



DONALD R. PETERSON

# TWELVE YEARS OF CORRESPONDENCE WITH PAUL MEEHL

*Tough Notes From a Gentle Genius*

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**Donald R. Peterson**



**Psychology Press**

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*To Paul E. Meehl, who taught thousands of students how to think and blessed the lives of those who knew him well.*

The Master in the Art of Living makes little distinction between his work and his play, his labor and his leisure, his mind and his body, his education and his recreation, his love and his intellectual passion. He hardly knows which is which. He simply pursues his vision of excellence in whatever he does, leaving others to decide whether he is working or playing.

Adapted from an ancient Zen Buddhist text



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# Introduction



**P**aul Everett Meehl died on Saint Valentine's day, 2003. Five days later, his obituary appeared in the *New York Times*.

Dr. Paul Meehl, a University of Minnesota psychologist whose writings on research methodology, mental illness and other topics influenced generations of researchers and psychotherapists, died on Friday at his home in Minneapolis. He was 83.

The cause was chronic myelomonocytic leukemia, his colleagues said.

The names of other American psychologists—B. F. Skinner, for example—might be more familiar to the public. But many experts say Dr. Meehl's influence within his field was equally profound.

His writings are widely cited and prescribed reading for every graduate student. His insistence on precise thinking and scientific tough-mindedness made him a scourge to some and a role model to many others.

In the early 1960's, when a vast majority of psychiatrists and psychologists believed that schizophrenia was caused by bad parenting, Dr. Meehl argued that the illness must have a strong genetic component, and discussed the subject in his 1962 presidential address to the American Psychological Association. Forty years later, the genetic basis of schizophrenia is widely accepted.

In a 1954 book, "Clinical Versus Statistical Prediction: A Theoretical Analysis and Review of the Evidence," Dr. Meehl, who retired in 1990 but continued to teach at the university until last year, enraged many colleagues by pointing out, in meticulous and acerbic detail, why clinicians were not very good at predicting people's behavior.

A far more reliable method, he argued, was to analyze the information gained from personality tests, psychiatric interviews and other sources using mathematical formulas. Dr. Meehl referred to the volume as "my disturbing little book." And many clinical psychologists reacted accordingly.

"Essentially," said Dr. William Grove, director of the clinical science and psychopathology research program at Minnesota, "he was saying that as far as predicting the prognosis of a mental disorder or predicting future recurrences is concerned, clinicians could be replaced by a clerk with a hand-cranked Monroe calculator."

Dr. Daniel Kahnemann, a psychologist at Princeton who last year won the Nobel in economic science, cited Dr. Meehl's work as an influence on his own.

"What he did there was more than show the limitations of clinical judgment," Dr. Kahnemann said. "He also showed that the subjective confidence that people have in their judgment is not necessarily a good indication of their accuracy."

Born in Minneapolis, Paul Everett Meehl received his bachelor's degree from the University of Minnesota in 1941 and his doctorate in 1945. He was trained as a psychoanalyst and kept a couch in his office.

Dr. Meehl's effectiveness as a critic of sloppy thinking in psychology was aided by a conversational writing style and a knack for coining phrases. In a now-classic paper, "Why I Do Not Attend Case Conferences," Dr. Meehl listed the logical sins routinely committed by psychologists when they gathered to discuss patients.

One was the "'Me too' fallacy." In it, psychologists, upon hearing of a patient's odd behavior, insist that it is normal because "anyone would do that." The "Uncle George's pancakes fallacy" is exemplified by the clinician who, told that a patient stored leftover pancakes in the attic, declares, "Why, there is nothing so terrible about that—I remember good old Uncle George from my childhood, *he* used to store pancakes in the attic."

Dr. Meehl was the author of one of the scales of the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, one of the most widely used personality tests. In recent years, he played the central role in developing taxometrics, a field concerned with using mathematical formulas to determine the natural groupings of biological or psychological variables.

He is survived by his wife, Leslie Jane Yonce; his daughter, Karen Enid Hill of Seattle; his son, Erik Rolf, of Hopkins, Minn.; and three grandsons. His first wife, Alyce Roworth Meehl, died in 1972.

