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Did Husserl Take His Doctor's Degree Under Weierstrass' Supervision?

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DID HUSSERL TAKE HIS DOCTOR'S DEGREE UNDER WEIERSTRASS' SUPERVISION?

In connection with my lecture on the unfinished edition of Karl Weierstrass' works [1] delivered on 26th August, 1965, at the 11th International Congress of the History of Science in Warsaw, Mr. W. S. L. Huemmer from Bamberg (Western Germany) put a question concerning Edmund Husserl's (1859—1938) acquisition of the doctor's degree. Among other things, Mr. Huemmer argued that in Husserlian literature one could find merely the statement that Husserl had taken this degree on the basis of a dissertation on the calculus of variations written under the supervision of Weierstrass, whereas the paper itself had disappeared and nothing certain was found out. It does not seem, he added, to be widely known that after he had taken a doctor's degree in Berlin Husserl went to Vienna with the intention to qualify for academic lecturer in mathematics there. [2] I have investigated these questions, and this paper presents the results; it must be emphasized, though, that I am here concerned exclusively with Husserl's mathematical development and not with Husserl the philosopher.

1.1. Dietrich Mahnke writes: "Husserl ist als Weierstrassschüler von der höheren Analysis ausgegangen. (Seine Doktorarbeit gab *Beiträge zur Variationsrechnung*.)" [3]. This statement was taken by Werner Illemann as the starting-point for his investigations, but he failed to find the dissertation in the university libraries at Berlin, Leipzig, or Vienna. [4]

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[1] *Actes du XIᵉ Congrès International d'Histoire des Sciences*, vol. 3, Varsovie 1968, pp. 235—39.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 239.
[3] "Von Hilbert zu Husserl", *Unterrichtsblätter für Mathematik und Naturwissenschaften*, vol. 29 (1923), No. 3/4. pp. 34—37, quotation on p. 34. This publication as well as that cited in note 4 were pointed out to me by Mr. Huemmer in his letter from 22nd September, 1965.
[4] *Husserls vor-phänomenologische Philosophie*, Leipzig 1932, p. 9.

1.2. Husserl's habilitation paper for the degree of *dozent* is not traceable, either. Husserl himself remarks [5] that in the autumn of 1887 a small booklet of four sheets entitled *Über den Begriff der Zahl, psychologische Analyse* was printed but it did not enter the market. One part of the psychological studies contained in his *Philosophie und Arithmetik* [6] is said to have been taken from this booklet [7].

2.1. Already Illemann rightly observed [8] that volume 7 of the edition of Weierstrass' works [9] had been based, among others, on an extended elaborate of Weierstrass' lectures on the calculus of variations during the summer term 1879, and that Husserl was one of its co--authors; this fact was emphatically pointed out by Rudolf Rothe. [10] Still today, in the library of the mathematical section of the Humboldt-University in Berlin there are copies and elaborations of this lecture by Weierstrass in which Husserl is mentioned as co-worker. Thus, Husserl did indeed attend Weierstrass' lectures. However, to answer the question concerning his doctor's degree it seemed advisable to ascertain first the particulars of his habilitation.

2.2. From the documents concerning Husserl's habilitation, which are deposited in Halle, [11] it follows that Husserl had passed his final examination at the secondary school at Olomuc, Bohemia, on 30th June, 1876, and afterwards was a student during three university terms at Leipzig until the winter term of 1877—78. He continued his studies during the next six terms, *i.e* from the summer term of 1878 until the winter term of 1880—81, in Berlin. The summer term 1881 and the winter term of 1881—82 (his 11th term) were spent in Vienna, where he took his leave on 19th May, 1882. Because in his *curriculum vitae* handed in together with his application for the habilitation Husserl mentioned that he had taken part in Leo Koenigsberger's *Oberseminar* in Vienna, it did not seem unjustified that Koenigsberger had also been the "godfather" of Husserl's doctor's degree. Since nothing more could be inferred from the documents of Husserl's habilitation at Halle, further investigations had to be carried on in Vienna.

