The author summarizes some memories and impressions of Paul Meehl as graduate advisor, classroom teacher, and departmental colleague.

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Meehl as Colleague

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The reader should refer to Meehl’s (1989) scientific autobiography for an account of Paul’s development. I offer some observations about Meehl as mentor, teacher, and colleague.

Meehl as Mentor

I was one of Paul’s very last students. I picked Minnesota for my doctoral work because of Paul and Irv Gottesman; I’d have been happy to work with either one. However, I was too stupid to ask either what their plans were before enrolling in fall 1980. Gottesman had just left for Washington University in St. Louis, and Paul told me he was not taking students. It looked like I was up the proverbial creek. I think Paul changed his mind about advising me principally because I happened to mention Kurt Gödel in conversation. He expressed surprise that I knew about Gödel’s proof (Nagel & Newman, 1958). My interests in logic and philosophy of science (Popper, 1959) were the bait I used to reel in my advisor, except I didn’t know I was fishing.

I didn’t seek, or get, much advising in the customary sense: advice about courses, research directions, or dissertation topics. Meehl didn’t write grants or have squads of graduate students working on a big project. I relied on Paul for stimulation, for intellectual reinforcement, and as a substitute for about 30 points working on a big project. I relied on Paul for stimulation, for advice about courses, research directions, or dissertation topics. Meehl didn’t write grants or have squads of graduate students working on a big project. I relied on Paul for stimulation, for intellectual reinforcement, and as a substitute for about 30 points

Meehl as Teacher

In 1981 I took Paul’s Philosophical Psychology course. A lot of his material sailed over students’ heads, but they found it spell-binding. This led to a regrettable absence of discussion; in fact, there was a culture of awed silence. Later when we co-taught the course, we had an easy back-and-forth that helped get students more involved.

Meehl taught from 3 × 5-in. note cards. With a couple of these, he would speak as if entirely extempore. He had such total mastery of his material that he only needed few notes to keep him on track. The lectures never got stale. Paul always had some new insight or a better way of explaining a tough point, which made Philosophical Psychology endlessly stimulating. (I took it three times in graduate school and several others took it at least twice.)

Meehl as Colleague

Critique of Darwinism. I would only add that this list fails to highlight Meehl’s interest in statistics in general or taxometrics in particular. Perhaps two thirds of Meehl’s notes to me concerned such topics.

Meehl greatly preferred intellectual activity (reading, writing, discussing) to almost anything else, from dawn to dusk. His two leisure activities seemed to be his daily walk and watching his cats. He dressed pretty much the same day after day, week after week: turtleneck sweaters, a peace medallion straight out of the 1960s if it was a quasi-social occasion, and a pastel blazer when appropriate. He was no fashion plate. As far as I could tell, this eliminated any need to think about such boring matters.

My last conversation with Paul was about 8 p.m. the evening before he died. He was dying and he well knew it, but I was entirely unaware. His wife, Leslie Yonce, put Paul on the phone because I wanted to call his attention to a very early paper concerning a Carnapian calculus for neural networks (McCulloch & Pitts, 1943). He not only instantly recalled the paper but remembered meeting the first author in about 1945, and he described their conversation and the fellow’s personality. This dedication to the intellect was entirely typical. I can count, literally on the fingers of one hand, the times Paul mentioned anything nonintellectual to me, other than observations of his cats’ behavior. (He was a cat lover, one of which was named Schroedinger, after the famous cat whose life depended on quantum-mechanical fluctuations.)

Often, Paul couldn’t wait for a response to one of his written queries. (These were parceled out to professors all over the country, according to the expertise of each.) He would call me at the office or home and ask his question. We would come to what seemed the natural end of the conversation and hang up. I learned not to move away from the phone at that point, because he so frequently called right back (within a couple of minutes), sometimes three or four times. Satisfying his nCognizance produced this fabulously rich verbal output, which itself seemingly generated more nCognizance and more output.

Although Paul was famous for not tolerating fools gladly in his written work (see, e.g., Meehl, 1973), he was also well known for what Bill Schofield christened the “Meehl error.” He would reformulate something dumb that one said, so the new version was much cleverer, and attribute the edited version to the speaker. This was not a tutorial technique; Paul actually thought people were making all these brilliant points. He showed no need to get the other person down, and he wasn’t even terribly invested in whether he convinced people of the correctness of his views. I attribute this to his extraordinary degree of inner-directedness. This amounted to a kind of narcissism, a narcissism of ideas, not of himself as a personality.

Paul very much enjoyed a Stammtisch with the experimental psychologists for many years. However, he found committee work and multiperson meetings in general very distasteful. (He once got himself taken off a college committee by tallying his vote vs. the committee decision, showing that he almost always disagreed with the majority and it almost never made any difference.)

A contractualist at heart, Paul took agreed-on obligations very seriously. However, and by the same token, he gave almost all unspoken obligations no weight at all. He would cheerfully announce that he wasn’t going to do X, where X was any of a number of things that people in his position generally did (like it or not).

In Closing

Paul Meehl was the intellectual leader of our clinical training program, our department, and at least two whole generations of U.S. clinical psychologists. With all due respect to my many esteemed, very sharp colleagues here at Minnesota and elsewhere, Paul Meehl was clinical psychology’s surest claim to genius. The sense of our loss, as a discipline, only grows with time.

References


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