

Yes, Doctor; No 'Doctor'

by [Samuel Hux](#) (March 2021)



Title Unknown, Otto Dix, 1923

Joseph Epstein is perhaps the most prolific and distinguished essayist writing today in English. His only rivals are the British Theodore Dalrymple and Anthony Daniels, the latter a physician by the way. (There's a joke hidden in the previous sentence. Does the reader get it?) But Epstein has another distinction neither Dalrymple nor Daniels can rival: he is the most despised essayist writing today probably in any tongue. Does he deserve it? No. But his detractors deserve the most utter contempt, and I am happy to give it to them.

What is Epstein's crime? Anyone who wants a fuller report should see the editorial "Notes and Comments" in the January '21 issue of *The New Criterion*, or Epstein's own humorous essay, "The Making of a Misogynist" in the February '21 *Commentary*. But, briefly, in a December column in *The Wall Street Journal*, "Is There a Doctor in the White House? Not If You Need an M. D.," Epstein light-heartedly, but seriously, advised First Lady Jill Biden—whom he charmingly called "Kiddo"—that she was misleading people by insisting on "Dr. Jill Biden"—misleading for the most obvious reason that does not take an advanced brain, much less an advanced degree, to grasp. Epstein could probably have saved himself from much condemnation had he not further commented on an absolute truth, that "'Dr. Biden'. . . sounds and feels fraudulent, not to say a touch comic." That was enough to drive the femi-fascists berserk. Epstein would not talk that way to a man. (How the hell does anyone know that?) Multiply this nonsense by 200 emails. Then TV hosts and talking heads deplored Epstein's lack of respect for the achievement of the doctorate—and why should not anyone so learned prefer *Dr.* to *Ms.* or *Mr.*? Even Northwestern University, where Epstein lectured (*sans* Ph.D.) for 30 years, in a stupid huff removed his name from its website for his criminal behavior. And I had always assumed Northwestern was a classy place. Shows how much I know. I did—me—attend a classy place, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; but I'll get back to that.

There are of course *honorary* doctorates and graduate-school-*earned* doctorates. Although we might remind ourselves that some honorary degrees are *earned* outside doctoral programs by a life of intellectual service: Edmund Wilson for example, the greatest critic and literary journalist of the 20th century. And some are not so much earned as simply awarded: for instance, Barbara Streisand with her *DHL* (Doctor of Humane Letters), for which Brandeis University should be ashamed. All Wilson and Streisand have in common is that neither would come forward if someone called for a doctor. Nor would the reverend with a Doctorate in Divinity be likely approached by parishioners for medical advice.

Nor would most with programmed doctorates. If the need is appropriate, we call on *M.D.* physicians, dentists with the *D.D.S.* or *D.M.D.*, and psychotherapists with *Ph.D.* or *M.D.* But usually or normally or appropriately—or whatever the right word is—we don't add the Dr. prefix to the names of people with the *Ph.D.*, or *J.D.* (Doctor of Jurisprudence), or *DFA* (Doctor of Fine Arts), or *Sc.D.* (which depending on local tradition can be honorary or grad-schoolish), or *D.Litt.* (same condition as *Sc.D.*), or *D. Soc. Sci.*, or some more arcane doctorates that don't come to mind . . . or the now famous *Ed.D.* (Doctor of Education) of First Lady (but not First Physician) *Dr. Jill Biden*.

I mentioned earlier that I attended as undergraduate the classy University of North Carolina. By *classy* I mean to indicate, proudly, that UNC is always referred to as one of the half-dozen or so most distinguished state universities. But I mean something else as well. Before "Carolina," and after a few years at "Benning's School for Boys" (Fort Benning, Georgia), I spent my freshman year at the local college in Greenville, NC, East Carolina. My parents had settled in Greenville when I was in diapers *because* a college was there, and I felt obligated. (This is not to suggest Greenville was/is a "college town" the way Chapel Hill or

Dartmouth's Hanover are, although a pretty and pleasant place it was—past tense.) East Carolina is now ECU, of which I know very little. When I attended it was ECC—only a few years after it had been ECTC, East Carolina Teachers' College, always called "Eesy Teesy."

When ECC began recruiting more and more Ph.D.s, I recall those profs were called Dr. Cummings and Dr. Meriwether and so on. When I transferred post-military to Chapel Hill, I found that, at faculty insistence, doctorized faculty—like those in disciplines without doctoral necessity—were called *Professor* or *Mister*. Mr. Goodykoontz; Prof. Holman. Or Prof. Natanson—who if he had wished "Jill-ishly" for a doctorish pre-fix might have called himself Dr. Dr. Natanson. (My favorite philosophy teacher, Maurice Natanson, later of Yale, had a Ph.D. in philosophy before he got a second degree in a now-defunct program at The New School for Social Research in which if you had a Ph.D. in one discipline you could earn in a different discipline the D. Soc. Sci.)

