

Dr Paul White  
Darwin Correspondence Project  
University Library  
West Road  
Cambridge, CB3 9DU  
UK

Paul Dunn  
Chair, Western Washington University Legacy Review Task Force

March 27, 2021

Dear Mr. Dunn and members of the Task Force,

Thank you for allowing me to contribute to your evaluation of T. H. Huxley's views on race, his relationship (pro or con) to the movement of scientific racism, and the wider impact of his work. As I'm sure you know, Huxley was a complex figure. He ranged across many fields, not only within the sciences but the humanities. He took up a variety of causes. He addressed many different audiences and published in a variety of media. As a historian, I have tried to understand his work in relation to its contexts, scientific, social, political, and personal. He is best known not for his extensive scientific publications, but for his more popular writings, especially on Darwinian evolution, science and religion, and education. He was a great polemicist and controversialist, and because of his provocative style, he is often quoted and easily misquoted or taken out of context. It is also the case that his views on certain topics changed considerably over time, and his later writings in particular show ambivalence about 'mans place in nature.' I will address your questions in order.

**What role did Huxley's beliefs on race occupy in his intellectual works, his public statements, and his life as a whole? Were they remarkable in the context of the time and place in which he lived?**

Huxley's training and expertise lay in zoology and comparative anatomy. He published several hundred technical papers in this field, from marine invertebrates to primates. Only a few of these touch on human race. He did, however, assume positions of leadership in anthropology and palaeontology and so his remarks on race were expressed from a position of authority within the scientific community, even if they were relatively marginal to his work as a whole. His views are presented mostly in public addresses and popular periodicals. They are not straightforward or easy to summarize. In several of his popular talks, he takes pains to point out that the concepts of 'race' and 'species' are themselves contested, and that the boundaries between them are not absolute. As a comparative anatomist he often focussed on 'persistent' features, and he certainly believed in the endurance of physical characteristics over long periods of time. In his early career he supported a theory of zoological 'types' and was reluctant to give this up in light of evolution, despite being such an ardent supporter of Darwin. His most well known scientific publication, *Man's Place in Nature*, argues strongly for the common ancestral links between humans and primates. His argument is directed *against* other zoologists and anthropologists (also clergymen) who maintained that humans were not 'simian,' that they possessed distinct anatomical figures warranting their placement in a separate class. The details of these arguments are very technical, but the gist is one of continuity (anatomical and physiological) across the primate series including 'man.'

In the mid 1860s, he engaged in another set of controversies about the relationship between human groups. His writing here was even more adversarial, and he was particularly critical of scientists in Britain, France, and America who claimed that human races had different ancestral origins, that they had the characteristics of distinct species, that they could not interbreed without producing monstrosity (these included Richard Owen, James Hunt, Samuel Morton and his followers in

America, and Louis Agassiz). Some in this group were also notable for their promotion of white supremacy, defence of slavery, and advocacy of the South in the civil war. Huxley's arguments built on his primatology, insisting on the continuity between humans and animals on the one hand, and on the commonalities of human groups on the other hand. He did not argue against the concept of human races, but he emphasised their shared characteristics, their intermixing over thousands of years, the variability and gradation of every feature.

Where the difficulty arises, is his belief in racial hierarchy, and in *natural* inequality. He makes the point very starkly in his popular essay, "Emancipation Black and White," written in the aftermath of the American civil war (1865). The 'negro' is a man, a brother; he must not be enslaved, he must not be treated any differently, he must be granted equal rights, legal, political, and professional. Not because he is the equal of the white man, but because slavery and oppression degrade all men and impede civilisation. Equality of opportunity must be granted for civilisation to thrive. All races can and will improve; but they will not be equal in their achievements. It is an extremely polemical and curious essay. In fact only two pages address the emancipation of blacks, the rest considers the 'woman question', but with exactly the same conclusion. Women should have every opportunity afforded men in society, remove all natural impediments. Their true differences, strengths and weaknesses, will then be apparent.

Were these views typical of his time? Not at all. They were far in advance of it; highly progressive, even radical. They were not simply views, but causes, and Huxley devoted a great deal of his career to them in the field of education reform. He campaigned tirelessly for universal education, for the introduction of science and other modern subjects to schools and universities, for a true 'liberal education' as well as technical education for the working classes. In doing so, he opposed some of the most entrenched ideological and institutional hierarchies in Britain at the time, those of class. In less outspoken ways, he also supported women's causes in higher education, scientific education, medical training and certification.

