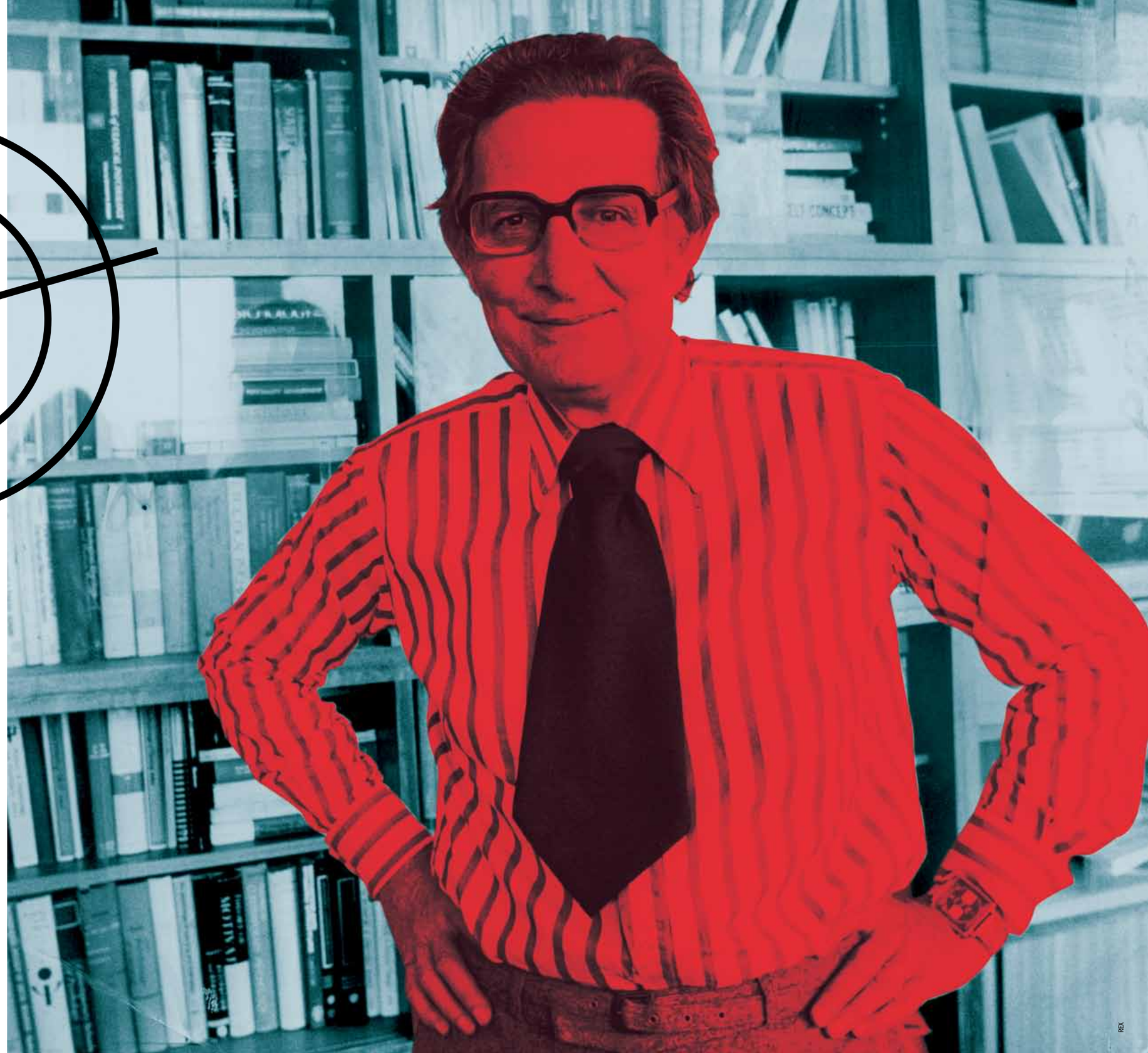
Sometimes you need a pariah

Would someone as contrary and controversial as psychologist Hans Eysenck survive in academia today? Philip Corr doesn't think so – and believes that science will suffer as a result



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Last month's headline-grabbing postponement by the London School of Economics of a talk by a former doctoral student of mine on account of "negative social media activity" raises concerns about whether controversial views are given a fair hearing in the modern academy.

As reported by *Times Higher Education*, Adam Perkins, lecturer in the neurobiology of personality at King's College London's Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience (IoPPN), had been due to expand on his research indicating that welfare dependency creates, over the generations, "employment-resistant personalities". However, his talk was cancelled at the last minute amid fears that it might be disrupted by protesters.

I couldn't help but reflect on what the social media activity might have been ahead of a talk on IQ, class, religion or race by another IoPPN researcher, with whom I once shared a desk for three months: Hans Eysenck. Some indication is given by the fact that Eysenck – who was born 100 years ago this month, and died in 1997 – was physically attacked at the LSE in 1973 on account of his view that the documented statistical mean difference in IQ between "black" and "white" populations is partly genetic in nature – as well as his belief that innate differences in IQ are largely responsible for social class stratification.

