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## “DEAR DOCTOR”

The story of Mortimer Adler's Ph.D.

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### EDITOR'S NOTE:

I have often been asked about how Mortimer Adler received a Ph.D. considering that he was kicked out of high school at age 15 and had no Bachelor or Master's degree.

Well, here is the story in his own words and I have also attached his dissertation.

How he became a Professor at Columbia is another story for another time.

Enjoy,

Max Weismann

During those last years at Columbia, many letters passed between Bob Hutchins and me, those he wrote me always addressed “Dear Doctor.” I do not know whether that was simply a humorous acknowledgment of my claim to being a scholar of sorts or an oblique reminder that I had not yet earned the title. The reminder I did not need. It came in no uncertain terms from Professor Poffenberger, head of the Psychology Department in which I had been teaching since 1923. Poff said, gently but firmly: “Mortimer, you’ve been around now for almost five years. It’s about time you got your Ph.D.” That meant finishing a piece of “experimental” research, writing a dissertation, and defending it in the final oral examination that all doctoral candidates had to go through. Some years earlier, I had passed the preliminary written examinations, which consisted mainly in a day-long ordeal of answering questions about every aspect of the science of psychology—its history and its present state.

Over a period of two years, I accumulated a vast pile of raw data in the form of test results. All that remained was to score the papers on which students had registered their preferences, work out statistical correlations of the results with other supposedly relevant factors, construct tables and charts, and write the dissertation itself. I found myself either too busy or too bored to do much of this busy work, so I hired two of my students to do the scoring and my sister, Carolyn, who had graduated from Barnard and was working for her own Ph.D. under Professor Boas in the Department of Anthropology, to do the necessary statistical computations. A girl who had been a classmate of my wife at Barnard and was now working with her at R. H. Macy’s department store volunteered to construct the graphs or charts that an orthodox Ph.D. dissertation had to include in order to look right. As for the dissertation itself, I had examined so many of them that I knew exactly how one had to be written: an introductory chapter stating the problem, followed by a description of the method and the materials devised to solve it; then a series of chapters summarizing the findings, accompanied by tables, charts, and graphs; finally, a chapter or two stating the writer’s interpretations of his findings and the conclusions he could draw from them. Once all the data was in hand and the statistical work had been done, there would be no difficulty in writing the dissertation. In fact, I did it in twenty hours at the typewriter, turning out seventy-seven pages between 9:00 A.M. one day and 5:00 A.M. the next.

Before I tell the rest of the story, I must confess that I had little or no interest in this Ph.D. project; in fact, little or no interest in getting a Ph.D. I had not yet read William James's telling attack on the Ph.D. octopus in American institutions of higher learning, but if I had been acquainted with it at the time, I would have given it to Professor Poffenberger as expressing my reasons for not thinking it necessary to get a Ph.D. I had been teaching the subject for five years and had demonstrated in the preliminary written examination my knowledge of it. Why did I need to do some trivial piece of research, have it published, and get awarded a Ph.D. for it in order either to go on teaching or to win advancement in rank and increase in salary? I realize, of course, that Poff would have listened to me patiently, been tolerant of my complaints against the system, but he would also have told me that I had to do it whether I liked it or not. He was so insistent on my conforming to the requirements that he even conspired to help me conform by maneuvering enough credits on my graduate school record to fulfill the course requirements (I had cut some of the graduate courses that I had registered for, and so received only attendance credit for them, which was not sufficient for the purpose).


In addition, I had never taken the examinations in French and German which were among the requirements for a Ph.D. in psychology at Columbia. On this score, I must confess a profound disinclination on my part to become competent in foreign languages. I had passed my French courses in college, but I did nothing to maintain or improve my ability to read that language. I began the study of German, but found its irregular verbs and its peculiar word order so annoying that I gave it up. The secretary of the Psychology Department, a few months before my oral examination, called my attention to the fact that my records showed that I had not passed my qualifying examinations in French and German. She, too, was willing to conspire, and said she would not mention this to Professor Poffenberger if he did not specifically ask her a question about it.

The morning of the oral examination finally came. It was held in the Trustees Room in Low Library and attended by four professors from my own department, together with three or four from other departments. The dissertation I had submitted bore the title "The Experimental Measurement of the Appreciation of Music." Professor Woodworth sat at the head of the long conference table, chairman of the meeting. He opened it by a startled exclamation as he looked at the matriculation parchment in front of him, which con-

tained the candidate's record. "The candidate," he said with a smile, as if it could not possibly be true, "does not seem to have passed his French and German examinations." Then, with another, even gentler, smile he added: "Let's do something about that here and now. You, Professor Garrett, ask him a question in German, and you, Professor Lecky, ask him a question in French." Garrett asked me what time it was, and I replied, "*Zehn Uhr*"; Lecky asked me how I felt, and I replied, "*Tres bien*"; and Woodworth, with a final smile of benign content, said, "Examination passed!"

Since I felt that the dissertation itself was not worth two full hours of questioning, I diverted the attention of the examiners from it by proposing a theory of pleasure and displeasure in the aesthetic experience. The theory contended that pain had no sensory opposite, and that displeasure was not the opposite of pain, but the opposite of pleasure as an affective response that had no specific sensory basis. I argued for this contention on the physiological grounds that we have specific nerve endings for pain, but none for pleasure. The theory was novel enough not only to get everyone's attention, but also to set my examiners to quarreling among themselves about it. This used up most of the two hours, and after returning to the Board Room, which I had been asked to leave while my examiners discussed the merits of my dissertation and its defense, I was told that I had passed but that my examiners recommended that the title of the dissertation be changed to "Music Appreciation: An Experimental Approach to Its Measurement." It was published under that title as Number 110 in the *Archives of Psychology*, edited by Professor Woodworth, and its preface expressed, not fully enough, my debt to all the persons who did the real work on it—Douglas Moore who wrote the music, the technician at the Aeolian Company who made the recordings, two students of mine, Richard Fitch and Sigmund Timberg, who scored the papers and tabulated the results, and, last but not least, my sister Carolyn, who did or supervised the statistical computations, graphs, and charts.

That morning in April 1929, when I finished writing the dissertation a little before 5:00 A.M., I did not go to bed, but lay down for a brief nap until the morning milk and paper arrived. While breakfasting, I looked at the *New York Times* and, on the first page of the second section, found the announcement that Robert Maynard Hutchins had just been elected president of the University of Chicago at the age of thirty. I can recall vividly the thought that jumped into my head the moment after I felt a surge of exuberant gaiety at this announcement. Why, I asked myself, had I drugged

through this tiresome Ph.D. business when it might no longer be necessary for me to have that union card for academic advancement? Then, almost as quickly, I remembered the repeated salutation “Dear Doctor” in the letters Bob Hutchins had written me. I might just as well go ahead and justify the epithet, even if I regarded it as having little significance. 

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