

Why I don't have a Ph.D. and, by extension— “what does your Ph.D. actually mean?”

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In 1967, I was given one of a limited number of faculty fellowships to the now defunct Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University headed by the empiricist, Paul Lazarsfeld who is known as the cofounder of mathematical sociology. Lazarsfeld was establishing a more scientific and less philosophically-based sociology at Columbia in conjunction with the theoretician Robert Merton, the founder of a new field called the “sociology of science” for which Merton would later become the first social scientist to receive the National Medal of Science award in 1994.

I had graduated second in my class, with an emphasis in upper-level mathematical statistics, but from a smaller, less prestigious university (Idaho State University), I was admitted to Columbia partially on the basis of a theoretical essay which I had submitted with my application. The essay reflected Merton's “structural-functional” concept of scientific theorizing and Professor Merton had found it meritorious. Merton, then the chair of the department, had furthered my admission. He assigned himself as my advisor and took a personal interest in me.

Columbia at the time was in turmoil, not only because of the Vietnam war, but academically as well. In conjunction with growing antiwar distractions, empirical science itself was under a philosophical assault which was posing itself as a new “wave of the future.” The “hottest” professor at the time was Peter McHugh, a former professional Hollywood actor who had entered academia and who was presenting lectures on the linguistic philosophies of Ludwig Wittgenstein. McHugh was attractive, well spoken and lectured with the motions and gestures of a trained actor. His were the most entertaining lectures in the department, and, needless to say, his lectures became a student favorite since they compared so favorably with the dryer presentations of less theatrically trained professors.

McHugh was wrapping Wittgenstein in a pseudo social-science methodology called “ethnomethodology.” However, he spent much less class time on this pseudo-methodology of sociologist Harold Garfinkel than he did on Wittgenstein's book “Philosophical Investigations.” McHugh's “witty” lectures drove home Wittgenstein's points from “Philosophical Investigations”— a book written in “witty” sophistries which McHugh's lecture style was imitating. McHugh taught Wittgenstein's idea that the nouns of our language did not and could not reflect objective reality. All nouns took their meaning by what McHugh called “fiat” (by arbitrary decree). He was pushing the Wittgensteinian view that the nouns were subjectively imposed and were but socially agreed upon collections of unlike things without any connection to an objective reality.

A common “coffee house” debate among McHugh's students at the time were discussions comparing insanity with sanity. The strict Wittgensteinian view held that insanity and sanity could only be distinguished as private vs. collectively imposed meanings. Insanity was a system of privately imposed subjective meanings while sanity was a system of collectively imposed subjective meanings. Neither system could identify objective reality, so sanity was as far removed from truth as was insanity. It was concluded that the distinction was somewhat arbitrary.

McHugh's “show biz” lectures on Wittgenstein were destructive in a department with a strong commitment to the application of the scientific method. Empirical science is built upon

the testing of factors governing cause and effect relationships. These factors must be “externally existent” for these tests to have any validity. However, the philosophy of Wittgenstein, as popularized by McHugh’s entertaining lectures, cast doubt among graduate students as to the validity of these testable factors as indicators of anything real. Increasingly, students began to view “academic progress” as imposing revolutionary group-constructed redefinitions upon the obsolete and reactionary “meanings” of past academic conventions.

No one seemed to realize that science itself was under assault by this Wittgensteinianism; that without firm, objective meanings to our categories hypothesis testing simply could not occur. No one recognized or seemed to care that McHugh’s Wittgensteinianism was undermining the scientific epistemology of the department.

My fellow students were indifferent to the fact that they were laying an ax to the epistemological roots of western science itself. They were satisfied to dismiss empirical science with sniggering comments about a notorious failure on the part of Columbia’s Lazarsfeld to correctly predict an outcome in one of his more famous studies, as if the failure of a hypothesis represented failure of the scientific method itself.

The “bible” on science at the time had become Thomas Kuhn’s book, “The Structure of the Scientific Revolution.” Kuhn reflected Wittgensteinian linguistic philosophy by proposing that scientific theories were merely functional belief systems which could be deserted for newer, more functional belief systems. None of these changing belief systems identified objective, underlying reality. The scientific ideation “canopy” at any moment in history was always only a consensus belief ala Wittgenstein. Kuhn’s argument was based upon the alleged replacement of Newtonian physics by relativity and quantum mechanics in the early twentieth century.

