

## EBBINGHAUS AND THE NEW WORLD †

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Historians of psychology are in general agreement that Wilhem Wundt (1832-1920) exerted his pervasive influence upon the development of modern psychology in North America primarily through the numerous American Psychologists, who received their doctorates at his Leipzig Institute and who, in turn, founded many of the most important laboratories and clinical facilities in the United States and Canada. Hermann Ebbinghaus (1850-1909), on the other hand, appears to have influenced the development of psychology in the new world somewhat less directly. The Ebbinghaus papers at the Institute for History of Modern Psychology (IGNP) at Passau University in West Germany contain extensive correspondence and other archival materials about (1) the relationship between Ebbinghaus and William James (1842-1910) and his circle, (2) the influence of Ebbinghaus on the establishment of the first psychology program at Cornell University, (3) the scientific controversy between Ebbinghaus and Christine Ladd-Franklin (1847-1930) on the nature of color vision, (4) the collaboration between Ebbinghaus and Max Meyer (1873-1967) on the English translation of the Abriss der Psychologie (Psychology, 1908) by Ebbinghaus and (5) the involvement of Ebbinghaus with G. Stanley Hall (1844-1924) and Edmund C. Standfor (1859-1924) in the preparation of the twentieth anniversary of Clark University.

We shall focus primarily on two provocative letters by the philosopher Jacob G. Schurman (1854-1942) of Cornell University, inviting Ebbinghaus to come to Ithaca in upstate New York and establish the first psychology program at Cornell. The letters were written two years before Edward B. Titchener

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(1867-1927) began his long and productive association with that institution. The paper will also seek to examine the circumstances surrounding the call to Cornell and to discover the reasons why Ebbinghaus rejected the prestigious appointment

## Background

### Berlin University

Berlin University (Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität), which had been organized by Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) in 1809-1810 as a reform university, was the largest academic institution in Germany in the fall of 1890 (Eulenburg, 1940; Lenz, 1910-1918). The College of Arts and Sciences (Philosophische Fakultät), to which Ebbinghaus belonged, was the most heterogeneous branch of Berlin University. It included all the traditional liberal arts, the natural sciences, as well as the professions of education and pharmacy. Psychology, specifically experimental psychology, the field which Ebbinghaus represented, was a minor subspecialty of philosophy.

The faculty of this college consisted of 169 teachers with academic rank in 1890. About two-thirds held salaried appointments as full or associate professors. The remainder were unpaid instructors (Privatdozenten), who earned small, irregular incomes from lecture fees or as assistants of the tenured faculty. The student-faculty ratio was reported to have been 40:1 on the average. However, many teachers must have had very few students indeed, if some famous academicians were able to attract 100 or more students to a general lecture course. During the 1890-1891 school year, Berlin University had an enrollment of more than 5,000 male students, but there were only 1,649 students in its Philosophical Faculty. The University also provided instruction for about 3,000 auditors who did not pursue degree programs. Many of these were women.

### Ebbinghaus

In the fall of 1890 Ebbinghaus was a 39-year-old junior academic at Berlin University, who had been teaching for almost ten years. He had been promoted to the rank of associate professor (Ausserordentlicher Professor) only three years before at the recommendation of the philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), who had been impressed by his rigorous methodological approach to psychology (Dilthey & Zeller, 1886, p. 115). He still needed to qualify for a tenured full



professorship at another university, however, because so-called in-house appointments were generally frowned upon at that time (Busch, 1959).

During the 1890-1891 academic year, Ebbinghaus attracted a total of 167 students to his lecture courses on "Logic and Introduction to Philosophy" and "General History of Philosophy." He was widely regarded as an outstanding teacher. For example, George H. Howison (1834-1916), the noted American philosopher, studied experimental psychology under Ebbinghaus during the Winter Semester of 1881/1882. He was one of a small group of students, whom Ebbinghaus instructed in the laboratory procedures on Wednesday afternoons in his own home! Howison, who was 48 years old and had been a college teacher for almost 20 years, commented on Ebbinghaus's teaching skills in a letter of November 13, 1881 to his neighbor and friend, Williams James, at Harvard University (Perry II, 1935):

... I have stumbled on a splendid young fellow here at the University. A "Privatus" Namens Dr. H. Ebbinghaus, who lectures this semester on Psychophysik, Schopenhauer's philosophy and on Kant's Transcendental Dialectic. He strikes me altogether as the most gifted man I have seen at the University, although his standpoint is quite at variance with what I can hold true. (p. 767).

