W. V. Quine: A Student’s-Eye View

*Charles Parsons*

Possibly the most important course in my undergraduate education was one that I did not take, Philosophy 140, Deductive Logic, taught by Professor Willard van Orman Quine. Precisely my not taking it was the occasion for my first meeting with Quine. In the spring of 1951, as a freshman in Harvard College, I was obliged to choose a field of concentration. I had decided on Mathematics, but I had already been interested in philosophy for a few years and, without having studied logic, knew that it had a foot in both fields.

We were asked to fill out a “plan of study” that would state tentatively what courses we would take to satisfy the requirements of the field. The person with whom I filled out the plan was Professor Hassler Whitney. I wanted to take Quine’s course in Mathematical Logic, Mathematics 280. Philosophy 140 was a prerequisite, but I believed that I could learn what I needed by studying the textbook on my own. Either Whitney or someone else thought that I should clear this with Quine. He held office hours in a study in Eliot House, and I sought him out there. He smoked a pipe as he did for many years. I don’t recall that he talked of anything but the business at hand. I think my program in mathematics was ambitious enough to convince him that I could do what I proposed. I don’t recall coming away with a vivid impression of the man, but I think I did note an economy of style that one also finds in his writing.

In my spare time during the following summer, I set to work on *Methods of Logic*, Quine’s textbook for 140. Although it is a textbook, studying it was one of the most memorable of my formative experiences. Logic can be a dry subject, and especially in those days it was often presented with rather heavy formalism. Quine strove for elegance of presentation and a twofold economy, that the methods should be economical to present and for the student or logician to use. Logic books for philosophy teaching ask the student to test or verify inferences given in words. It is often not too easy to think up such exercises, and in a book with a lot of them they can have a dreary similarity. Not so those of *Methods*; almost every example seemed to tell a little story, for example:

The guard searched all who entered the premises except those who were accompanied by members of the firm.

Some of Fioreccio’s men entered the premises unaccompanied by anyone else.

The guard searched none of Fioreccio’s men.

Therefore some of Fioreccio’s men were members of the firm.

Thus Quine’s style and presentation made the work of learning the technical logic

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in the book a pleasure. But *Methods* is also a work of philosophy. I might have learned the logic from any one of several books available at the time, although the number was small compared to what it came to be later. The philosophy, though presented in an unobtrusive way, was distinctively Quine’s and had a lasting influence on me. One aspect was his avoidance of those staples of the logical tradition, the notions of proposition, judgment, and property. Another was his care in distinguishing the use of linguistic or formal expressions from their mention in discourse about them. A third was the distinction between variables, which range over a domain of objects, and schematic letters, which are “dummies” replacing expressions of various semantic categories. Quine’s aim was in part to insulate the student against the very natural idea that predicates or general terms designate properties in something like the way in which names designate their bearers.

In my sophomore year I encountered some more of Quine’s writings, by taking the remarkable course Problems of Analytic Philosophy, taught by Professor Morton White. Quine’s most celebrated essay, “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” had appeared earlier that year, and the course included his critique of the analytic-synthetic distinction. About that time I also read his entertaining but serious discussion of ontology in “On What There Is” (1948). I don’t think I understood very well what was going on in the first of these essays, but it made me permanently wary of the analytic-synthetic distinction.

It was only the next year that I took Math 280. Quine used as a text his own *Mathematical Logic* (in the revised edition of 1951), which in its own way is also a masterpiece, but it is for good reasons one of the least read of Quine’s mature books. It is in the tradition of Whitehead and Russell’s *Principia Mathematica*, in that its main undertaking is to develop a comprehensive system of logic incorporating set theory, while giving proofs in considerable formal detail. Quine developed the most precise and readable way of presenting such proofs ever devised, but not long afterwards logicians found it unnecessary to present proofs in such detail, and the system of the book, related to the better-known system NF of a 1937 paper of Quine, has been found more interesting for its somewhat curious metamathematical properties than as a vehicle for logical and mathematical proof.

Happily, the last chapter of the book was devoted to Gödel’s incompleteness theorem, and Quine devoted much of the course not to presenting the work done in his book but to a new proof of Gödel’s completeness theorem (due to his pupil Burton Dreben), the concept of recursive function, the undecidability of quantificational logic, and the incompleteness theorem. These are essential to modern mathematical logic, so that Quine’s course gave me my start in that field. The presentation was in Quine’s somewhat deadpan style but carefully organized.