Bertrand Russell has said that Wittgenstein intimidated him when Russell had him as a student and Wittgenstein had come to be considered the most influential philosopher of the twentieth century by many. Because of this massive reputation, no alternative was ever given to Wittgenstein’s view that human categories are composed of unlike elements; that our categories are groupings of things which are placed together simply by McHugh’s “fiat.” If this is true, if our categories do not identify a factual commonality but are only an arbitrary grouping by human decree, by “consensus,” then using those categories for scientific description is not possible.

This viewpoint, taught by a socially attractive professor and accepted uncritically by my student peers, produced in me an existential crisis. What was the point of education if knowledge did not identify truth about things, but only a temporary belief about things; a belief which could change with time and fashion? I remember standing in the Columbia library stacks paralyzed and unable to pursue topical research because I had been denied by Wittgenstein the critical tools needed to evaluate the articles I might read. I remember watching, with envy, a friend pursue library research for his orals, with no compunction and with vigor, simply because he accepted that understanding something which is collectively believed is the same as acquiring knowledge. For him, academic science had become a social process with which he felt comfortable. He felt absolutely no requirement for a sound epistemological underpinning to knowledge.

At the end of January 1968 and through the month of February this personally paralyzing crises about the validity of scientific categorization collided with politics. The communists Vietnamese launched the Tet Offensive. Tet was a perfect test of Wittgensteinianism. It was the first major military engagement in history fought, not for military objectives, but to influence public opinion. The communist takeover of dozens of cities and the holding the

ancient Vietnamese capital of Hue for a month cast doubt in the minds of the general public that the Johnson administration's "attrition" war strategy was working.

The reality was that Tet was a huge loss to the communists. To gain temporary control of South Vietnamese cities as a propaganda ploy, the native South Vietnamese Viet Cong guerrillas were nearly eliminated in the counter attack. Afterwards, the war was conducted mostly by North Vietnamese regulars, not Viet Cong insurgents. I know this to be the case because my brother-in-law was a Vietnamese speaking army intelligence officer who interviewed communist prisoners of war. He told me that, after Tet, he seldom interviewed the native Viet Cong fighters whom he had routinely interviewed prior to Tet. Post-Tet interviewees were North Vietnamese regulars who had been sent south to fight.

The Tet offensive propaganda ploy also sent a signal to the American left. You don't have to successfully collapse a social order to gain a cultural "meaning shift" or a change in collective cultural ideas using disruptive tactics. Tet introduced the idea of the politics of disruption which fit perfectly well with the academic paralysis I had been personally suffering under Wittgensteinian influence.

The lesson of Tet reinforced what I already knew to be true. Normal academic pursuits had already been "disrupted" for me. Western civilization had been built upon the premise that phenomena can be categorized by form and function. These forms and functions provide a rational or logical relationship between members of any category. Classical knowledge consisted of proposing this logic as the description for individual members of the category; as the thing which members held in common. René Descartes, the father of the scientific method, took classical knowledge one step further by proposing that all such "categorical logics" must be tested against or compared with categorical membership as found to exist currently and within the real world. The scientific method became a form of epistemology, either confirming or disproving the logical hypotheses and thus confirming or disproving the "opinions" of logic and converting them to "facts" or "errors."

Ludwig Wittgenstein had used sophistry to prevent a generation of students from acquiring the academic heritage left them by western civilization. Wittgenstein knew that ignorant people could not identify the forms and functions which actually defined categories (nouns). The uneducated could only identify membership in categories "intuitively;" that is, they were able to identify an "oak leaf" without exact mathematical and geometric knowledge about the forms which ascribed a particular leaf to that category. Since assignment of phenomena to categories were ignorant and intuitive for most people, Wittgenstein convinced them that all such intuitive assignments were arbitrary and that the category had no "meaning" beyond their collective ability to ignorantly and intuitively assign membership. Thus, Wittgenstein placed a barrier between our academic heritage and a generation of students.