What I am suggesting just above is a rule of thumb not universally admitted. The less distinguished the institution of "higher learning," the more likely you are to find faculty called—and calling themselves—Dr. Whatsit; the more distinguished the institution the more certain you are to find faculty called—and calling themselves—Mr. or Ms. Whosit or Professor Thatsit—in an atmosphere of gracious . . . and classy . . . understatement. Does this sound snobbish? Okay. That's all right (which is classier than *alright*). I recently mentioned this rule of thumb to my spouse, who attended, by the way, Mount Holyoke College, Columbia, Harvard, and Yale. She looked at me as if I had just announced with conviction that it was February: "*Of course!*" she said, "Everyone knows that!"

It's time to confess that I own a Ph.D. That is, I am not only a retired Professor of Philosophy but a Doctor of Philosophy as well. I would be embarrassed to call myself in

ordinary social life "Dr. Hux." Well, I once did—or rather my wife did for me. Knowing that an excellent restaurant had a reputation for snootiness as regards reservations and preferred table, she reserved for her mate Dr. Hux, asking casually if it was acceptable for ladies to dispense with gloves. When after dining I paid with my Dr.-less American Express card, the owner gave me a confused but withering look I'll never forget.

Nor do I, nor did I, use my pre-fix professionally—although it was difficult to avoid it. The City University of New York is a vast place, with its dozen or so campuses; sometimes, some parts, *classy*, some somewhat *crass*. The secretaries and non-teaching staff might occasionally call one *Professor*, but vastly more often *Doctor*, even if one was not doctorized, and never *Mister* or *Missus*. It was as if it were beneath their hard-earned dignity to work for one of the latter. So I eventually gave up.

My college was one of the more "working class" campuses of CUNY. Which does not mean a Left-ish and ready-to-be rebellious student body; on the contrary, respectful and eager to please. Confused by the Lefty fool who'd tell his classes "Call me Tom [or Jake or Larry]," they were more comfortable being taught by a *Doctor*. So, when at the beginning of a semester a student would ask me, "What do you mean, Doctor Hux," I would answer to that and in similar cases, until the students caught on, "What I mean, *Patient Brown* [or *Rodrigues* or *Stern*] . . ." But, incapable of calling me *Mister*, they settled on *Professor*—so that's what I remained. (Although I wasn't there, I would guess *Dr. Henry Kissinger*—appealed to by defenders of *Dr. Jill Biden*—was not "Dr. Kissinger" when at Harvard, that classy place. And frankly, when he became the famous public servant, I never heard him referred to as anyone but "Henry Kissinger" pure and simple.)

One more remark before I turn the page, even if the

remark will offend some (even possibly a couple of friends). The *Ed.D.* is not the equivalent of the *Ph.D.* It's a degree designed for administrators, not scholars, and has more relaxed intellectual standards. Furthermore, it suffers from association with the *Education* discipline (sometimes named as at my college *Teacher Preparation*), and as everyone in the academy knows, although not all will admit, the Education major—or the “Ed department”—is intellectually a joke. So that “Dr. Jill Biden,” as Joseph Epstein remarks, has a touch of the fraudulent and comic.

But there's more going on here than considerations of the appropriate (and the classy!), so, as I said above, we turn the page into considerations somewhat memoir-ish. I loved every moment (allow me a slight exaggeration) of my undergraduate experience at Chapel Hill. It did not take me long to know that reading and thinking about books and talking about ideas and even getting paid to do so was the future I wanted. And I knew that meant graduate school to get the degree that's like a union card. But I did not know how much for how long I would hate grad school.

I retired as a Philosophy professor—but I became one only after a mid-career revolution. I began my academic career in English departments. When applying for grad schools I was initially undecided between English and Philosophy, slightly more intrigued by the latter. But research in college catalogues told me that the “continental” varieties of philosophy that Maurice Natanson, primarily, introduced me to were in grad schools not so respected as British “analytic” schools, Logical Positivism, Wittgenstein, and such that did not strike me as studies in *The Humanities*. So, I opted for English, which had been my undergrad “major” after all, Philosophy having been my “minor.”

Armed with a fellowship I entered a doctoral program and, dissatisfied, switched to another school a year later, where over two years I accumulated most of my credits . . . in

courses which, with an exception or two, seemed intentionally designed to bore the bejesus out of one. When it was time to select a dissertation topic (I had resolved all along to skip the Master's degree) I discovered that, in that program, your "choice" was limited to choosing between two topics offered you. In my case, (1) a history of an 18th century American publishing house, name of which I've forgotten; (2) a history of a 1930s (or maybe it was 1940s) short-novel competition. I skipped out and, with the help of a friend who had a friend, got a teaching-assistantship at my third post-graduate program.