2.3. To my request, Dr. Friedrich Katscher searched after Husserl's

[5] *Philosophie und Arithmetik*, vol. I, Halle 1891, p. ix.
[6] *Ibid.*
[7] *Ibid.*
[8] *Husserls vor-phänomenologische Philosophie*, loc. cit.
[9] *Mathematische Werke von Karl Weierstrass*, vol. 7: *Vorlesungen über Variationsrechnung*, bearbeitet von Rudolf Rothe, Leipzig 1927.
[10] *Ibid.*, p .v.
[11] *Archiv der Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg*, Rep. 21, Abt. III, No. 193; according to a communication in a letter dated 2nd November, 1965, from the manager of the archives. Dr. Schwabe, whom I wish to thank most sincerely for his exhaustive information.

dissertation in the library of Vienna University, [12] and was successful. The dissertation is entitled *Beiträge zur Theorie der Variationsrechnung*. [13] The high catalogue number [14] allows us to assume that the dissertation was transferred from the archives into the library only about 10 years ago, or else catalogued*only at that point of time, which should account for the fact that it had not been found during the earlier searchings in the university library. On 2nd October, 1882, the Dean committed the dissertation to Leo Koenigsberger as reader (*Referent*) and to Emil Weyr as second reader (*Coreferent*) for a critical appraisal. [15] Thus, the hypothesis that Koenigsberger, who was a disciple of Weierstrass', was Husserl's main supervisor proved to be true. That Husserl chose Vienna instead of Berlin for his doctoral promotion can be explained by that he was citizen of Austria-Hungary by birth. [16]

2.4. Furthermore, from Husserl's personal record enclosed with the documents of his habilitation in Halle [17] it follows that after his promotion to the doctor's degree he went to Berlin once more and, in 1884, came back to Vienna, where he continued his studies under Franz Brentano, who persuaded him to take philosophy. Apart from Brentano, Husserl felt himself most indebted to the philosopher from Berlin, Friedrich Paulsen, and Weierstrass, who "mea studia mathematica maxime adjuvit". Insofar, then, as Husserl was a mathematician, he was in fact a disciple of Weierstrass!

2.5. To complete the discussion of Husserl's habilitation let us add [18] that as "Doctor Vindobonensis", *i.e.* as an owner of a foreign academic degree, he had first to undertake what was then technically called a "nostrification" (the confirmation of the diploma). During the oral examination for the "nostrification" (the *Rigorosum*), which took place on 28th June, 1887, he had to answer questions from mathematics, physics, and philosophy; what is here of interest is that his examiner in mathematics was again a disciple of Weierstrass', namely Georg Cantor! After he had "gloriously" (*rühmlich*) passed the examination Husserl was admitted to the habilitation proper in order to obtain the *Venia legendi* as a private *dozent* in philosophy.

Thus, Mr. Huemmer's questions mentioned at the beginning as well as his other remarks can be answered as follows:

3.1. With regard to his mathematical education, Edmund Husserl

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[12] My sincerest thanks are also due to Dr. Katscher for his meticulous researches.
[13] Manuscript, 56 pages.
[14] D 13.088. — Dr. Katscher's information in a letter dated 6th May, 1968.
[15] A remark on the title-page of the dissertation, according to Dr. Katscher's information from a letter dated 16th May, 1968
[16] This is also a presumption of Dr. Schwabe; *cf.* note 11.
[17] *Cf.* note 11.
[18] *Cf.* note 11.

can be described as a disciple of Weierstrass'. [19] However, he was not granted his degree under the direct supervision of Weierstrass.

3.2. Husserl did not go to Vienna in order to make his habilitation there. Rather, in Vienna he obtained his doctor's degree under Leo Koenigsberger. His mathematical dissertation is accessible. His promotion to the doctor's degree took place on 23rd January, 1883. [20]

3.3. Husserl's habilitation for *dozent* in philosophy took place at Halle after he had done the "nostrification" in which Georg Cantor had participated.

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[19] G. Mittag-Leffler (*Sur les fondements arithmétiques de la théorie des fonctions d'après Weierstrass*, in: *Compte Rendu du Congrès des mathématiciens tenu à Stockholm*, 1909, Leipzig and Berlin 1910, pp. 10—31) gives on page 11 a list of Weierstrass' students including among them Husserl. Therefore, it seems that Husserl ought to be included in Heinrich Behnke's list of those who "bei Weierstrass gelernt haben oder mit ihm fachliche Gespräche führten" (*Karl Weierstrass und seine Schule*, in: *Festschrift zur Gedächtnisfeier für Karl Weierstrass 1815—1965*, Köln und Opladen 1966, pp. 13—40, especially pp. 35—40, quotation on p. 34).

[20] Dr. Katscher's information in a letter dated 25th May, 1968.