I write this many years later as an "autodidact." At the time, however, I was only an ignorant graduate student. I knew that there had to be something terribly wrong with Wittgenstein's view of language and its implicit attack upon the scientific method, but I had no way out of the swamp, no linguist argument which I could oppose to Wittgenstein and which would allow categories to reacquire objective reference. I no longer had the lens of Western culture and could no longer evaluate what I was being taught as either "fact" or "error." The pigmy was no longer being allowed to stand on the shoulders of giants. I became increasingly indifferent to class attendance as I had lost the ability to detect anything of substance in the lectures.

Two weeks after the end of the Tet offensive, in March of 1968, I went to my advisor, Robert Merton, with a very radical proposal. I proposed that all classes should be suspended in the department until the war in Vietnam ended. I told Merton that I no longer

had the capacity to concentrate on studies, an incapacity which I blamed on anxiety over the war. I did this, not so much as a deliberate deception, but because I lacked the language to express my deeper malaise— the dissolution of my faith in language as supporting the scientific method as a consequence of Wittgenstein's influence.

Merton sympathized with my alleged war anxieties. He told me that he had used his academic prestige to arrange a visit to the White House for the purpose of expressing war opposition to the president personally. At the time, Merton was perhaps the most renowned social-science theorist in the country and his influence was immense. Over thirty years later, my own daughter would use Merton's work from this period to structure her own master's thesis.

This professor of immense influence then said something which proved fateful. He ended our conference by telling me he would "think about" my proposal to suspend classes in opposition to the war. It proved "fateful" not because Merton intended it so, but because of my own capacity for betrayal.

My meeting with Robert Merton had been a political strategy. Because of the radical climate on the campus, the graduate students in the department had organized themselves into a "union" patterned after a labor union. I had informed the leadership of the graduate student's "union" of my scheduled meeting with Merton and what I intended to purpose to him. That leadership was waiting for me when I exited Merton's office and when I told them that Professor Merton was "thinking about" my proposal to suspend classes, the leadership hastily arranged a meeting of the graduate students. A vote was taken on my plan to suspend classes which passed easily, primarily because I had reported that the chairman of the department was open to the possibility of a suspension.

It needs to be noted that Merton had said this to me in what he believed was a private conversation and in response to a student who was expressing academic anxiety. His statement was made more in sympathy to my anxiety than in agreement with what he must have seen as the immature thoughts of a graduate student. In this he was mistaken. I was no longer capable of pursuing academic goals. Any career in academia would require that the contemporary career path be suspended for me, but for reasons which I was incapable of verbalizing at the time.

Merton had inadvertently struck a spark which was destined to influence academia for the next half-century. The student newspaper, the Columbia Daily Spectator, reported this first graduate-student vote for a "strike." That report seemed to foment a campus-wide willingness to politically disrupt normal student activities. Several weeks later, the marxist "SDS" seized the Columbia College administration building which was rapidly followed by the occupation of four other classroom and administration building by spontaneously organized students who were unaffiliated with the marxist organization. This included seizure and occupation of my department's main building by the same graduate student "union" which had initiated the first student strike vote.

While the building seizures had been given coloration as "politically caused,"¹ university acquiescence to the initial demands did nothing to end the occupations.

The building-occupation phase of the student strike had lasted only seven days and ended because non-striking undergraduates— angry at the disruption of their education— had placed a blockade around the occupied undergraduate building to starve out occupiers. An

¹ Allegedly a Columbia building project which took part of a park on the edge of Harlem was "racist." The construction was suspended almost immediately and never restarted.

attempt to break the blockade was repulsed with force and the student-on-student violence moved the administration to request the student blockade be withdrawn with the promise of an immediate end to the occupation by police.

The removal of obstructions to classrooms by the promised police raid did not end the strike, but intensified it. Afterward, the building occupations were replaced by massive rallies in the campus central quad which incorporated many more students than had originally joined the occupation. These rallies were stimulated by alleged police brutality² during the evacuation and arrest of the student occupiers. However, these rallies— being ringed with red flags— were not protests, but self-proclaimed continuations of the student strike.