Such claims – which remain hotly contested to this day – were far more incendiary than those of Perkins, and, indeed, other attempts were made to mute them. Arriving to lecture at the University of Birmingham, also in the early 1970s, Eysenck was greeted with the phrase "Fascist Eysenck has no right to speak!" daubed on the wall.

However, alongside it was the contradictory phrase: "Uphold genuine academic freedom!" And the fact is that despite holding an array of highly controversial positions, Eysenck flourished as an academic and also as a public figure. It is well worth asking whether he still would – and whether that matters.

Another of his more notorious claims was that smoking "does not kill". His point was that the evidence of a correlation between smoking and lung and heart disease did not necessarily entail a causal relationship. Instead, he hypothesised that certain personality traits, such as stress-related neuroticism, meant that some people were both more inclined to smoke and more prone to get cancer. Knowledge that Eysenck received the best part of £1 million from the tobacco industry to fund his research damned him in many people's eyes; the truth is that he did little work of value or interest to the tobacco industry with the money, but it is hard to see modern university managers tolerating such reputational damage.

There was something else about Eysenck that would not now be readily tolerated. Modern academics are expected to speak only on matters in their area of (inevitably, and increasingly, narrow) specialism, and not to make statements about things that they have not personally studied. Eysenck would certainly be accused of speaking on matters on which he was not an expert, and his probable retort that his deeper knowledge of psychology could be brought to bear on any topic, and that the public had a right to hear it, would cut little ice.

No doubt modern selection, promotion and funding panels would also look down on some of his choices of publication outlets, which included such distinctly middle-brow venues as *Reader's Digest* and even the top-shelf magazine *Penthouse*, a 1970 edition of which includes an insightful interview with Eysenck by the British psychologist David Cohen next to a risqué picture of a naked model called Pretty Polly.

Nor would Eysenck's cause be helped in the modern academy by the manner of his approach. Although he was an old-school gentleman in person, he could be abrasive and combative in print. He felt the need to win the argument, and sometimes he used theatrical tricks to do so. During public lectures, for instance, he would deliberately leave holes in his argument; when critics jumped on them he would come back with a killer retort. The child of a famous screen actress and a cabaret raconteur who was brought up in Berlin by his opera-singing maternal grandmother, Eysenck was a performer, and despite evincing denial, he loved it. His 1990 autobiography, *Rebel with a Cause*, asserts that "a lecturer need not become less intellectual and scientific for also being entertaining". And it gleefully reports the verdict of an American psychologist who had observed a talk of his in 1964: "I strongly urge any critic of Eysenck's work to confine his controversy to the printed scientific literature, as verbal confrontations at meetings and symposia will only inevitably lead to utter and traumatic humiliation."

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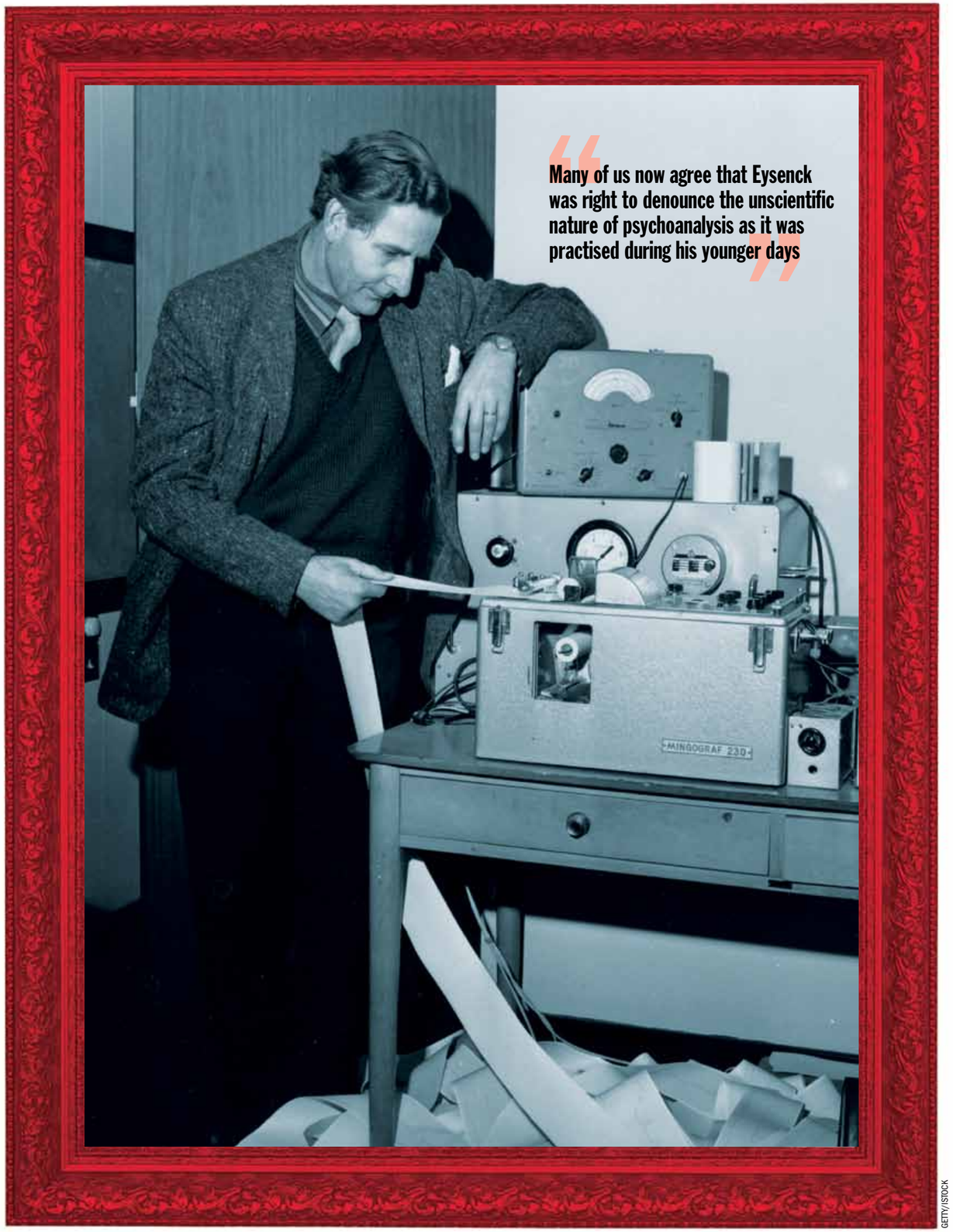
Nevertheless, Eysenck's "professor know-it-all" style grated on many people, especially when coupled with his intellectual combativeness. This was demonstrated most starkly and famously when he was shouted down in 1958 by an audience at the Royal Medico-Psychological Association – the forerunner to the Royal College of Psychiatrists – after denouncing psychoanalysis.

