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**Max Meyer and the Psychology Department
at the University of Missouri
1900-1930**

The text of a lecture given as part of the "Last Lecture"
series during Arts and Science Week at the University of
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by

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When I accepted the invitation to give one of the "last" lectures, I found that my biggest task was that of choosing a subject that matched the grave standard set for the series. If I had one last lecture to give to an audience at the University of Missouri, on what subject would it be? I decided that three criteria had to be met:

1. The subject had to be one that I considered important.
2. It had to be one that would interest people from disciplines outside of psychology.
3. It had to be relevant to the life of the University.

My subject meets all three requirements. It is the life and intellectual career -- or at least a significant part of that career -- of the first psychologist at the University of Missouri. My interest in this man arises from my conviction that his name should be resurrected from the oblivion to which it has been consigned and that he should be remembered with great affection by every scholar who values academic freedom, intellectual distinction, and the humanistic values. I hope that this lecture will at least revive his memory for one evening.

The man of whom I speak was Professor Max Meyer. For 30 years he graced this campus with his presence, years in which he enjoyed the greatest respect of his profession, his students, and his faculty colleagues. Historians of psychology generally consider Meyer to have been the equal of such distinguished contemporaries as Woodworth, Lashley, and Seashore, even though all of these people worked at universities that enjoyed more prestige and recognition than Missouri. In the end Meyer left Missouri amid bitterness and controversy, a victim of events over which he had little control and for which he was largely not responsible. He has been gradually forgotten ever since, even by the department that he founded. The year 1990 marks the anniversaries of two events in the career of Max Meyer. Exactly 90 years ago he came to Columbia to establish the psychology laboratory, and 60 years ago he left for the second and last time. Our story begins, however, 98 years ago, when Meyer first arrived at the University of Berlin to begin his doctoral studies.

The Early Years: 1892-1900.

Lack of money was a problem that would afflict Max Meyer throughout his life. As the son of an impoverished goldsmith, he was forced to make his earliest decision as a graduate student by the need to find financial support. For this

reason Meyer enrolled at Berlin as a student of theology, the only area for which scholarships were available at the time. Never a religious person in the conventional sense of the word, he took no courses in his stated major. After his first year he moved into the philosophy curriculum, through which he came into contact with the noted psychologist Hermann Ebbinghaus. This contact lasted only briefly because of Ebbinghaus' departure for a new position at Breslau. Meyer then came under the influence of a person who would become both his mentor and his close colleague, Carl Stumpf.

Meyer was attracted to Stumpf because of their mutual interest in acoustics and the psychology of music. Working under the joint direction of Stumpf and the theoretical physicist Max Planck, Meyer completed a doctoral dissertation in which he presented a new theory of audition that challenged in several ways the then-dominant resonance theory of Wilhelm Wundt. Meyer must have impressed Stumpf, because he was retained as a research associate in the Berlin laboratory after receiving his Ph.D. in 1896.

During these years just before the turn of the century, Berlin was a leading center in the study of the newly emerging field of form psychology. Broadly defined, this psychology accounted for human perception in terms of

organized form-qualities rather than in terms of associations among simple and discrete elements. This anti-elementism would culminate, in the years between 1910 and 1920, in the famous movement known as Gestalt Psychology. Stumpf took an early interest in this intellectual movement and eventually, as chairman, made the Berlin department the major locus of Gestalt studies. His interest in form is also evident in his own research in tone perception. In particular, he was interested in the conditions under which the occurrence of multiple tones might be "fused" into the experience of hearing a single tone, such as, for instance, when the two tones are consonant. This was the problem toward which he directed Meyer's research efforts in 1896 and which would lead to an acrimonious breakup in 1898.

The details of the rupture need not concern us; it is sufficient to note that Meyer considered Stumpf's concept of tonal fusion to be "absurd" on both theoretical and methodological grounds. What is worse, Meyer wished to publish his criticisms of fusion in a leading journal and was restrained from doing so only by Stumpf's strong objections. Meyer persisted, however, and, when Stumpf went on a short holiday in April of 1898, Meyer seized the occasion to send his critical article to Ebbinghaus for publication in the Zeitschrift fur Psychologie. Meyer described what happened

next in his memoirs:

When Stumpf returned in early June, I gave him a copy of the galley proof. He looked at it. I had hoped that he would accept it like a rainy day. But he looked at me speechless, trembling. Said he would take it home to read it. Two days later I received by main a brief note from Stumpf, politely though in the fewest possible words ordering me to vacate the laboratory. I never in my life saw him again.