Given the limits that newspapers require for the obituaries of all but popularly famous celebrities, the *Times* account of Meehl's career was adequate. But to me, who had begun to study with Paul Meehl 55 years before and had maintained a continuing and often intense personal correspondence with him through the years that followed, the cold print of a newspaper obituary could not begin to suggest the force and quality of the effects Meehl had on those who knew him best.

As soon as I learned of his death, I wrote to his wife Leslie, who often collaborated with her husband in their taxometric studies and had served as an e-mail intermediary between Paul and his correspondents during the final year of his life, when macular degeneration robbed him of his reading vision:

*As free of sentimentality as Paul was, I don't suppose he'd have sympathized much with my response. I tried to be manly and rational about it at first, but then said, "Aw hell," and wept. I owe everything I have ever done in my career, the good life I live, to Paul Meehl. That sounds hyperbolic but is not. I have some talent and I've received lots of help from other good people, but nobody in my experience—not my parents, none of the other fine teachers I have known—has influenced me as deeply and pervasively as Paul did. Of course he greatly expanded my intellectual horizons, as he did those of everyone who knew his work. And he gave me the critical boosts we all need to enter a profession—brought me into clinical psychology, guided my education, got me my first job, did all the other helpful, encouraging things seniors do for juniors in any academic field. But for me, as no doubt for some others who were closest to him, the effects went far beyond cognitive enlightenment and professional fortune.... He taught me a form of integrity unmatched by anyone else I have ever known. No nonsense. No bullshit. No lying to oneself or others. Be thou true, through and through, but don't get grim or sanctimonious about it.*

Before Meehl died, I had started to write another book, but I could not drive thoughts of the man and his work from my mind. Now and then, I would go back to our correspondence, to the many ideas we had traded over the years, and I would always find something fresh and provocative in his letters, especially the penetrating, eventually illuminating way he opened new windows on old issues by

raising questions neither I nor anyone else I knew had ever thought to ask. After some time, I came to believe I had a special opportunity, perhaps an obligation, to let others in on the wit and warmth and wisdom that came through in the handwritten pages he sent to me. Besides, I am grieving and want to write one last long letter to my friend. Thus this book, which consists mainly of letters Paul Meehl and I exchanged during the last 12 years of his life.

I have described elsewhere my experience as a graduate student at the University of Minnesota, conspicuously including my relationship with Paul Meehl, and have no inclination to repeat the story here. The images that flash through my memory now, as I move through my 80th year, are still dominated by Meehl. My first meeting with him—I just back from a grisly war, armed with the GI bill, a sophomore English major bumbling about in my search for some way to make a living in an intellectually challenging, morally satisfying way; he just 2 years beyond his PhD but already nationally recognized as the *Wunderkind* of psychology, taking a full hour to describe clinical psychology to me and leaving me determined to enter a field I had barely heard of before I came through his office door. The delicious mix of excitement, authority, and humor that suffused his lectures. The long sessions in his office after he became my advisor—cheerful conversations about vexing questions, always enriching. My astonishment when he asked me, just short of my own PhD, to take over his graduate class in clinical psychology while he was out of town on a colloquium tour, and offered me money for work I'd have been delighted to do as token return for all the intellectual gifts and personal benevolence Meehl had showered on me. He calculated the fraction of his salary attributable to teaching the course and gave me a check in that precise amount.

In 1952, I completed my own doctoral studies and joined the faculty of the psychology department at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign. For long years afterward, my contacts with Meehl were those of friendly exchange between academic colleagues with some common interests. We sent manuscripts and reprints to one another, more from me to him than the other way around, now and then a congratulatory note, letters when one of

us had a question and wanted to talk as we had during my years in Minneapolis. We continued to write to each other whenever our interests and activities coincided, as they often did.

Our correspondence continued after I moved to Rutgers University in 1975 as dean of the newly established Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology. I was the first and am still the only psychologist who has directed a research-oriented PhD program in clinical psychology, a practice-oriented Doctor of Psychology (PsyD) program in an academic psychology department, and a school of professional psychology in a major research university. These engagements have required me to pay unusually close and persistent attention to the “Great Struggle of the Psychoclinician,” never better described than by Meehl in the preface to his classic book on psychodiagnosis:

“How do I help my clients or patients, practicing an art that applies a primitive science?” Or, on the other side of the coin, “How do I preserve my scientific mental habits from attrition by the continual necessity, as a helper, to think, act, and decide on the basis of ‘scientifically’ inadequate evidence—relying willy-nilly on clinical experience, hunches, colleagues’ anecdotes, intuition, common sense, far-out extrapolations from the laboratory, folklore, introspection, and sheer ‘guesswork’?”