The research and publication record of Ebbinghaus is well known. In the fall of 1890 he had published only one thin book and four articles, a total of 225 pages or about 15 per cent of his lifetime research output. The following topics were addressed: (1) On memory (1885), (2) The laws of brightness contrasts (1887), (3) Reasons for deviations from Weber's law of visual perceptions (1889), (4) After images in binocular color phenomena (1890a) and (5) On the values of negative sensation (1890b). During the same academic year, Ebbinghaus and Arthur König (1856-1901) founded the Zeitschrift für Psychologie und Physiologie der Sinnesorgane (Journal for Psychology and Physiology of Sense Organs), which, according to Boring was edited by "...a coalition of independents outside of the Wundtian school" (1929, p. 389).

Ebbinghaus, who had married relatively late, was the father of a four-year-old boy in 1890 (the recently deceased philosopher, Julius Ebbinghaus, whom I had the privilege of interviewing twice about his recollections of his father). His official salary at Berlin University consisted of "2,000 Marks and a housing allowance" (Gossler, 1886). To this he was able to add the respectable income of 3,890 Marks from lecture fees paid by his students.

Ebbinghaus had an active circle of friends and intellectual associates among the younger faculty members and the intellectuals and Bohemians associated with Berlin University. These included at that time the military historian Hans Delbrück

(1848-1929), the philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), the classicist Hermann Diels (1848-1922), the Indologist Paul Deussen (1845-1919), the sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (1855-1936), and the journalist Lou Andreas-Salomè. (1861-1937).

### Cornell University

Cornell University was founded in 1865 to provide a "...university of the first magnitude -such as we have in Europe" and to create in "...Ithaca the seat of learning of New York, if not Amer.ca..." (Bishop, 1962). In the fall of 1890, the university had an enrollment of 1,100 male and 290 female undergraduates and about 80 graduate students. Instruction was provided by 53 male professors of whom 60 per cent held the doctorate in this area of specialization. The classes were held in ten new buildings and the library.

The department of Philosophy at Cornell was established in October of 1890. Funding was provided by the American philanthropist, Henry William Sage (1814-1897), who had made his fortune in lumber and transportation (Veysey, 1959). Sage was a long-time member of the Cornell Board of Trustees (1870-1897) and served as its president for more than twenty years (1875-1897). The first director of the philosophy program was Jacob Schurman, who was to invite Ebbinghaus to Cornell. A faculty of 8-10 professors provided instruction in history, philosophy of religion, pedagogy, psychology, modern philosophy, Greek philosophy and logic. As a special innovation, the new college was to have its own psychological laboratory. In addition, the school would edit and publish a new journal -the Philosophical Review (Cornell University Register, 1891-1892).

### Schurman

Jacob G. Schurman was born in Canada in 1854, a descendent of New Yorkers of Dutch origin, who had left the United States after the Revolutionary War, due to Loyalist sympathies (Veysey, 1959). He received his B.A. from the University of London with first class honors in "Mental and Moral Science." A year at Edinburgh earned him a D. Sc. with distinction in 1878. Refusing a teaching post at Acadia in Nova Scotia, because its Baptist traditions seemed too narrow for him, he, instead, spent a year in Heidelberg with Kuno Fischer (1824-1907). A second year was divided between Göttingen and Berlin. In Berlin, Schurman became an admirer of Eduard Zeller (1814-1908), the noted theologian and historian of Greek philosophy. Schurman probably met Ebbinghaus at this time. He worked in his field of interest, spoke English well and had been endorsed



by Zeller and Hermann von Helmholtz (1821-1894) as a Privatdozent (Sprung & Sprung, 1985). Schurman served for some time in Berlin as private secretary of Andrew Dickson White (1832-1918), the American Ambassador to Germany and incumbent President of Cornell University. After teaching English and philosophy at several smaller Canadian and American universities, Schurman was selected in 1886 for the endowed "Chair of Christian Ethics and Philosophy" at Cornell (Veysey, 1959). With the aid of one assistant, Schurman provided all the course offerings in philosophy and psychology. He was a brilliant speaker and his courses in metaphysics, ethics and the philosophy of science became favorite electives of Cornell students. After promotion to the deanship of the new school of philosophy, Schurman contacted Ebbinghaus.