At a university with no particular reputation for excellence, I found a mental excitement like nothing since my undergraduate days (and before them the barracks debates back at Benning's School for Boys). With the exception of a couple of Old Farts and a New: an exceptional faculty who created an atmosphere not so much "scholarly" (although they were scholars) as "Intellectual!" The department chair was a Shakespeare scholar and compelling critic who also translated Erasmus's theology. My dissertation adviser was a Melville scholar-biographer who was also a novelist, and who was responsible for bringing to campus for lectures, all in a single semester, Robert Penn Warren, Norman Mailer, Bernard Malamud, Ralph Ellison, and William Styron. Handling the poets—the department offered a doctorate in creative writing for poets who wrote a full book of poems with a long critical introduction (one of them won a *Prix de Rome*)—was a poet, critic, anthologist, who was largely responsible for Dylan Thomas's sojourn in the States. One of the judges on my own dissertation defense was a Brit, a novelist, poet, critic, and translator of Greek and Latin classics: a consummate man-of-letters. And since my advisor was on academic leave in Europe when my time came up, I was advised by an historian of language broadly cultured enough to see to my thesis, which was a literary-philosophical history of American thought from Jonathan Edwards to Emerson and beyond, leading to reflections

on themes close to European existentialism: partially flawed I suppose, like all dissertations, but never a dull word. I am confident my thesis would have been accepted nowhere else. What I am trying to suggest is an English department like no other and none I've seen since and like no other I've taught in since . . . which made me happy to escape, when I did later, into the Philosophy discipline, which in my CUNY college—lo and behold!—has been a home for classical and continental philosophy.

So why did I hate grad school, my haven excepted, and why does the Ph.D. mean so little to me? Grad school—at least in English—was not so much “higher learning” as *narrow, narrower, narrowest*. I've told this story before, the story told me, probably a fiction, by a pal who'd taught in San Francisco. He, another Sam, threw a party to which he invited an ichthyologist, and for this fish-expert's comfort invited another from Berkeley. When he asked Chauncey (as I'll call him) if he'd enjoyed the party, Chauncey said he had not, as there'd been no one to talk to: Chauncey was fresh water and the other guy salt water. Perhaps this parody tells a truth about the hyper-specialization of the hard sciences given the proliferation of scientific knowledge. But an analogy would be the inability in literary studies of an 18th-century specialist to converse with a medievalist—which itself is a parody, but revealing of a direction. Aping the specialization of the physical sciences, literary studies becomes ever more super-hyper specialized as its adherents try to show how “serious” they are . . . “just like physicists and biologists,” and unlike the mere practitioner of *belles lettres* of the past, who would be considered “not a serious scholar.”

Consequently, while the reading and studying of great literature has traditionally been thought expansive of one's mind and culture—and even of the soul—its “serious” study in graduate school encourages the shrinkage of same. And the

Ph.D. is both the symbol and manifestation of that truth. During the almost half-century of my academic career, I taught only undergraduate students, never tempted by the prospect of reading the theses of Ph.D. candidates. While the Ph.D. may indeed be a professional advantage (the "union card"), it is in most cases an intellectual waste of time.

But . . . a combined *but* and *however* . . . I did during that half-century have a distant relationship to one grad school, the CUNY Graduate Center, never as instructor but occasional attendee of intellectual presentations and seminars and had an atypical respect for the "Grad Center"—which housed at least three phenomenally prolific and profound colleagues, who gave a certain tone to the place in the Center's heyday (no longer enjoyed!) of around 30 years ago. I mean the "public intellectuals" Irving Howe, Alfred Kazin, and Arthur Schlesinger. All too busy to have ever considered a Ph.D. which, for them, would have been a waste of intellectual energy. Plenty of academic honors there, but no display of doctoral pre-fixes before names.

I will end more or less where I began. Kiddo Jill should take the advice of Joseph Epstein, who, incidentally, owns an honorary degree but remains *Mister* Epstein. And defenders of the First Lady's right to her doctorish title, should cease referring to *Dr.* Samuel Johnson. In the 18th century, when the doctorate was a rarity, Sam Johnson was awarded such by Trinity College Dublin and Oxford University for his vast artistic and scholarly achievements and contributions. Any comparison between the situations is embarrassing and makes the Lady look *really* foolish. He or she who makes it—it should be said—has no class.

And, oh, did the reader catch the joke in my second sentence? Theodore Dalrymple and Anthony Daniels are one and the same person. With an extraordinary bibliography for one intellectual. And not a single Ph.D. between "them."

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