As Meehl’s letters show, his preoccupation with that struggle continued into his latest years, as it has in mine. If a single theme can be found to dominate our correspondence, it has its source in our attempts to reconcile the demands of science and profession in the practice of psychology.

In 1989, I “retired.” Paul made the same move a year later. After that, our correspondence intensified. During some periods, we wrote to each other every week. Meehl corresponded actively with colleagues in each of his many areas of interest—with his “gene gang” on genetics, with those who shared his interests in research on schizophrenia, intelligence, personality, and learning; with special “pen pals” among his peer philosophers of science; with his collaborators, especially Niels Waller, on taxometrics; with David Faust in developing the “Faust–Meehl hypothesis” in cliometrics. Many a memo was sent to faculty members in the University of



Minnesota psychology department, addressed simply to “Crew.” The contents of the messages varied from hastily scribbled, always amusing, often very funny comments on some particularly stupid article he had read in a newspaper, through his handwritten speed notes and letters, to major typewritten essays, many of which he dictated after cogitative composition during the 5-mile walks he continued into the last years of his life. His secretary and/or his wife distributed his correspondence, along with his published articles, among the several mailing lists that he maintained. Meehl not only wrote personally to all these people, he served as a kind of intellectual matchmaker by putting colleagues with common interests in touch with one another. For example, it is unlikely that I would have enjoyed correspondence with David Lubinski concerning his elegant, penetrating research on cognitive abilities, or with the philosopher Susan Haack on the pertinence of her views to applied psychology, had not Meehl written to each of them suggesting that they send some of their writings to me.

His frequent correspondence with me was therefore not unique. However, it differed from much of Meehl’s other correspondence in several ways. One was the length of our association—more than a half-century altogether. Another was the unusually broad range of our common interests. A third derived from the accident of our physical separation. Several of Meehl’s colleagues probably shared as many interests with Paul as I did, but many of those were fellow inhabitants of Elliott Hall in Minneapolis who could talk to Paul whenever they wanted to; hence, many of their exchanges were not registered on paper as ours were. I kept his letters and copies of my own in an orderly way so I could recover what we had written before whenever we returned to a topic we had discussed at an earlier time. All of this, I think, brought a continuity and coherence to the long series of our letters that would probably be difficult to find in his correspondence with others.

At the time we wrote our letters, neither of us dreamed that they would go on public display. I had no thought of converting them into a book until my wife suggested that I do so. But once I started to read our letters from the earliest to the latest, a previously unnoticed order began to emerge. Consecutively, each topic seemed

to flow naturally into the next. A cumulative effect also appeared as we dug deeper and deeper into some of the issues that concerned us most. I no longer consider it accidental that the final chapters in this book epitomize the merits of science by summarizing our thoughts on “the scientific mentality,” as well as the limits of science by defining the boundaries of scientistic confidence in our efforts to understand the human condition. For me, writing the book was both a therapeutic experience and an intellectual joy. Each day I could not wait to get back to the office to see what would turn up next. The book wrote itself. Four months after I started putting it together, the first draft was finished.

Of course, some of the content of our letters is personal. Besides our perorations and reflections on the conceptual matters we addressed, Paul and I wrote to one another as person to person. In that regard, the correspondence becomes more than a series of scholarly essays. At another level it is a story of the relationship between Paul and me, at first as mentor to student, but later as colleague to colleague, and at last as aging friend to aging friend—two elders “explaining ourselves to each other.”

Inevitably, people who write frequently to one another develop a kind of shorthand that will not always be comprehensible to others, so I have spelled out some of those. I think most of the remaining abbreviations and other idiosyncratic usages that Paul and I employed will be readily understood. Of course, some of the names we mention will be unfamiliar to people who do not share our academic history, but I think most of the ideas we discuss are common fare in the social, biological, and behavioral sciences. At least I hope that a reasonably coherent sense of our concerns and considerations will be apparent to readers whose interests are similar to ours.