### The invitation

1. The first letter found among the Ebbinghaus papers was written by Ebbinghaus to his brother Carl Ebbinghaus (1854-1914) in Bonn. Ebbinghaus explained that he had forgotten Carl's birthday in July, because he had been "...strongly and strangely preoccupied.." (Ebbinghaus, 1890c):

...Shortly before... I had received under rather tempting conditions the offer to go to one of the better American universities in the United States and to found there an institute for experimental psychology... Numerous consultations with good friends and an active correspondence with Adele (Mrs. Ebbinghaus, WGB), who was in the country as well as Aunt Friederike (wife of father's brother, WGB) claimed all my thought and time that were left after lectures and work on the journal (Zeitschrift für Psychologie etc., WGB). What will happen in this matter, has not been completely decided. I am generally more for than against it. However, Aunt Friederike won't hear anything about and my wife is not exactly excited about it... (August 18).

The invitation to "found an institute for experimental psychology" must have been quite tempting, since his own experimental facilities at Berlin were extremely limited (Sprung & Sprung, 1985). Although he reports that he asked for the advice of some of his colleagues, his wife and his aunt were clearly the decisive figures. The aunt seems to have encouraged Ebbinghaus's intellectual interests and aided him financially in Berlin both before and after his marriage.

2. The next letter was handwritten by Dean Schurman on official Cornell stationery. The relevant sections only are reproduced (Schurman, 1890):

... It has been a matter of some disappointment to me that no word has come from you as yet. I think you promised to write me, I interpret your

delay as indicating an inability to decide positively one way of the other. Before you can answer this letter, the Trustees of the University will have settled upon the amount of money to be appropriated for the philosophical department, and I have no doubt it will be more than enough to satisfy all the conditions you insisted upon in connection with psychology. What I want to know then, as early as is convenient of you, is whether you would accept the chair of psychology, if it were offered to you at a salary of \$3,500-4,000 (this latter figure, I think a possibility)...(September 23).

Schurman probably had met Ebbinghaus again in Berlin during the summer of 1980 to discuss the new program at Cornell and the proposed experimental laboratory. Schurman appears to have gained the impression that Ebbinghaus might accept his invitation, and he was clearly disappointed by the delay. However, he repeated his offer again in writing. The promised salary was an excellent one not only for Germany but also for Cornell and other American institutions at that time.

3. The third document is another letter from Hermann Ebbinghaus to his brother in Bonn. From the context, Ebbinghaus was responding to his brother's fears that he would leave Germany and accept the attractive offer from Cornell (Ebbinghaus, 1890d):

I was pleased to hear you would not like to see me go to America ... I can now provide you with the information that I will not go... My wife, as well as Aunt Friederike, cannot reconcile herself to the idea, and although I would be rather inclined to go through with the project in view of the advantages offered to me, I have given up. (September 30).

Although Ebbinghaus was clearly aware that the acceptance of the Cornell position would have greatly furthered his career, personal considerations clearly influenced his decision to remain as a junior academic at Berlin University.

4. The final document in our series was again written by Schurman. The letter is typed and less personal in style and content than the earlier communication in September. Schurman began by informing Ebbinghaus that Friedrich Schumann (1863-1940) might possibly qualify for the Cornell appointment but only at a substantially lower rank and salary (Zusne, 1984). Next Schurman expressed his unhappiness that Ebbinghaus had been unable to accept his offer (Schurman, 1891):

... I cannot omit the expression of my regret that you yourself should have withdrawn from the candidacy. That your reasons were satisfactory, even I must admit. None the less I regret that I am not to have you as a colleague. You have before you, however, a most



promising career in Germany, and I congratulate you very heartily on the rate at which you are advancing to its completion. (January 2).

The letter ends with a request to Ebbinghaus to send an article for the inaugural issue of the new Cornell journal. Even articles, rejected by Ebbinghaus, for his own publication, would be welcome for the new American venture.

### ... And Now For The Rest Of The Story

The saga of Cornell and its new psychology program did not end when Ebbinghaus declined Schurman's generous offer in the fall of 1890.