Whatever prompted Meyer to commit such an egregious breach of academic etiquette we do not know. Stumpf, as the Professor of the department, was one of that class of scholars that Fritz Ringer has called the German Mandarins, and he possessed an ego typical of the group. Note one sentence of Meyer's : *I had hoped that he would accept it like a rainy day.* In this statement Meyer revealed several things about himself: a confidence in the correctness of his own views, a scrupulous fidelity to scientific standards, even at the expense of offending a powerful adversary, an intolerance of opinions that he considered incorrect. He also showed a naivete and lack of political sense that would, as we shall see, be his undoing.

From Berlin Meyer went first to London, where he was

given the opportunity to carry out research at the Imperial College but not paid a salary, and then to the United States, where he worked at Clark University for a year as the unpaid assistant of G. Stanley Hall. During this time, Meyer supported himself by giving music lessons to private pupils.

Meyer at Missouri: 1900-1930

Despite his lack of a paying job, Meyer had by 1900 attracted considerable attention to his novel ideas on audition and the psychology of music. In the spring of that year he was offered a position at the University of Missouri. The university at that time was relatively small, enrolling 1304 students, of whom 50 were engaged in graduate studies. However, it was going through a period of growth in both size and academic reputation under the leadership of President Richard H. Jesse, a classics scholar who, between the years 1890-1908, succeeded in strengthening both the curriculum and the faculty.

Meyer accepted the offer and was appointed Professor of Philosophy in June, 1900, with responsibility for starting a laboratory in experimental psychology. For this he was given \$500 by the University, a relatively large amount of money at the time and indicative of the academic values of the Jesse

administration. Contrast this, for example, with the \$150 that G. T. Patrick had received to establish the laboratory at Iowa two years earlier. The psychology program consisted of Meyer and one additional colleague for many years, and Meyer did most of the teaching. An example of his teaching load for 1910-1911 indicates how much he did:

Introduction to Psychology (2 semesters)

Perception and Behavior (2 semesters)

Differential Psychology (1 semester)

General Aesthetics (1 semester)

Theory of Music (1 semester)

Advanced Psychology (1 semester)

Comparative Psychology (1 semester)

Abnormal Psychology (1 semester)

In subsequent years he also taught Social Psychology and Industrial Psychology. As a social psychologist, I am especially interested in his approach to that subject, which is worth considering in some detail. In his university days, Meyer had been exposed to certain intellectual traditions growing out of German Idealism in which an effort was made to preserve ethical religion, moral law, and spiritual values against what was perceived to be a rising tide of materialistic natural science. The aforementioned Dr. Ringer,

in his book The Decline of the German Mandarins, documents this development. Some psychologists had become involved in this movement, including the father of psychophysics, G.T. Fechner. Meyer had undoubtedly been aware of this, and of the widely circulated writings of Friedrich Lange, a German editor and social activist of the 1850's who had called for a universal European community following the revolutions of 1848. Central to the thinking of this movement was the conviction that political, humanitarian, and social commitment is essential to life in the modern world. This may help explain why Meyer placed psychology, particularly social psychology, at the center of all social thought. In his book The Psychology of the Other One, published in 1921, he described the several social sciences, such as history, economics, and religion, as applications of psychology:

It is easy enough...to answer the question what use the social sciences have for psychology. They simply are psychology in the modern sense of the word; and on the other hand, psychology is a social science...A hundred years ago, Johannes Mueller, the father of modern physiology, made the famous remark: Nemo psychologus nisi physiologus (No one is a psychologist unless also a physiologist). Today a still more valuable statement would be this: Nemo psychologus nisi sociologus.

Intellectually, Meyer's years at Missouri were productive ones. He published major monographs in 1901, 1907, and 1929, as well as six textbooks and numerous articles in professional journals. For all that, however, Meyer languished in comparative neglect. Few people paid attention to his theory of audition, virtually nobody recognized his studies in the psychology of music, and his many contributions to the emerging area of behavioral psychology went unnoticed as John B. Watson, a far less subtle thinker than Meyer but a far better self-promoter, went on to become the "Father of Behaviorism".

