

In Defense of Robert A. Millikan

Re: The Report of the Committee on Naming and Recognition to the Caltech Board of Trustees

Background

The recently created Committee on Naming and Recognition (CNR) issued a Report dated December 17, 2020 recommending that Caltech remove the name of Robert A. Millikan from all assets and honors as delineated in Appendix D of the Report. The Report was discussed and adopted by an overwhelming majority of the Caltech Board of Trustees at a special board meeting held on January 13, 2021. Below is a statement of Robert Bonner, one of the three trustees who dissented.

Dissenting Statement of Trustee Robert Bonner

I realize that this is a difficult and complex issue, but regarding Dr. Millikan, for reasons I will explain momentarily, I do not agree with the recommendation and oppose the motion to adopt the recommendation that we remove Dr. Millikan's name from the Millikan Library, the Millikan Board Room, his portrait from the Athenaeum, the medal award named in his honor, and the other items named for him listed in Appendix D of the report.

Severance

First, in recognition of his extraordinary contributions to the Institute, I am requesting that the recommendation as to Dr. Millikan be severed and considered separately from that of the other individuals. The other individuals, Messrs. Chandler, Robinson, Ruddock, Munro, and Gosney, were donors to Caltech and prominent individuals -- newspaper publishers, businessmen and so on -- but none of them are as central to the history of Caltech as Dr. Millikan.

We are Erasing History, Make No Mistake

The Report states several times, as if to reassure us, that adopting its recommendation re Dr. Millikan will not be "erasing history", but that is surely what the effect will be. Dr. Millikan's name will be removed from the Institute and in a very real sense we will be erasing his memory.

The Report suggests that this is not part of the *cancel* culture of the moment, but if we are honest with ourselves, this surely is part of canceling and removing a historic figure who is now viewed as flawed for evidently believing in something, eugenics, which we now view, in hindsight, as inappropriate or unethical, or given the abuses in the name of eugenics that later came to light, something morally offensive, or as President Rosenbaum put it, "morally reprehensible."

Indeed, on multiple occasions the report cites to the killing of George Floyd and the demands for social justice that have roiled our nation since late May and which have given birth to a culture of cancelation.

I strongly believe in police reform, but some aspects of this movement are reactions, emotional reactions that propose actions that are not necessarily wise or right. Defunding the police is but one example. The movement and its demands are born out of pain and anger, and they have, as Dr. Rosenbaum observed, an "emotional resonance." All the more reason that we should be wary. We should take care not to be swept up in the passion of the moment.

The cancel culture is, I believe, worthy of some degree of wariness. Indeed, this might be a good time for all of us to take a deep breath and hit the pause button. Ben Rosen, the chair of the CNR, expressed concern that the Committee's work might have taken until January 2022 but for some good staff support to the CNR. The first thought that struck me when he said this was that it would be better to decide the issue of removal of Dr. Millikan's name from Caltech in January 2022, than in the heat of the moment.

Usually, when a person is accused of serious charges that impugn his or her reputation, that person has a chance to explain themselves. But here the charges against Dr. Millikan are leveled against him seven decades after his death. He is not here to defend himself and his good name. There is, I believe, something unfair about this.

The Report purports to give the perspective of those who oppose removing Millikan's name from the Institute, but it entirely omits the fact that by adopting the recommendations regarding Dr. Millikan, *we will be seriously damaging, indeed, destroying the reputation of Dr. Millikan*. Nowhere does the Report so much as mention the damage to Dr. Millikan's reputation that will surely result from the action it recommends.

And let's not kid ourselves, if we adopt the recommendations we *are* destroying a person's reputation. And not just *any* person, but *the one* person who is most responsible for making Caltech the truly great science and research university that it is. Dr. Millikan was not just the longest serving President in Caltech's history, he is the most important and influential person in its history.

There's an old saying: He who steals my purse, steals trash. But he who steals my good name leaves me very poor indeed.

Make no mistake, what is being proposed will "steal", will damage and forever besmirch Dr. Millikan's name and reputation. As Professor Wey Gomez intimated, we will be stating, in effect, that Dr. Millikan was not a decent person, he was not a good person.

Principles for Removing Recognition

Regarding the principles that apply to this situation, and let's face it, we are making them up as we go, I agree with one principle articulated by the CNR: There is "a presumption against" removing someone's name -- and severely damaging his reputation -- especially when that individual, like Dr. Millikan, "is central to the Institute's history." See Report, 10.

I would argue that the corollary to this presumption is that the evidence must be extremely compelling to overcome this presumption. We should not leap to conclusions where the evidence does not support them.

In my view, the evidence must be such as to show that a person's beliefs or actions were egregious and viewed as morally reprehensible *at the time*. It should not be based on views held in 2021 or much after the fact, but rather it should be viewed as it was viewed some 80 or 90 years ago.

My central premise is:

If we are to destroy a person's reputation – and I will state this proposition simply -- I do not believe we should do it by applying hindsight.