1. The first catalogue of the new philosophy department at Cornell University listed "Frank Angell, B.Sc., Ph.D., Assistant Professor" as the first full-time teacher of psychology (Cornell University Register, 1891-1892). Angell had received his doctorate in experimental psychology at Leipzig University under Wundt in the summer of 1891 (Zusne, 1984). His major contribution at Cornell was as teacher of introductory psychology, however. He was also credited with outfitting Cornell's first psychological laboratory with "... apparatus... made in Germany under (his) special supervision... and providing every facility... for experimental work in psychology" (Cornell University Register, 1891-1892, p.64) Angell was at Cornell only one year. In 1892 he moved to California to establish the psychological laboratory at the newly founded Stanford University in 1893 (Boring, 1929).

2. Angell's replacement was the 25-year-old Englishman, Edward B. Titchener (1867-1927), a fellow student of Angell under Wundt (Boring, 1929). Titchener was offered the position at the rank of instructor and a salary of only \$1,000 per year (Schurman, 1892). He was to teach the introductory course in psychology, supervise the new psychological laboratory and devote his free time to editorial work for the Philosophical Review. After one year of a satisfactory service, Titchener would be considered for an assistant professorship.

The rest is history! Titchener accept Schurman's rather parsimonious offer and established an outpost of Wundtian psychology in the wilderness of upstate New York. Boring, Titchener's star pupil, had described the aegis of his teacher at Cornell in the following eloquent passage (1929):

Titchener spent the rest of his life in Cornell, thirty-five years at all. ...Only once did he return Europe: to the International Congress of Psychology at Munich in 1896. As the years went on, he left Ithaca less and less frequently, in part, because while immersed in psychology, he had little immediate interest in American psychology and thus withdrew more and more from his contemporaries. (p. 420.).

But these were not empty years, he assures us (1929):

He gave fifty-four doctorates in psychology during his thirty-five years at Cornell, a great personal achievement because most of the dissertations bore the stamp of his own thought... The volume of Titchener's publications was large. Besides books, his bibliography lists 216 of his own articles and notes and 176 publications from the Cornell laboratory. (p. 420).

3. Unfortunately, the future for Ebbinghaus in Germany was less inspiring. He may have believed in 1890 that a "most promising career" awaited him in the German academic world (Schurman, 1891), but the reality was very different. Three years after Ebbinghaus refused the offer from Cornell, he was compelled to leave his non-tenured position at Berlin University and accept an appointment at the much smaller and less prestigious university in Breslau in the far reaches of Silesia. When he was finally appointed to another full professorship at Halle University in 1905, he had to start over again (Robinson, 1985). There was no laboratory, little equipment, and much time wasted in endless and frequently unsuccessful petitions to the Prussian government for financial support.

It is always risky to speculate about alternative events in history. No one can really know what would have happened if Ebbinghaus had gone to Cornell and if Titchener had, for example, obtained a position at Oxford or Cambridge. We know that Hugo Münsterberg (1863-1916) and Max Meyer (1873-1962) went to the United States and that August Kirschmann (1860-1932) went to Canada to establish programs under conditions not unlike those at Cornell (Boring, 1929). All three were successful in their work and appear to have accomplished what they set out to do. There is evidence, however, that none of them fitted very well in the academic worlds of their adopted countries and that they were not very happy in the New World (Roback, 1952). Münsterberg, for example, seems to have tired diligently and continuously to return to Europe after accepting his appointment at Harvard (Bringmann & Balance, 1973). Titchener, educated within the atmosphere of Wundt's productivity, would probably have succeeded as well in England as he did in America. Ebbinghaus, on the other hand, appears to have been a tragic figure. His pre-eminent talent for experimental research, which made him so attractive to Cornell, actually may have contributed to his relative lack of success in Germany, dooming him to nothing more than disappointing provincial appointments.



## RESUMEN

Este artículo describe el intento de la Universidad de Cornell para convertir a H. Ebbinghaus en su primer profesor de Psicología en 1890. Se analizan las circunstancias que rodearon esta oferta y las razones que llevaron a Ebbinghaus a rechazarla.

## SUMMARY

This paper describes an attempt by Cornell University to recruit Hermann Ebbinghaus (1850-1909) as its first professor of psychology in 1890. The circumstances surrounding the call to Cornell and the reasons Ebbinghaus offered for declining this prestigious position are examined.

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