

DISCUSSION NOTE

Thomas Kuhn, Hyperbole, and the Ashtray: Evidence of Morris' Faulty Memory

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Abstract

Errol Morris has claimed that Kuhn threw an ashtray at him during a dispute about some matter in the history of science. Morris also claims that Kuhn threw him out of the graduate program at Princeton for disagreeing with him. I argue that Morris's attack on Kuhn contains some degree of hyperbole. Further, I present evidence that shows that Morris is mistaken about key events during this period. In fact, Kuhn was supportive of Morris in his pursuit of a career in the history of science.

1. Introduction

Michael Weisberg recently published a rather glowing review of Errol Morris' book, *The Ashtray: (or, the Man who Denied Reality)*. As readers know, Errol Morris has claimed that Kuhn threw an ashtray at him during a dispute about some matter in the history of science. The issue that allegedly prompted this incident concerned the proper interpretation of Maxwell's work on electromagnetic theory (see Weisberg 2021, 751). Historians of science, it appears, do not take issues of interpretation lightly. In fact, Morris claims that he was "thrown out of Princeton because [he] disagreed with Thomas Kuhn" (Morris 2018, 169n1; see also Morris 2011). Oddly, this accusation was only raised many years after Kuhn died (see Morris 2011). Consequently, Kuhn had no chance to explain himself. In this reply piece, I want to raise some concerns that raise doubts about Morris's account of what transpired between him and Kuhn.

2. Some history

Kuhn learned some important lessons when he worked on the history of quantum physics project in the early 1960s. He was struck by the fact that many of the scientists he interviewed did not have accurate memories of the past, even as they were active participants in the events of the past (see Kuhn 1997/2000, 303). You ask: How could Kuhn know this, given that he was not there? Well, he found remarks that the physicists had made in published papers or in letters to colleagues that betrayed the fact

that their thoughts in 1962 about what they believed in 1920, say, were not supported by what they said in these letters and papers. Kuhn found this quite frustrating.

Indeed, this insight was part of the catalyst for Kuhn's book on the black-body problem (see Kuhn 1978/1987). In that book, Kuhn aimed to show historians that in 1900, Planck did not believe that energy was quantized, contrary to a widely held view. Planck's remarks in published papers before 1905, and even later, suggest that he only treated energy as if it was emitted in discrete units in order to make the problem he was tackling mathematically tractable.

But this is one of the consequences of historical research. We find old documents that cannot be reconciled with our current beliefs about what happened when those documents were original written.

I think Morris has been prone to this same problem.

This was obvious when he first published his recollections of the ashtray story in the *Opinionator*. In the comment thread to Morris' piece, Kuhn's daughter, Sarah, corrected Morris on his claim about what Kuhn smoked. Morris had remarked that Kuhn smoked incessantly, and that he smoked Pall Mall cigarettes. Morris even included an old Pall Mall advertisement in the published piece. Sarah Kuhn, though, corrects Morris, noting that he never smoked Pall Mall cigarettes; rather, Kuhn's brand was Camel (see Kuhn 2011).

Now one might think that such details do not matter. But Morris appeals to these details in an effort to get us thinking about the incident he is about to recount for us, the throwing of the ashtray. Incidentally, when he published *The Ashtray* in 2018, Morris corrects this mistake. He writes: "Kuhn in those days was a chain-smoker, alternating unfiltered Camels with True Blues (a low-tar, low-nicotine brand)" (Morris 2018, 9). Here, he gives us the impression that his memory of that time was so distinct and still so clear that he even remembers the brands of cigarettes that Kuhn smoked. Well, he did not remember the brands, as we saw above. Nor did he acknowledge the fact that he had earlier misremembered things and had to revise his account. Morris is beginning to look a bit like the physicists involved in the revolution in physics in the early twentieth century. Memories are often unreliable. Is it possible that Morris even forgot that in 2011, Sarah Kuhn corrected his mistake about what Kuhn smoked? Are we to trust his memory about an event that happened in 1971?

3. In the archives

Having spent some time going through the material at the Thomas S. Kuhn Archives at MIT, I came across an interesting document that raises serious questions about Kuhn and his relationship with Morris, as Morris has recounted it in *The Ashtray*. There is a letter dated from February 9, 1972. This would be closer to the time of the alleged throwing of the ashtray.

In the letter, Kuhn *advocates* on Morris's behalf, for him to be admitted to a PhD program at UC Berkeley, where Morris would end up going. So, contrary to what Morris suggests, rather than undermining Morris's pursuit of a career in history of science, Kuhn was actually working to help advance his prospects at having such a career. This is not a formal letter of recommendation in support of Morris. Rather,

Kuhn is reaching out to a colleague, John Heilbron, to pave the way for Morris's application. Kuhn was trying to make a case for Morris.

Furthermore, there are important remarks of detail that Kuhn makes in the letter that call into question Morris's claims about Kuhn.

First, Kuhn explains that Morris was admitted to Princeton as a "qualifying student." That is, he was given one year to prove himself. He was not, and never was, a regular student in the History of Science program at Princeton. Consequently, given that Morris was never admitted to the PhD program at Princeton, Kuhn could not throw him out of the program.

Second, Kuhn explains that Morris did not take the requirements that were set on him upon his admission as a qualifying student seriously. Consequently, Morris's stay at Princeton was cut short by his own choices and actions, not by any sort of vengeance on Kuhn's part for Morris's unwillingness to be deferent to him.

Third, Kuhn suggests in the letter that UC Berkeley should take Morris's application "quite seriously." So he was supportive of Morris, contrary to what Morris suggests. He was not trying to undermine Morris's academic career, even before it began. Rather, he was putting Morris in a position to effectively pursue an academic career as a historian of science.

4. Monkey business

My aims here have been to suggest that Morris's attack on Kuhn contains some degree of hyperbole. This is not new. Elsewhere I have discussed in detail a case where a visiting scholar at Princeton suggested that Kuhn had multiple monkeys in his office (see Wray 2018; and Walker 2010, 433). In fact, as I argued, Kuhn only had one monkey in his office. And that monkey later went to live with a woman who claimed to be a niece of Wittgenstein.

Interestingly, Morris never mentions the monkey in Kuhn's office. I am not suggesting that it was the monkey that threw the ashtray. But I am suggesting that we may not have received the full story from Morris. There is an important lesson in methodology in the history of science that Morris did not learn from Kuhn. And this has nothing to do with Kuhn's preoccupation with Whig history.

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