In his relations with other people, Meyer was usually respected but not especially well liked. He had never been popular among other psychologists, who considered him aloof, isolated, and disdainful of opinions that did not match his own. He could also be acerbic in argument. Dr. Robert Daniel, an Emeritus Professor in the Missouri psychology department, recalls a story passed on by his longtime colleague, the late Dr. Fred McKinney, who came to Missouri in the fall of the year that Meyer left. The occasion was a colloquium at the annual meeting of the Midwestern Psychological Association, in which a critical colleague passed off one of Meyer's ideas by saying "I give better material than this garbage to my

students". Meyer replied, "Ja, I also give better material to my students. This garbage I save for professional colleagues like you."

Among his faculty associates at Missouri, Meyer's relationships were likewise mostly cordial but not close. He had the reputation of being a good University citizen, serving on numerous committees and earning the respect of those with whom he worked. In 1908 he developed a plan for a University-wide system of grading based on the normal probability distribution, commonly called "grading on the curve". This effort was in response to Jesse's request for a uniform system of evaluation. After a brief trial, however, the faculty rejected the idea, much to the displeasure of Meyer, who refused to have anything more to do with revision of the grading system. The method that Meyer proposed was, of course, widely adopted later on.

One group of people apparently did like Max Meyer -- the students. In spite of his stiff and formal manner, his intimidating way of interacting, and his almost total lack of humor, students were attracted to him and tried to please and impress him. At the time of his dismissal from the University, about which more will be said later, many of his former pupils came forth to defend their old teacher. Most

had become successful and respected people after graduating, and all recalled Meyer as having been stern but fair, demanding but always ready to reward intellectual achievement. Typical was the comment of Mary Paxton Keeley, a long-time resident of Columbia who had been one of Meyer's first students:

He was a brilliant and fascinating teacher and probably the most talked of professor on the campus. He was by far the most outstanding teacher I had at the University. He was pleased when any student showed evidence of thinking.

In 1904 Meyer married Stella Sexton, a student in one of his classes. He was 31 at the time and she was not yet 20. The marriage was not an especially happy one. A part of the problem was the condition that had dogged Meyer since his early days: lack of money. Another was Meyer's old fashioned attitude that a woman's place is in the home keeping house and raising children. Mrs. Meyer had intellectual aspirations that may have been frustrated during her years as a homemaker. After the marriage ended in divorce in 1936, she returned to school to complete work for her bachelor's and master's degrees and eventually became head of the Spanish department at Christian College, known today as Columbia College.

Max Meyer's attitude toward women is suggested in a story told by Neil Bartlett, a retired professor at the University of Arizona. One year in the early 1920s an undergraduate woman came to Meyer asking to be admitted to the psychology department. Bartlett describes Meyer's reaction:

Meyer listened to her, then explained that as a student majoring in psychology, she would have to participate in some experiments involving the smoking of tobacco (at that time he was engaged in such research, and evidently used the time-honored reprehensible practice of forcing his students to serve as subjects). He reminded her that the University of Missouri rules forbade women to smoke, and inasmuch as (she) was a woman, that rule of course applied to her. So how could she possibly become a major?

The victim of this Catch-22 situation was Inez Callaway, who finished her studies at Missouri in the School of Journalism and went on to become a distinguished correspondent during World War 2 and, later, a nationally syndicated columnist for the Scripps-Howard Newspapers and the United Features Syndicate. We can only guess what contributions this talented person might have made to psychology.

Meyer's Downfall at Missouri: 1929-1930

In 1929, Max Meyer became the victim of a series of events in which he was only tangentially involved but which brought his career at the University of Missouri to an end. One of his undergraduate assistants at the time was a young man named O. Hobart Mowrer. In March, 1929, Mowrer was enrolled in a sociology course entitled "The Family", taught by Dr. H. O. DeGraff. The course required each student to be involved in an original research project, and the group with which Mowrer was working had been assigned the topic "The economic aspect of women". The study consisted of a mailed questionnaire of 11 items, to be sent to approximately 600 students. Responses were to be entirely anonymous; Mowrer's cover letter was explicit in its instructions that names should not be given. Eight of the 11 questions were relatively innocuous items dealing with attitudes toward divorce, economic independence of women, and sharing of expenses on dates. The other three, written by Mowrer, dealt with beliefs about extramarital sexual relations. Some were phrased in a way that could be construed as leading and perhaps even loaded. Question 3, for example, read: "Are your own relations with men restrained most by religious convictions, fear of social disapproval, physical repugnance, fear of pregnancy, lack of opportunity, fear of venereal

diseases, or pride in your own ability to resist temptation?"