**Did Huxley's scientific work contribute, either in support or opposition, to the development of scientific racism and Social Darwinism, both during his lifetime and after? What portion of his total work did these contributions occupy, and how significant are those contributions in supporting or refuting the ideology of scientific racism?**

The great authority on Victorian anthropology, George Stocking, has shown how pervasive the concept of racial hierarchy was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. By 21<sup>st</sup> century standards, every scientist, every white European or North American, was racist. There were however substantially different models of race, with very different social and political implications. Huxley's views lie firmly within those of advanced liberalism. At its foundation were assumptions about the superiority of European culture and civilisation, not skin colour, facial angle, or even brain size. Addressing a popular audience in Birmingham in 1867, he began by saying he was going to challenge some of their convictions about human race. Those of you with straight hair, he remarked, are more like gorillas. Yes, Australian aboriginals go naked and sleep on the ground. But "it was not 2000 years since our respected ancestors were running about as completely devoid of clothing and painted blue (audience laughs)" (*Birmingham Daily Post*, 12 October 1867). The English, he adds, were once savages, as were the Romans, and the Greeks. All human peoples can be modified, improved, according to European standards. The alternative is extinction.

In several other essays, he argues for the complexity of 'Britishness,' composed of a number of different peoples, languages, and cultures. He reduces to absurdity the idea of a pure race. There are short brunet broad heads, and tall blond long heads, and everything in between. "The combination of swarthinness with stature above the average and a long skull," he jokes, "confer upon me the serene impartiality of a mongrel" ("The Aryan Question," 1890).

The question of 'social Darwinism' is again, not a simple one. In some of his essays from the 1880s, he is writing in a period of fears about British decline and degeneration. There is population pressure (crowded hungry urban poor), there are scarce resources. There is then a 'struggle for existence in human society' in the form of competition between nations. He uses a language of battle in which the weapons are knowledge and technology, science and education ("The Struggle for Existence in Human Society," 1888). It is a darker turn from his earlier writings that brim with progress and improvement, but it is also another plea for investment in the institutional structures that foster education, in knowledge-based industries of the kind that he sees being made in Germany and the United States. Perhaps surprisingly, he opposed eugenics on the grounds that we are largely ignorant of the biological basis of 'improvement', and because no state or authority should have this power. Humans are not sheep or cattle, carrots or potatoes. We don't know what conditions make for 'genius.' It seems to arise most often as a 'sport of nature,' unpredictable, from unlikely roots. The way to improve people and nations is education, not selective breeding.

Huxley's last writings are his most complex and ambivalent with regard to biological determinism and human nature. In "Evolution and Ethics" (1894), he argues that we are a part of Nature, products of evolution, of the struggle for existence, subject to Nature's laws, but that we are also at odds with Nature, that we impose our own limits on struggle, that we have evolved ethical principles and behaviours that resist these laws of nature. Human/nature, every man and woman, is divided, at odds with his or her own instincts, trying to cultivate a garden of eden amidst an indifferent or hostile world.

**What harmful institutional practices, policies, or general practical consequences, if any, can be specifically traced to Huxley's views?**

In his own time, Huxley (like Darwin) was accused of lowering human dignity, of debasing human nature through its links with animal ancestry. His campaigns for scientific and non-sectarian 'liberal' education brought him into sharp conflict with many leaders of the Anglican clergy, and defenders of traditional classical education. Many industrialists did not support his programs of technical education; why should labourers and 'working men' have knowledge? If there is anything that Huxley can be reasonably blamed for, it is the introduction laboratory methods and techniques to the life sciences, the foundations of modern biology as a discipline, and the increased authority of science in culture (this was also loathed by some of his contemporaries). He lived in a time and place where it had comparatively little.

I am trying to imagine what Huxley might say about the campaign to rename the college of environment on the grounds that he was a racist, eugenicist, and eco-fascist. I expect he would be very supportive of any student-led movement of resistance to oppression, but puzzled that he was seen as the oppressor. In delivering this report, I tried to re-familiarize myself with his writings on race and was surprised by their diversity and shifts of emphasis, if not outright contradiction. They verge from the audacious to the highly technical. They assert natural inequality without clearly grounding it in any of the typical formula of scientific racism. Though Huxley promotes craniometry and anthropometry, he never draws any conclusions about racial hierarchy on these grounds, and even undermines them. Thus the Australian type rank lowest, but have bigger brains than the 'Negroid'; complexion, facial angles, and other 'brutish' features count for nothing when it comes to intelligence. The only explanation he seems to offer for the 'primitive' condition of other peoples is their geographical isolation, which is to say, their failure to mix with other peoples, to produce vigorous hybrids or mongrels like himself. Their isolation, too, from European culture and civilisation which they can and must absorb, or perish.

I have tried to understand something of the situation you are facing, and have read several articles in

the AS Review (“Thomas Huxley: Once Respected, Now Rejected,” “Students Continue to Push for Huxley College Name Change”). These are not well informed and are stitched together from a handful of sources. From the *Executive Intelligence Review* (one of the sources cited), I learned that Huxley orchestrated the hideous conspiracy that man is an instinct driven ape-like creature. Huxley is described as an abolitionist, he was in fact much more than this. He called for the elimination of all political, legal, and economic prejudices, equal rights and opportunities for people of all races (and sexes). If the staff and students agree to remove Huxley's name, they should at least do so with a better understanding of his views, and an appreciation for his place in the history of human emancipation and activism.

Yours sincerely,  
Paul White

Affiliated scholar, Department of History and Philosophy of Science  
Research associate, Darwin Correspondence Project  
University of Cambridge