It is not easy to guess who those might be. Probably most of them will be other psychologists. I hope that the book will attract some of the most serious scholars in our field—people who know Meehl’s work as well as my own and would like to examine what we say to each other in the candor of a private correspondence. The book includes an extensive set of endnotes that identify the many works to which we refer in our letters and often add explanatory comments on remarks that are unclearly or incompletely ex-





pressed in the original exchanges. Readers who go beyond the correspondence to the various primary sources that Meehl and I discuss may find their intellectual stores enriched.

I believe the book should eventually make its way to a larger audience. Most of all, it would be useful reading for the armies of psychologists coming along these days who have never read Meehl's work, do not even recognize his name, and need to learn far more than they typically learn about *how to think*. Paul Meehl was the grand master of critical analysis in psychology. In my opinion, all students of psychology need a thorough grounding in his major works, many of which are now conveniently available in the *Meehl Reader*. It seems to me that a book based on his correspondence would be a particularly informative companion volume to the *Reader* in any course designed to help students learn "how to think like a psychologist," the most valuable cognitive commodity anyone in the discipline—teacher, researcher, or practitioner—can offer the public. In Meehl's dialogue with a career-long student and colleague, readers can gain an inside perspective on his remarkable mind at work.

Beyond psychology, Meehl's stature as a philosopher may attract some readers in that discipline. Still further, both Meehl and I read extensively in such fields as history and biography, and in the ease of private correspondence felt free to comment about well-known authors and their works. Whether any of those or their followers would be interested in our comments I cannot guess, but I have a hunch some highly literate readers, whatever academic union cards they happen to carry, might enjoy reading the book simply as an intellectually challenging human story.

I have to say something else before I get to the letters. To me and to many others, Paul Meehl was a genius, but he did not attach the label to himself. Keen as he knew his intelligence was, Paul did not consider himself a genius. He thought this overused term should be reserved for the likes of Einstein and Freud. Probably Darwin too, although, as Meehl's letters show, he was critical of evolutionary theory as commonly received, and annoyed by those, including otherwise respected colleagues, who treated the Darwinian formulation as gospel.

Whatever *he* thought, Paul Meehl—Regents' Professor and honorary Doctor of Science, University of Minnesota, with joint appointments and histories of active teaching in law, medicine, and philosophy; co-founder, with Herbert Feigl and Wilfrid Sellars, of the Minnesota Center for Philosophy of Science; author of ground-breaking work in such broadly diverse fields as learning theory, psychopathology, psychometrics, forensics, political theory, behavior genetics, and philosophy of science; recipient of every major award organized psychology has to offer; member of the National Academy of Sciences; chosen by the Society of Clinical Psychology of the American Psychological Association (APA) as one of two Clinical Psychologists of the 20th Century and in my opinion the only one who fully deserved the accolade—comes as close to genius as anyone I ever expect to know. For me, correspondence with Paul Meehl was a priceless privilege. It is a further privilege to let others in on it, to give them a chance to see the intellectual sparkle, erudition, human kindness, and moral passion that Paul Meehl brought to his everyday exchanges with one of the fortunate few who knew him well.

I am grateful to my wife Jane, who sensed my gloom after Paul died, encouraged me to compose this book, and offered helpful editorial suggestions from start to finish of the manuscript. I am also grateful to Paul Meehl's wife, Leslie Jane Yonce, for permission to publish her husband's personal correspondence, further encouragement as I prepared the manuscript, and essential help in editing and enriching the text. Without Leslie's collaboration, the book would contain some unacceptable errors and lack some of the nuanced knowledge of Paul's ways that only his wife could provide. I thank Scott Lilienfeld and Niels Waller, who read the manuscript and urged its publication. Without their enthusiastic approval, it is not clear that the book would have appeared in print. Finally, I thank Debra Riegert, senior editor in the house of Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, who insisted wisely on a change in the title I had initially proposed, but unlike other editors I have known did not insist rigidly on squeezing the unique creature that is this volume into a standard "scholarly" format that would have destroyed the spontaneity and spirit of the work.