Meyer's role in the project consisted mostly of giving Mowrer some envelopes bearing the department's return address. Through the parents of one of the women who received the questionnaire, the project came to the attention of the Columbia Daily Tribune, in which a story on the affair appeared in the edition of March 13, 1929, along with an editorial entitled "A Filthy Questionnaire". In a passage that made up in zeal what it lacked in syntax, the editor described the questionnaire as "a nasty proposition and should be promptly attended to and whether or not a department should be given the boot by the authorities of the institution."

Denunciation of both DeGraff and Meyer gained intensity as news of the case spread across the state. A petition from certain townspeople in Columbia called for the dismissal from the University of the person (i.e., Meyer) responsible for "the circulation of such an indecent and vulgar communication." On March 19 the Republican floor leader of the Missouri House rose to state that "the sex questionnaire strikes at the most basic and fundamental principles of human society. It would break down and destroy the moral and spiritual idealism and purpose of the people." Newspapers

around Missouri, with the single exception of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, joined in the chorus of public condemnation.

Meyer's support within the University was mixed. A large proportion of the faculty supported him and DeGraff. Particularly outspoken in his defense of his colleagues was zoology professor W.C. Curtis. President Stratton D. Brooks, who had never been popular with the faculty and was facing problems of his own with the Board of Curators, was not inclined to take up the unpopular cause of his beleaguered professors. Curtis expressed the belief that Brooks could have "snuffed out the whole matter in the first three or four hours and nothing would have come of it." Instead, Brooks joined in the vilification of Meyer and DeGraff and recommended to the executive committee of the Board of Curators that the two be dismissed. Although the committee did make this recommendation, the full Board compromised by firing DeGraff, who was young and relatively unknown, and placing the more prestigious Meyer on a year's suspension without pay.

Throughout all this, some of Meyer's strongest support came, not surprisingly, from the students. In March, student leaders organized a petition drive calling for dismissal of the complaints against Meyer and DeGraff and

eventually placed more than 1200 signatures before the Board as it deliberated the professors' fates. "Students," a story in the St. Louis Globe-Democrat reported, "crowded into the anteroom of the presidential suite and between classes the hall was jammed before the doors. While the afternoon meeting was in session, the Missouri Student, weekly publication of the student body, appeared on the campus with a front page editorial denouncing the restriction of education." It should be noted that the student who was at the center of the storm, Mowrer, graduated on schedule and went on to get the Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins. He eventually became a leading figure in experimental psychology and was elected President of the American Psychological Association in 1954.

On May 17, 1929, an investigating committee of the American Association of University Professors arrived in Columbia. Under the chairmanship of the noted biologist A.J. Carlson, this group concluded from its inquiry that Meyer and DeGraff had shown "lack of forethought as to possible social consequences of the questionnaire", that Brooks had "misled both the people and the Board of Curators on the purport and moral consequences of the questionnaire", and that, finally, the whole controversy was "a matter of no fundamental importance". The group found that the dismissal of DeGraff

and the suspension of Meyer were excessive in light of the magnitude of their offense and their status in the University community.

Meyer had intended to spend the summer of 1929 teaching at Ohio State University, but he cancelled these plans when the faculty at Columbus, fearful of attracting criticism by their association with him, asked him not to come. Although he had a contract, Meyer stayed away. "I preferred not to mix with them", he remarked. In the fall he left for Santiago, Chile, where he spent his year of enforced leave at the University of Chile, supported through aid from the Pan-American Union and funds collected by the Alumni Association of the University of Missouri. His problems followed him. Certain representatives of missionary churches from the United States spread stories about Meyer's immorality and lack of fitness to teach young people, embarrassing him and hindering his work. In February, 1930, he received a letter from the Consul General of Chile in New York expressing regrets over the way Meyer had been treated and thanking him for his work at the University.

The last chapter in the story of Max Meyer's career at the University of Missouri began in the spring of 1930. On his return from South America he was greeted enthusiastically by the faculty. A dinner given in his honor was attended by

his most of his colleagues and by Walter Williams, who had succeeded Brooks as President of the University during Meyer's absence. To Meyer's faithful ally W.C. Curtis went the honor of presiding and of sitting at Meyer's right hand. And then, with his honor restored and his career re-established, Meyer made another of his tactical errors. At a meeting of the Southern Society for Philosophy and Psychology held at Nashville, Meyer gave a detailed public description of the ordeal he had undergone at Missouri a year earlier. In the course of his recitation he made some highly uncomplimentary remarks about several Curators, even calling one of them "senile". Word of this indiscretion quickly got back to Missouri and on May 26 the Board found him guilty of "insubordination". He was dismissed from his position as professor of experimental psychology and assigned to the Central Institute for the Deaf in St. Louis as a research professor. This gave him two years to complete the research on audition that he had begun in Columbia. In 1932 his de facto connection with the University came to an end. He remained on the faculty roster, as research professor with no salary and on permanent leave, for six more years so that in 1938, at age 65, he could be eligible for a Carnegie pension of \$990 per year.

