

# *Mortui Vivos Docent - the Pleasure of Learning from Quine's Archives*

by Douglas B. Quine

Princeton University, June 23, 2008

## SLIDE 1: *Mortui Vivos Docent: the Pleasure of Learning from Quine's Archives*

It is wonderful to be back in Princeton today celebrating Dad's centennial with so many of his colleagues and students.

This was one of his favorite places, during Princeton's bicentennial celebration in 1946, he participated in the "*Problems of Mathematics*" conference and we spent the academic year 1956-7 at the Institute of Advanced Studies when I was in the first grade. When I was ready to go to college, he spoke highly of Princeton and it proved an excellent choice.

This is also a fitting day for a scholarly symposium on Quine. Each Monday night during the academic year he went to the Society of Fellows dinner to learn. Afterwards at home we would hear about advances in DNA research, decoding Linear B, or botanical experiments leading to rediscovery of primitive ancestors of corn.

The value of a liberal arts education is not only that it prepares you to solve problems in unexpected contexts, but also that it drives a love of lifetime learning. I titled my talk *Mortui Vivos Docent - the Pleasure of Learning from Quine's Archives*. *Mortui Vivos Docent* (Let the dead teach the living) is doubly fitting because it is also the motto of my high school, the ancient Roxbury Latin School.

If you aspire to another liberal arts education after Princeton, I'd encourage you to edit Quine's books (although you might start with just one). For the past year,

as my long suffering family well knows, Dagfinn and I have been editing two forthcoming Quine centennial books. It is a wonderful educational and broadening experience. I've found unpublished verbatim lectures and retirement toasts which we are bringing to light. I've laughed at some wonderful turns of phrase. I've spent an hour on the Internet in Google, wikipedia, Princeton's WordNet, and historical sources trying to resolve a single character in a word. Dad's vocabulary was so exhaustive that it sometimes took multiple dictionaries (sometimes in different languages) to check words. He loved subtle turns of phrase. Often what appeared to be a typographical error in an original manuscript proved to be a clever linguistic twist.

#### SLIDE 2: 1975: Nature of Natural Knowledge

Consider, for instance, footnote 1 of "Nature of Natural Knowledge" from 1975. He writes: *This paper is meant as a summary statement of my attitude towards our knowledge of nature. Consequently I must warn the more omnivorous of my readers (dear souls) that they are apt to experience a certain indefinable sense of déjà lu. The main traces of novelty come towards the end.* Perhaps you, like the professional editor, are tempted to correct the French to the conventional déjà vu. But reread the context. He warns his "readers" of repeating text which they will recall having read, "lu". One more letter confirmed.

#### SLIDE 3: 1951: Structure of Appearance"

There is a wonderful avian metaphor in his review of "Structure of Appearance": *One importance of Goodman's book is that it shows how well we can get on without those platonistic aids... It was to be expected that the clipping of wings should be an aid to keeping our feet on the ground, but it is*

*agreeable to observe, in addition, how nimble we can be once our wings are clipped. The truly rational animal, one begins to believe, is a featherless biped.*

#### SLIDE 4: 1984 *Relativism and Absolutism*

Another turn of phrase that took a moment to catch was in “Relativism and Absolutism”: “*It just takes a little stubbornness, a Missourian insistence on being shown.*” What pray tell is “Missourian insistence”? This two word phrase appears only once in Google – and that is a reference to this very paper. Then it came to me – the end of the sentence “being shown”. Of course - residents of Missouri insist on being shown..

Dad was an inventor. Over 75,000 Google references to *gavagai*, rabbit, (I brought one given to him by Altschuler) derive from his writings as do thousands of references to the presumptive spy Bernard J. Ortcutt. While he held no patents, at my last count he was cited by over a dozen.

He also was a visionary, his 1939 “Relations and Reason” in MIT’s Technology Review is a gem. It illustrates taking complex wiring diagrams, simplifying them into logical statements, and recasting them as the minimally necessary circuit. While Dad couldn’t operate any electronic device more sophisticated than a calculator, the Quine-McCluskey theorem still is used to design many complex electronic devices. I love the following section in which he discussed using the same approach to eliminate redundancies and contradictions in complex legal contracts. Reading the jumble of amended terms and conditions for my credit cards and insurance policies, it is obvious that this paper deserves to see the light of day again – 69 years later!

## SLIDE 5: 1992 *Hobbling the Hawkers*

Likewise his 1992 “Hobbling the Hawkers” celebrates the respite from advertising provided by the Merritt Parkway and raises issues associated with unwanted mail that are being debated in state legislatures today. Near the end he expresses his concern for our environment with a finely tuned SAT test gem: *“Man’s abuse of the earth’s atmosphere, hydrosphere, THAW-no-sphere [chthonosphere], and biosphere has aroused at last a laudable host of nature lovers and conservationists, for whose success my hopes are only moderately high but immoderately fervent.”*

Other examples proved prophetic with changing times. In several papers he talked about de re and de dicta facts; about the “number 9 being necessarily square” while the number of planets is not necessarily square. Indeed, with the recent demotion of Pluto, the number of planets is no longer square. QED. (and of course we editors had to add an explanatory footnote to the book)

## SLIDE 6: 1995: *In Memory of John Finley*

He also had a wonderful way of capturing the essence of a story. In his memorial for Finley he said: *“John was sensitive to the wishes of his flock. In a letter to the Crimson a student protested the lunchtime segregation of the faculty at the tutors’ table. He and his friends wanted the stimulation and edification of our company. So John disbanded the tutors’ table... Later another student wrote to the Crimson that the students wanted, for the pitifully brief space of the noon hour, to be able to relax with their young peers. So the tutors’ table was restored.”*

SLIDE 7: 1987: Carnap

Dad's also told how his colleagues got their names, my Princeton philosophy Professor Hempel, for instance: *Ina [Carnap] called Carnap Peterli for no apparent reason, and Eva called [Carl] Hempel Peter on similar grounds; but Eva protested that she had been doing it first, and that the ambiguity was intolerable. Ina AK-seeded [acceded], and called Carnap Carnap thenceforward. Hempel has been Peter to all of us ever since.*

SLIDE 8: 1987: Carnap

Dad enjoyed playing with words: *I was to come down from Stanford and lecture at U.C.L.A., but I came down with hepatitis instead.*

SLIDE 9: 1937-1967 “*Logical Correspondence with Russell*”

I had the pleasure of learning about many things this year. I learned about Jean Van Heijenoort and I read Bertrand Russell's letter in the midst of the cold war. *“My time is all taken up in trying to secure that the class of human beings alive in 2000 A.D. will not be the null class.”* I guess it worked... “Logical Correspondence with Russell” also mentions the cigarette that saved Russell's life.

SLIDE 10: 2002 *Advice to the Next Generation*

Finally, in his posthumous 2002 “Advice to the Next Generation”, Dad said *“Cultivate the inquiring mind., Don't suppress a question, however trivial, that sparks your curiosity. Track it down or look it up as soon as you can.”* – it is good advice and this has been a wonderful opportunity to do so.