Academic activity ceased. The administration announced the suspension of graduate and undergraduate classes and adopted a “pass-fail” system³ to assign credits for the semester. Thus all pretense at teaching and learning was ended. Columbia assigned academic credentials by “fiat” rather than requiring students demonstrate acquisition of an objectively-defined body of knowledge. The university invented “consensus fiat” as a means of restructuring academics.

The real issue for the strikers was that the curriculum was not supportive enough of left-wing belief systems. This was made clear when junior faculty organized “liberation classes” to replace suspended classes during the strike .

Columbia University was not the same place when it reopened six months later. While its structure was essentially the same, its “ideation canopy” was not. It had become much more Wittgensteinian, having replaced a commitment to an objective knowledge base with teaching-sensitivities to the political prejudices of left-wing students.

“Allan Bloom, a professor of philosophy at the University of Chicago, believed that the protest efforts at Columbia were responsible for pushing higher education further toward the liberal left. As a result of the protests, Bloom stated, ‘American universities were no longer places of intellectual and academic debate, but rather places of “political correctness” and liberalism’ .”⁴

I was supposedly profiting from the “pass-fail” grading of suspended classes (“pass with a Ph.D. grade” in the graduate school). However, I had deserted those classes well before the strike began because *“I had lost the ability to detect anything of substance in the lectures.”* Being assigned a “pass” for non-attended classes did nothing to resolve what Wittgenstein had denied me— that I no longer had *“the lens of Western culture and could no longer evaluate what I was being taught as either ‘fact’ or ‘error’ .”*

The problem was Wittgenstein’s assault upon the categories by which we “knew” anything. According to Wittgenstein, those categories identified nothing objectively real but were only consensus groupings of nominally unique objects which could be regrouped in any number of ways with as much “meaning.” He taught that the categories which scholars had developed to provided logic and commonality for the real world were only illusions.

² The police officers were incensed with elitist students throwing away an educational opportunity which was only an unattainable dream for them and their families. They carried hidden leather saps with them into the building which they used to peel the scalps from the side of some students heads. It was a wound which bleed profusely, but did no permanent damage. It was an excellent control method for resisting students. They were not used on unresisting students who were allowed to walk through police lines without being arrested after complying with police orders during the evacuation.

³ There was one significant exceptions to “pass-fail” in an empirical mathematics course which will be discussed at length below.

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Columbia_University#Protests_of_1968

After the building occupations had ended in a permanent class-suspension for the semester, I used the hiatus in a desperate last effort to reconnect myself to academic science. I “totally immersed myself” in a desperate attempt to write a paper which might reconnect scientific categories to objective referents. Without training in epistemology and only a cursory knowledge of the history of the scientific method, an ignorant graduate student tried to make desperate reason overcome his abysmal ignorance in an unequal contest with Wittgenstein.

Many days later I emerged with a paper which was symptomatic of a student trying to make logic reach beyond his knowledge. Stylistically, the paper was somewhat disjointed and cryptic. However, it did have an understandable point. It argued that categories could have an objective referent and were excepted from Wittgensteinianism if the category could be demonstrated to be manipulatable in a predictable way. The method by which manipulation could be demonstrated was the application of something I called a “tool.” A “tool.” operated upon a member of the category in such a way that it changed it in a predictable manner and would change any other member of the category in the same way. The operation of “tools” on members of the categories such that similar outcomes were produced proved that the category had objective reality.

From a knowledgeable perspective, this was only a primitive restatement of Francis Bacon’s “Organon” (tool)⁵. The “tools” of the 24 year old graduate student were really operations performed upon an independent variable in a scientific experiment and his “similar outcomes” were the changes wrought on the dependent variable. The 24 year old graduate student did not recognize what his discovery actually was; that the existence of science, invented by Bacon and Descartes over 300 years ago, disproved Wittgenstein and, alternatively, for Wittgenstein to prevail, experimental science must be destroyed. The young student only hoped that his hard-won, even if historically ignorant, concepts of “tools” and “similar outcomes” might make it possible for scholastic categories to again become objective referents effectuating academics for him again. For this he needed confirmation and he sought the aid of a professor.

