

Centennial Celebration & Marker Dedication

honoring

WILLARD VAN ORMAN QUINE

(Oberlin College June 25, 2008)

GLIMPSES BEHIND

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1. My title makes allusion to “Glimpses Beyond”, the brilliant appendix to Quine’s celebrated textbook *Methods of Logic*. But whereas “Glimpses Beyond” was a forward-looking survey of topics yet to come, my “Glimpses Behind” look *back at* and *beneath* experiences of the great man we honor today.

So, rather than speak impersonally or abstractly about Quine, I’m going to reminisce and relate some of my interactions with him, both personal and professional. My remarks, therefore, will be highly personal, but please understand that I was *not* one of Quine’s intimates or even part of his circle of friends. I belonged to a younger generation, on familiar enough terms to call him “Van”, but no closer.

2. As preternaturally smart, precise and careful as he was, Quine was not infallible. He sometimes made a philosophical or even logical mistake, as when he pronounced the truth functions explainable by dispositions to assent and dissent. But when it came to another great love of his life, geography, Quine may have been truly papal in his inerrancy.

For example, I used to do serious sailing on the Great Lakes, in particular on Lake Erie. I remember Quine’s once remarking in conversation that Lake Chautauqua drained into the Gulf of Mexico. I was sure he was wrong. After all, Lake Chautauqua sits high above Lake Erie, between the ports of Barcelona and Dunkirk, only a dozen miles from the lake itself. Moreover, Chautauqua Creek flows into Lake Erie at just the point where one would expect overflow from Lake Chautauqua to be deposited. I had sailed past the mouth of this creek many times. I felt certain Quine was wrong.

So I looked it up. It turned out, of course, that Quine was right. I should have expected as much from a man who cherished geography as much as philosophy and who grew up on Hawthorne Avenue in Akron, a hilly street a mere thousand feet in length, the runoff from one end of which (Quine’s end) drains into the Gulf of Mexico, while the runoff from the other end drains into the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

3. In his engaging autobiography, Quine confesses to “an odd and deep-rooted trait of [his]: mild resistance to instruction”. It was this trait, I believe, that kept his creativity from being extinguished by formal education. Here at Oberlin, a fellow student and poker-playing friend put him onto Bertrand Russell, and Quine soon had immersed

himself in *Principia Mathematica*. The Oberlin faculty knew nothing about *Principia Mathematica* or the new logic, but they were wise and generous enough to encourage Quine's enthusiasm, which eventuated in a senior thesis that won him *summa cum laude* honors and entrance to Harvard.

Quine completed his doctoral studies at Harvard a mere *two years later*. Having also completed doctoral studies in two years,ⁱ I feel a certain kinship with our great man in this matter, so perhaps you will permit me to challenge Quine's advice to students *to avoid highly abbreviated doctoral study unless forced by financial exigency*. My contrary advice would be *to abbreviate whenever possible*. Two years gave Harvard scant opportunity to stifle Quine's creativity. I shudder to think of the loss to philosophy that five or six years of doctoral indoctrination might have occasioned!

4. The scene of my first professional encounter with Quine was his 1965 Arnold Isenberg lecture "Stimulus and Meaning" at Michigan State University (an adaptation of which later appeared as "Epistemology Naturalized"). The lecture deeply puzzled me, then a junior Assistant Professor. I'd like to think it was because I already sensed the flaw in the doctrine of stimulus meaning that later made possible the production of translation manuals rival to the homophonic one, but in fact it was due entirely to rank callowness. Quine is a profound and difficult thinker. One has to plunge in deeply to appreciate the waters. All I had done to that point was to dangle my toes in them a bit, and that simply won't do. Not when it come to the philosophy of Willard Van Orman Quine!

5. In a 1976 symposium on "Existence and Logic" at the Biltmore Hotel in New York City,ⁱⁱ I had the privilege of unveiling my duality-based proof of Quine's Indeterminacy-of-Translation thesis for first-order languages in front of Quine himself, who was serving as commentator. I was deeply anxious how Quine would view the work, since it trampled with abandon over his stimulus-meaning controls on translation. But to my great relief and even greater delight, the result pleased, even tickled Quine ... in part, perhaps, for its unremitting perversity, for the proof gets translation 'right' only by getting it systematically and comprehensively 'wrong'.

Quine saw the result as vindication, remarking that he had never expected to see a fully-fledged translation manual rival to the homophonic one. He had supposed that any departure from the homophonic manual would occasion other departures, which in turn would occasion still others, and so on indefinitely, i.e., he had not thought it possible to do the thing in "one fell swoop".

But Quine was far from pleased with my later piece on his Indeterminacy-of-Translation thesis as a study in philosophical exegesis, deriding it as "legalistic", which for Quine was a severe reproach. And indeed it was legalistic, for I was determined to nail down such elusive notions as *rival* translation manuals and *empirical adequacy* of manuals. Quine simply didn't want to be pinned down. He wanted philosophical elbow room, and he wasn't above waffling a bit to get it. Nor, for that matter, have any of those thinkers whom we hail as the great philosophers hesitated to waffle to get room to maneuver. It comes with the territory.

6. My last encounter with Quine took place in 1991, in Konstanz, Germany, on the occasion of the first meeting of the Pittsburgh-Konstanz Colloquium in the History & Philosophy of Science.ⁱⁱⁱ The University of Konstanz had decided to embellish the occasion by awarding an honorary doctoral degree to Carl G. Hempel. Adding further luster to the occasion, Quine too was present. The Rector, Horst Sund, hosted a formal dinner for Hempel and other dignitaries after which speeches were expected of various people, among them myself as Director of the Pittsburgh Center for Philosophy of Science. I remarked how truly special the occasion was for me personally, because my *Doktorvater* (Hempel) and one of my two principal mentors *in absentia*—Thomas Aquinas and W.V.O. Quine—were present. I added that I often had trouble distinguishing Aquinas from Quine, offering as illustration Aquinas' dictum "*ens et unum convertuntur*" (being and unity are interchangeable). What could this maxim mean, I asked, if not "No entity without identity"? I thought Quine would fall off his chair laughing. When his turn to speak came, Quine quipped that his surname really was 'Aquinas'... with a suppressed 'A'. The man's wit was always sharp and at the ready.

7. Quine's philosophical writings sparkle. No one since Bertrand Russell has invested philosophical words with such magic. Russell got the Nobel Prize in Literature for doing so. Quine didn't, ... but he should have. Still, in the long run, it doesn't matter that Quine didn't get the Nobel Prize any more than it matters that Hume never secured a university post or that Descartes never won the backing of the Paris theology faculty. In the fullness of time, Quine will take his place in the philosophical pantheon alongside Aquinas, Descartes, Aristotle, Hume, Plato, and their ilk. From the position he will then occupy, the Nobel Prize will look like small potatoes.

ⁱ At Princeton, not Harvard.

ⁱⁱ The other presenters were Bas C. Van Fraassen, R.M. Martin, and Nicholas Rescher; Quine commented on all the presentations.

ⁱⁱⁱ The meeting celebrated the Carnap-Reichenbach Centennial.