Nor do we believe we should do so by applying “guilt by association.”¹ But with all due respect, that is what this Report does and it does so repeatedly. Unless we are willing to apply guilt by association and a whole lot of hindsight, there is, to quote Gertrude Stein, “no there, there.”

Let me explain.

The Main Charge against Dr. Millikan

The CNR’s primary charge against Dr. Millikan, and the reason we are given for forever erasing his name from the Institute, is essentially that he was associated, as a member of the board of trustees, with the Human Betterment Foundation (HBF) and eugenics. Further, that the HBF supported involuntary sterilization, albeit with significant procedural safeguards, of what were termed then “feeble minded” persons; what we might call today the severely or profoundly mentally disabled.

Only twelve pages of the 35-page Report are devoted to describing the evidence, not just against Dr. Millikan, but also the five other individuals. Report, 12-24. The only actual evidence regarding Dr. Millikan is that he joined the board of HBF in 1937 and a letter he wrote to Mr. Gosney in 1940, responding to a letter to him from Gosney. That’s it. We don’t know who asked him to be on the HBF’s board or why he joined it.² We do know that he had nothing to do with the founding of the HBF and that, as the Report states, he neither led nor shaped its policies. Report, 15.

Much is said and attributed to HBF in its pamphlets and so on, but I believe if one focuses on the record of what Dr. Millikan believed - - and he is not here to defend himself – it is this:

Evidently he believed that there was causal linkage between what was then called “feeble mindedness” (or severe mental disability) and genetics. Although he was not a geneticist, he evidently believed there was scientific evidence to support the notion that genetics played a role in intelligence and, therefore, in severe mental disability. Further, I believe it is fair to say that, by associating himself with HBF, he supported, with appropriate procedural safeguards, involuntary sterilization of severely mentally disabled persons where there was a clear genetic connection. I do not believe that anything more can be read into Dr. Millikan’s response letter to Mr. Gosney, other than Dr. Millikan appears to acknowledge that he had very little time or part in doing anything for HBF.

Despite innuendo in the Report, there is no compelling evidence in the Report that Dr. Millikan ever endorsed or advocated using involuntary sterilization based on race or ethnicity. I say “innuendo” because the Report refers the HBF “promoting what it called ‘race betterment’” Report, 15. Today,

¹ I do not suggest that Dr. Millikan, in accepting a position on the HBF board, can escape being associated with its general position in support of eugenics and, in particular, its advocacy of laws permitting involuntary sterilization of the feeble minded. What I mean to say here is that it is inappropriate to hold Dr. Millikan accountable for every pamphlet or idea espoused by HBF merely because he was a board member. And I particularly believe it is inappropriate to find Dr. Millikan responsible for the abuses of state sponsored sterilization without a whit of evidence that he was aware of them. What seems so clear to us today was not that clear back then.

² The Report says nothing on the important subject of why Dr. Millikan joined the HBF board in 1937. It is extremely unlikely that Dr. Millikan affirmatively asked to be on the HBF board. Rather, it is likely that he accommodated significant Caltech donors, such as Ruddock and Gosney, who asked him to join the board after Robinson died in 1937. Millikan, the consummate fundraiser for Caltech, not wishing to alienate donors, probably acceded to their requests. It appears quite doubtful that Dr. Millikan was ever deeply committed to the cause of eugenics.

“race betterment” reads as if it is a racist statement, but when written in the 1930s, it likely referred to the human *race*, not to a particular racial group.³ Thus, the Report makes an unsupported leap of logic that Dr. Millikan’s association with the HBF supports an implied assumption that Dr. Millikan’s support of HBF was animated by racism.

Importantly, there is not a shred of evidence that Dr. Millikan read any HFC pamphlets or agreed with their proposed legislation -- indeed, much of what is cited was before he was even on the HFC board -- much less that in hindsight he should be tarred with the misuse and abuse of genetics by the Nazis and even within states of the United States that adopted these laws.

When we examine the contemporary historical record, all that can truly be said is that Dr. Millikan apparently believed that there was a link between severe mental retardation and genetics, and this was a widely held view at the time. Indeed, the Report provides no evidence that this view is even incorrect. Even today, most of those who have studied this issue have concluded that genes play a part in determining intelligence, although so do environmental factors.⁴ To state this has nothing to do with race.

Certainly we are not cancelling Dr. Millikan, removing his name forever from Caltech, destroying his reputation, because he held the belief that there is often a genetic factor in those born with a profound mental deficit, even if we assess that view to be incorrect today?

While Dr. Millikan’s evident support for sterilization, albeit with procedural safeguards, of persons with genetically-related severe mental disability, is troubling, we should consider the fact that a significant number of otherwise well-educated and respected individuals at that time supported, with appropriate safeguards, involuntary sterilization of severely mentally disabled persons, -- often persons who required institutionalization.

The fact is that before Dr. Millikan joined the board of the HBF, a majority of states, 32 state legislatures, had enacted laws permitting involuntary sterilization with procedural safeguards for severe mental retardation.