The obvious choice for this review would have been Robert Merton, the nation’s greatest “meta scientist.” Merton understood better than anyone at the time the principles upon which science operated. He was well versed in the history of science and might have recognized in my “tools” a restatement of Bacon’s “Organon.” However, this possibility was no longer available because of my betrayal of Merton to gain a graduate student “strike vote” which ultimately provided the spark for the university wide rebellion. A second choice was William Goode⁶ — another well known Columbia professor— whose graduate student assistant was in the McHugh clique and therefore had familiarized Goode with Wittgensteinian issues.

To be fair to Goode, he provided professorial input to a paper submitted by a student with whom he had no academic relationship other than through his acquaintance with the McHugh group. He returned the paper with red-penciled notes the most important of which asked for a more precise definition of and suggested modifications for my concept of “tools.” However, Professor Goode told me he could not grasp the purpose of the paper or its overall argument, prefacing his comments with “I might be too stupid.” The problem, of course, was not Goode’s “stupidity” but his inability to supply scientific history to an ignorant

⁵ SRNRL intern, Isaac Parish brought this to my attention. He noted that Bacon’s scientific method was built upon an analogy with the arts which, of course, use “tools” to produce forms.

⁶ Best known for books on marriage and the family and as a friend of feminism. He had been brought to Columbia by Lazarsfeld because Goode used massive amounts cross-cultural data which he treated mathematically and was supportive of Lazarsfeld’s scientific approach to social sciences.

graduate student who had been incapable of putting his thesis in the context of academically known linguistic, scientific and epistemological principles. Even though true, the paper demonstrated no real scholarship, tied itself to no knowledge from the past.

I was devastated by Goode's response because I had hoped that he might supply the missing academic context. McHugh had offered no knowledgeable alternative to the Wittgensteinian assault upon scientific categories. It had been left to a first year graduate student from a backwater university of inadequate academic preparations to "invent" the alternative *ex nihilo* (out of nothing). Mathematical logic informed that Wittgenstein's categorization by "social fiat," if true, was incompatible with the scientific method. However, this mathematical truth could not be expressed in philosophical terms which might be familiar to academia. I had hoped that Goode might supply those familiar philosophical terms, but he could not.

It would be another 27 years before the student would bring his *ex nihilo* paper into a recognized academic context⁷. It would occur long after I had been ejected from the university for my offense against Robert Merton and the role I had played in the 1968 Columbia troubles. A meeting was convened among the departmental faculty specifically to address me and my relationship to the university. During this meeting, a vote was taken to exclude me from the Ph.D. program.

I was the only graduate student who faced such faculty strike-related censure. I had been warned of the impending tribunal by several faculty members, including William Goode and Paul Lazarsfeld, and advised to begin lobbying for retention of my status. I was unable to do so for the same reason that I had previously deserted my studies. The *ex nihilo* paper had failed to resolve Wittgenstein's assault upon scientific categories. I was still without "*the lens of Western culture and [still] could not evaluate what I was being taught as either 'fact' or 'error'.*" I was paralyzed by the same existential crises and could take no action to defend my position in academics.

After the censure vote, Lazarsfeld had contacted me to offer me a job as a mathematician in the Bureau of Applied Social Research. This, I suspect, was due to my last effort as a Ph.D. student at Columbia University. Ignoring the "pass-fail" system for strike-interrupted classes, statistical mathematician Dr. Burton Singer⁸ decided to test the competence of his students. He assigned a statistical experiment, which if concluded successfully, would be the bases of the grade. Singer supplied four unidentified writing samples which needed to be statistically assigned to four known authors. The student's were required to develop a test for "writing style" and supply the needed statistical tests which would successfully identify passage with author. He assigned groups of four students to complete the experimental design.