Max Meyer passes from our story at this point. He lived

from 1932 to 1940 in Miami, where he continued his research at the University. He lived there without his family. His marriage ended in divorce in 1936. After leaving Miami he lived with a daughter in Virginia until his death in 1967 at the age of 94.

What message, if any, does Max Meyer have for us today? Perhaps none, in any direct sense of the word. He was a man of his times and he reflected, as do we all, the attitudes and values of the age in which he lived. If we today are smoother in our collegial relations than he was, it is because we are the products of an academic system much different from the one that produced Max Meyer in the days of the German Empire. If we are more tolerant of diversity, more willing to suffer fools gladly, it is because we have been shaped by a more pluralistic society than his. If we are more enlightened and egalitarian in our views of the relationships between women and men in society, it is because our society has moved in this direction. And what of the positive aspects of the man? We certainly must respect his scientific integrity and his dedication to the truth as he saw it. His stubborn lack of willingness to compromise on matters of science was a virtue, in spite of whatever personal disputes it may have engendered. And what of his belief in academic freedom, his insistence on the right to

inquiry that eventually led to his downfall? Certainly that, too, is something we should admire and work to maintain. But I think that the most important quality in Max Meyer, the characteristic of the man that is most important for psychology and for all the social sciences, was his view that psychologists must study the behavior of total person in a social context. In taking this viewpoint, he avoided two of the more common theoretical pitfalls of his times: the sterile mentalism of the Structuralists and the biological reductionism of the radical Behaviorists. To Max Meyer, the subject matter of psychology was always the "other one", the one who is doing the acting and who can be observed objectively and systematically. This other one is a whole person, conscious and acting with will, embedded in a society of other conscious and willful persons. In this sense Meyer was not only a great scientist, but a great humanist as well.

Afterword: Max Meyer Forgotten

The laboratory begun by Max Meyer in 1930 grew eventually into the Department of Psychology at the University. This department of more than 30 faculty now grants the Ph.D. in four specialties and advises over 600 undergraduate majors. It has also kept alive the scientific spirit with which Meyer endowed it and enjoys a national reputation for its

strong research programs. Meyer would no doubt have been amazed to see how the department and the University have changed since his time.

A few local sites associated with Meyer can still be seen. At the northeast corner of Stewart Road and Glenwood Avenue, just west of the campus, stands a large three-storied house that was the residence of Stratton Brooks during his tenure as President. A block east, at the corner of Stewart and Westwood, is another three-storied house that was the home of Max Meyer and his family from 1914 until his departure. I am especially interested in, and familiar with, this house because my wife and I bought it in 1974 and have lived in it ever since. One may also still see the site of the old psychology laboratory and the first home of the department. This space on the fourth floor of Jesse Hall is now occupied by radio station KBIA .

Some campus buildings also recall people associated with Max Meyer. Jesse Hall, of course, was named after the President who hired him. Walter Williams, the President who welcomed him back after his year's dismissal, was a journalism professor now commemorated by a building bearing his name in the Journalism School. W.C. Curtis, Meyer's strongest defender, later became Dean of Arts and Science and is remembered through Curtis Hall on the white campus.

Nothing is named after Max Meyer. No plaque bearing his name appears anywhere on campus. There is no formal acknowledgment that this distinguished scholar ever passed this way. Max Meyer is recalled, facetiously, only through a small building behind McAlester Hall which was dubbed, long ago and by some now forgotten graduate students, Max Meyer Hall. Ironically, it was once the morgue when McAlester Hall housed the medical school. The building no longer appears on campus maps; like Max Meyer himself, it has formally ceased to exist. And yet, as we pause to read again his manifold and varied writings, as we imagine that we hear in our halls the faint echoes of that heavily accented voice, and as we think once again of that great mind at work, we realize that although he has been forgotten, a giant once lived among us.

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