The United States Supreme Court in the case of *Buck v. Bell*, 274 U.S. 200 (1927) upheld those laws, saying that they did *not* violate the Constitution. The case was authored by none other than the Yankee from Olympus, the esteemed Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes.

Writing for a nearly unanimous Supreme Court, Justice Holmes said that science and experience “has shown that heredity plays an important part in the transmission of imbecility.” The point is that, if Dr. Millikan was wrong, so was Justice Holmes and many, many others.

We may not agree with that view today. But we know that many held the same views Dr. Millikan did. Justice Holmes did. Two thirds of the state legislatures elected by the people of their states did. That is a fact.

³ As noted above, the Report quotes from a HBF pamphlet that HBF’s “main goal was the investigation and promotion of ‘race betterment by eugenic sterilization.’” Report, 15. This implies racism. Yet it actually appears to refer to the betterment of the “human race.”

⁴ Even the late Dr. James R. Flynn held genes play a large part in determining intelligence, although he rightly rejected any racial implication. NY Times obit., Jan. 27, 2021.

While some who supported the involuntary sterilization may have been animated by racial bias, there is no compelling evidence that Dr. Millikan's views were so animated. The few comments in letters to his wife are entirely unrelated to eugenics or the HBF. To say that Dr. Millikan's views were in any way animated by racism or ethnic considerations is a stretch. This "evidence" is not only extremely circumstantial and tenuous, but frankly, it would not stand up in a court of law.

So, on the primary charge of the CNR's indictment, we should insist on more evidence than this before destroying the reputation of the person most responsible for Caltech being the great scientific research university that it is today.

We are left with what is essentially a charge that Dr. Millikan was negligent. Noting that some geneticists had turned away from eugenics in the 1930s, Dr. Millikan, who was not a geneticist, is chastised for his lack of due diligence before joining the HBF board. This criticism may well be valid, but it is a charge that Dr. Millikan should have known better. It is one thing to remove someone's name based on what they believed, but quite another to remove it because they were negligent. The failure to conduct due diligence fails, in my view, as a basis for removing Dr. Millikan's name from buildings or honors that have heretofore been named to recognize him.

Other Charges Raised

A single letter authored by Dr. Millikan to the President of Duke in 1936 is offered to support a completely different charge of sexism, a word that most probably did not exist back then. Report, 20-21. This charge has nothing to do with the charge that Dr. Milliken held views about eugenics.

But was he sexist as we use that word today? Possibly. But the case is not proven by his letter to the Duke President. Dr. Millikan was born in 1868, over 150 years ago. The one letter to the President of Duke University in 1936 is not such compelling evidence of sexism, I would submit, that we should cancel Dr. Millikan. Indeed, fairly read, he seems to be lamenting, not that women cannot become outstanding physicists ("we have not developed in this country *as yet* no outstanding woman physicists.") – he names two in Europe -- but that this was a rarity in the U.S. I heard a similar lament just a year or so ago. I do not believe it appropriate to cancel Dr. Millikan, to destroy his reputation, and his importance to the Institute for this, for not coming up with affirmative action for women physicists in the 1930s.

Was this person of evidently Anglo-Saxon roots, biased against Italians? Or Irish Americans? Or Blacks. He probably had some biases that we would condemn today.⁵ Such biases are not to be condoned, but standing alone, do they warrant the extreme action that is being recommended? I would say, no. Even Lincoln would not pass this test.

⁵ While in Mississippi in the early 1950s, Dr. Millikan wrote to his wife that "more than half the population in this state is made up of negroes. . . . [I]t means that under universal suffrage they could control the state now – an unthinkable disaster in view of the sort of people they now are." Report, 22. Although problematic, the remark is in some sense ambiguous. It could be interpreted to be racist, but it could also be interpreted to mean that Blacks in Mississippi lacked education because of the failure of the system and Reconstruction to uplift and educate Blacks following emancipation under the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, an issue we are still struggling with today. There is no question that such Millikan's view is politically incorrect today, not the least because it is so patently undemocratic.

Closing

I will end with this.

If this Institute is truly committed to preserving history, if it is truly committed to portraying its historical legacy, warts and all, the last thing it should do is remove Dr. Millikan's name. What it should do is preserve his name, but have a plaque at the *Millikan Library* that describes this complicated history. Have an interactive kiosk there. In that way, students and visitors and all who love and want to learn of about Caltech will learn of the flaws of even great scientists and institution builders like Robert A. Millikan.

If the motion to remove Dr. Millikan's name is defeated, I will propose this as an alternative motion.

Final Word

If there were evidence that Dr. Millikan supported involuntary sterilizations based on a person's race or ethnicity, I would vote "yes" in a nano-second. But friends and fellow trustees, the evidence in not there.

From our perches in the 21st century, some 80-90 years later, do we do extreme damage to a person's reputation because he believed there was science that supported involuntary sterilization in limited circumstances involving persons with extreme mental deficiency?

Based on what we now know about the abuses of eugenics and sterilizations, I don't agree with Dr. Millikan's views today. They are truly morally troubling. But I am well aware that I have the great benefit of hindsight.

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