⁷ In 1995, as the editor of a small academic publishing house, I had encountered an environmental scientist, Dr. Edward Krug, who had been excluded from his university position because he had published research which discounted the effects of alleged "acid rain" the latest *cause du jure* of the environmental movement. He had become a pariah in the universities. After sending out over a 1000 resumes without result, he started an alternative science journal *Environment Betrayed*, which had documented that the 1995 Nobel Prize in Chemistry had been given F.S. Rowland for an alleged ozone-killing chemical reaction by dimmers of chlorine monoxide, a reaction which had been disproved in lab experiments. The Rowland fiasco showed that Wittgensteinian social consensus science (from environmental prejudice) had now completely supplanted experimental science. This provided the academic context to the *ex nihilo* paper of my student days and led to my book *The Death of Reality*.

⁸ According to Singer's current bio on the University of Florida web site "...his career as a professor began at Columbia University in 1967 [where he] taught an introductory sociology statistics course that served as a gateway to extensive research in the social sciences." <http://www.epi.ufl.edu/?q=node/763>

Merton, McHugh (in a negative way by identifying the influence of Wittgenstein) and Singer were the only Columbia instructors who had supplied me with something of lasting value.

I had been trained in mathematical statistics, including the calculus derivation of the Gaussian normal distribution, but my knowledge had always been theoretical. Singer supplied an experimental context to that theoretical knowledge. Further, by sheer coincidence, Singer's proposed experiment incorporated language which might provide a "back door" test of Wittgensteinianism. Wittgenstein taught that the noun base of language represented socially imposed agreements without connection to objective reality. He alleged "commonsense agreements" as to what any noun identified. However, how "common" is our use of nouns? Nouns are modified by adjectives. If there were a difference between the way that the four unknown authors used adjectives to modify nouns would that not mean that they are using nouns in an "uncommon" way; that they were using nouns in a unique and individual way? Would that not mean that there is an individual need to modify abstract nouns in order to identify objective conditions, that noun use was not, in fact, "commonsense" at all but unique and individualized?

I was the only member of the group with an actual mathematical background. Therefore, the other students deferred to my desire to test the rate at which adjectives were used. The rate of adjective use could provide comparative statistics for the unknown passages versus the known writings of the four authors. A statistical regularity appeared which allowed identification of unknown passages with authors. The similarity between statistical means and variances for the known vs. the unknown passages would occur by chance only within the probability range accepted by science as significant. The authors were identified as unique in the rates of adjectives they used to modify nouns.

Singer never knew that I was testing an hypothesis, since he required a report which only covered statistical mathematics and methodology. The tested hypothesis proposed that nouns were not Wittgenstein's commonsense assignments of members to a "fiat-defined" category, but that nouns identified abstract realities which required that adjectival modification be applied to unique members of the category and that any individual speaker of the language chose the degree of adjectival modification required to make himself understood. Noun meanings were not collectively imposed by fiat, as Wittgenstein's sophistry argued, but such meanings were individualized adjectival modifications of abstract realities as supplied to unique circumstances by any speaker.

Singer would never know that this hypothesis was being tested, and neither would anyone else. In keeping with university policy during the strike, Singer presumed to assign academic credit for the experiment, rather than allowing the students to earn credit by their contribution. The design and mathematics had been mine and mine alone. I could design a test of the adjectival hypothesis, because the other members of the group didn't have the mathematical and research skills⁹ required to do so. The worst of my inexperienced co-researchers was an Englishman with a smooth, university-cultivated accent. He simply could not understand how the statistical mathematics operated and must be applied, so his contribution was restricted to the counting of adjectives. Yet the Englishman with the university cultivated accent and no math and research skills received the greatest credit for the successful experiment and I received the least. He was given an "A" and I was given a sub-Ph.D. "B+." The other members of the group were given Ph.D. level grades of "A-."

The real problem with Singer's inappropriate assignment of research credits is not that it negatively impacted my personal career— I was to be eliminated from the Ph.D. program

⁹ I had research experience as an undergraduate.

by professors more powerful than Singer— but that it had an impact upon science in general. Without being given lead credit for the research, I could not explain the hypothesis which had guided the research. I could not show how the research results brought Wittgenstein's attack upon academic categorization into question. The Englishman credited with the research could point to no conclusion from a project which he couldn't understand. Singer's politicized assignment of research credit would later become common in universities.