Few academics enjoy being humiliated by a colleague, and the modern obligation to regularly publish and land external grants would give victims of such treatment ample opportunity to exact revenge when asked to referee one of the perpetrator's applications. Even in Eysenck's day, it was a regular occurrence at the Institute of Psychiatry (as the IoPPN was then known) for colleagues to march to the office of Aubrey Lewis, its dean, to demand his dismissal – or, at the very least, some attempt to mute his outspoken views. Things got so bad that Eysenck threatened to expose to the national press his colleagues' attempts to stifle the new psychological treatments he advocated, and he made plans to establish a rival Institute of Behaviour Therapy. One can only imagine how the reputational fallout from such acrimony would be handled by today's managers.



> **"Many of us now agree that Eysenck was right to denounce the unscientific nature of psychoanalysis as it was practised during his younger days"**

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But if Eysenck had been muted in his early days, he would not have gone on to inspire several generations of academics to change the world of psychology and psychiatry. He is remembered within the discipline for being the handmaiden to the profession of clinical psychology; pioneering behaviour therapy and paving the way for the acceptance of cognitive behavioural therapy; arguing for the necessity of evidence-based medicine; establishing the need for the statistical technique of meta-analysis; and pioneering the study of the biological nature of personality and individual differences (now called personality neuroscience). But he is especially remembered for slaying the psychoanalytical dragon. Many of us now agree that he was right to denounce the unscientific nature of psychoanalysis as it was practised during his younger days, when it propounded such incorrect and dangerous guff as that autism is a consequence of a "refrigerator" mother, and that female patients' reports of sexual abuse are merely neurotic expressions of a fantasy. Such Freudian speculation made for good Hollywood drama (just watch Hitchcock's *Marnie*) but poor psychological science.

Eysenck's later years were characterised by largely unproductive forays into astrology and parapsychology, as well as his battles over IQ and smoking, which generated much heat but little light. However, the contrarian, defiant and oppositional attitude that led him down these apparent culs-de-sac is exactly the same one that drove him to make such remarkable progress in his earlier career. Great scientists such as Isaac Newton and Charles Darwin had famously difficult personalities, and there is good reason to think that this is necessary given the opposition that advocates of new ideas are likely to face. Perhaps – just perhaps – we need to be tolerant of especially awkward characters, even as we converse with them through gritted teeth.

Indeed, in an important sense, Eysenck's ability to inspire subsequent generations of researchers derives just as much from how he fearlessly and defiantly pursued his ideas as from his ideas themselves. One can only hope that the likes of Adam Perkins still feel this inspiration. But, at the same time, just imagine the Twitter storm – and the institutional hullabaloo it would provoke – that would be generated by an Eysenck talk today. In all likelihood, the man who was described in his *Guardian* obituary as the "people's psychologist" would have been not so much *persona non grata* as *persona absentia*. Even if he had managed to secure an academic position in the first place, he certainly wouldn't have landed a chair. That would have saved a few feathers from being ruffled, but would it really have been in the long-term interests of science? ●

Philip Corr is professor of psychology at City University London. He is co-founder and co-president of the British Society for the Psychology of Individual Differences, and is current president of the International Society for the Study of Individual Differences. His latest book, *Hans Eysenck: A Contradictory Psychology*, was published by Palgrave this year.