientists apparently believe that, as long as Cattell's science was not affected by his ideology, the latter should have no weight whatsoever in an evaluation of the former. To suggest otherwise, fumed one of Cattell's supporters, was "a direct negation of the most fundamental principles of the scientific enterprise," adding that no one had charged that "Cattell's science has been in any way compromised or contaminated by his religious or political views." Of course, the notion that most "hybrids" are unfortunate genetic combinations leading to crime and insanity is scientific nonsense — to be placed in the same category as belief in reincarnated princesses and UFO abductees. But quite apart from the undeniable evidence that Cattell's scientific pronouncements were indeed influenced by ideology, the fact that some individuals believe there should be a clear separation between the two is not binding on a professional association, which certainly has the right to consider its own expressed opposition to prejudice in deciding on the recipient of an award.

In addition, it is difficult for some psychologists to acknowledge the role that prominent members of their profession have played not just in the rationalization but in the encouragement of racial inequality — an unwillingness to confront psychology's own complicity in justifying discrimination. Two decades after the end of World War II, the Germans began the lengthy process called *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* — a "coming to terms" with the nation's past. American social science needs to undergo something similar, an honest examination of its own past, not out of guilt, but out of the desire to understand how science has been put to oppressive use. A forthright consideration of Raymond Cattell would be a good place to start.

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