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CHAPTER

1

Meekl



**W**hen I retired from my decanal duties in 1989, the editors of the student newsletter asked me to identify the experience outside the classroom that had most influenced my career. I dashed off the following handwritten note:

*My personal relationship with Paul Meehl. Meehl not only led me into clinical psychology, but was mentor and model to me throughout my graduate study. He was my advisor, so naturally he helped me plan my coursework, complete my dissertation, and meet all the other demands of the rigorous Minnesota PhD program, but he did far more than that. He always greeted me warmly. When I came in the door of his office, he would say "Donald Robert Peterson!" and I would say "Paul Everett Meehl!" and then our conversation would begin, a respectful discussion, often punctuated by laughter, between two people interested in the same topic. We were never close, equal friends. To this day, I feel that he is the professor and I am the student. But by prizing me, he helped me value myself. I have never written an article, chapter, or book without thinking, at some point, "What would Paul Meehl say about that?"*

Some months later, I learned that Paul had retired, so I dug out the copy of the newsletter that contained my statement and sent it to him, along with a letter that said, in part:

*I don't think I have ever told you directly what a powerful influence you have had on my life. I enclose a couple pages of a newsletter managed by the students in our school. Last fall, they asked me to comment on the experience outside the classroom that had mattered most in my career. My response appears on the second of the two pages I have enclosed.*

*I also enclose my latest try at the science x practice issue. I do not expect written comment from you (too late for that—the article is scheduled for the April American Psychologist) but I think you will be interested in the argument.*

Then, the following summer, I performed my annual duty of sorting through accumulated correspondence to see if anything in the pile still needed attention. For the first time, I read the newsletter statement closely, gasped when I saw that Meehl's name had been misprinted as "Meekl," and wrote another letter to my one-time advisor:

August 8, 1991

*Dear Paul,*

*Jesus Christ. I just finished my annual clean-up of outdated correspondence, and noticed for the first time the way our newsletter editor spelled your name. I am embarrassed less by the typographical laxity of the newsletter staff (and my own) than by the harsh realization that at least one of our students failed to know your name well enough to spell it correctly. My handwritten h's are easily mistaken for k's, but I still would expect any of our students to respond with "Meehl" to "Paul ..." as a free-association stimulus.*

*I have also had some afterthoughts about my comment. You are one of several smart but kindly critics who inhabit my brain and read over the stuff I write—D. G. Paterson and Herbert Feigl from Minnesota, Hobart Mowrer and Lloyd Humphreys from Illinois, among others. You, however, have been the most persistently helpful. (I'm sure you understand that I don't always agree with my mental commentators.)*

*With best regards,*

*Don Peterson*

This helped, but my shame did not subside immediately. Three days later, I mailed another letter:

August 11, 1991

Dear Paul,

Last night I was in the kitchen, wife Jane was in the living room, and she came in and said, "What are you groaning about?" And I said, "I was thinking about that Paul Meekl thing, but I didn't know I was doing it out loud." In a laughing way she said, "Oh hell, he's big enough to get a kick out of it. Why don't you tell him about some of the really stupid things you've done."

Not a bad idea, I thought. It takes me awhile to process mistakes like this, and it usually works best when I do it directly. So here's another story.

When I resigned as editor of the *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, I was asked to nominate some successors, with special interest in women as candidates. So I dashed off a note to Al Hastorf [Stanford psychologist], who was chairman of the APA publications board at the time, suggesting consideration of Mavis Hetherington, Lucy Rau Ferguson, and Ann Margaret Garner. I wrote the note in my usual script, handed it to a new secretary to be typed, signed it hurriedly the next day, along with a pile of other stuff, and left it all to be mailed.

A week or so later, I received a letter from Hastorf that said, "Thank you for your recommendations. Blah blah. I am not sure we are prepared to place Morris Hetherington or Lucy Rare Ferguson on our short list, but Ann Margaret appears to be an eminently interesting candidate."

I thought I learned at that time to proofread everything I ever mailed to anybody, but I seem to require repeated trials to learn all the important lessons of life.

With best regards,

Don Peterson

P.S. That takes care of me. I will chew out our students in (carefully proofread) print next fall.

While my letter of August 11 was on its way to Meehl, a letter from him, in response to mine of August 8, was in the mail to me:

8/12/91

Dear Don:

I think I've seen the "Paul Meekl" item before. Amused rather than irked. Re student not recognizing my name, we had an APA site visitor on our clinical program who clearly didn't recognize it. Such is fame!

I'm used to name corruptions—a rare name like Meehl is subject to them. Commonest, of course, is "Meal," and if orally on phone, "Neal" or "Neely." Locally the old Meehl–Dahlstrom rules [for configural scoring of the MMPI] were called the "Neely–Dahlstrom rules."