I don’t recall any relations with Quine outside the classroom in those days, and I took no more courses with him. In my senior year he was away in Oxford, and anyway I would not have done my honors thesis with him, since I did not plan to do one in logic. But after a year abroad I returned to Harvard in the fall of 1955 as a first-year graduate student in philosophy. Although I had to concentrate on preparing for the notorious Preliminary Examinations, I did devote some time that year to studying logic, but instead of with Quine it was with Hao Wang. In the middle of the year I did something that, I think, pleased Quine. I had worked on German and then French as an undergraduate, and during my year abroad spent
vacation time in countries where those languages were spoken. When the reading examinations in French and German were given in January, I took both and passed.

For some reason I could never entirely fathom, another member of the Department nominated me to be a Junior Fellow of the Society of Fellows. I had to formulate some sort of project; I no longer remember what it was. But I was called for an interview with the Senior Fellows, a formidable group of professors one of whom was Quine. Another was Arthur Darby Nock, an English-educated historian of religion, a lifelong bachelor, about whom many anecdotes have been told. Toward the end of the interview, when we had finished the discussion of my research interests, Nock asked me about other interests. Somehow I mentioned that I read works on religion and theology, mentioning Pascal as a writer I found interesting. I was not then and am not now a Christian, but I was more tempted by Christianity in those days. I surely knew that Quine was a firm opponent of religion; I should have known that this was perilous ground. I heard the story afterward that when the Senior Fellows came out of the room in a break in the interviews, Quine was heard to say, “Good grief; Parsons is pious.” I was not elected. Still, I was invited to apply again.

The following year Quine was again away from Harvard, and I began my dissertation work with Burton Dreben, a newly appointed assistant professor. I taught two sections of Philosophy 140. I did the same for Quine when he returned in the fall of 1957. Their lecturing styles were very different. Dreben’s was more extemporeaneous and much more emphatic and sometimes dramatic. Quine’s was, as I said, deadpan, and he had his lecture worked out thoroughly on 3x5 cards. Today’s undergraduates would be horrified by the rather rigid curve on which the course was graded: 10% A and A-, 30% B’s of different kinds, 50% C, and 10% D or E. Quine’s attitude was tough in other respects as well. If a student missed a quiz he was out of luck unless he had a medical excuse, which probably had to be offered in advance. Quine had an interesting system for grading the final examination. We would collect all the blue books, and he and the Teaching Fellows would sit down in one room and grade them together, dividing up the questions so that in principle all answers to a given question were graded by a single person. Quine did his share of the work, probably more because he was more efficient. When we had finished we worked out the final grades. I don’t know of a more efficient system.

Sometime that year I was in a seminar of Quine’s, but I don’t think I took it for credit. It was mainly devoted to Gödel’s The Consistency of the Continuum Hypothesis. The argument was clearly presented and discussed, and it was then that I learned the proof that is the foundation of modern work in axiomatic set theory. On the basis of my memory now, I am not sure how much we got behind the rather formalistic presentation in the monograph. It is now generally thought that Gödel’s presentation in an earlier announcement of 1939 conveys better the idea of the proof; indeed that was Gödel’s own opinion.

Quine regularly taught a course in Philosophy of Language, and in the spring of 1958 I audited it. Fairly early on he presented his eventually famous but then unpublished argument for the indeterminacy of translation. It was then that I first heard the word “gavagai” and of the possibility that a native’s utterance of “gavagai” might be translated as “Lo, a rabbit!” but equally as “Lo, a rabbit-stage!” or “Lo, an undetached rabbit part!” I had, and I think others had, the impression of
hearing something really new in philosophy. When Quine presented this he was clearly reading a manuscript, no doubt a draft of *Word and Object*. This may not have been ideal for the hearer’s comprehension. I was not a beginner with Quine’s philosophy, and I think I had some reasonable idea of what this was about. But I wonder about others, especially undergraduates.

What I have said about Quine’s courses would suggest that in the classroom he did not have the rapport with his audience that is nowadays considered essential to good teaching. Yet I think he was one of the great teachers of logic of his time and a considerable teacher of philosophy as well. How can this be? One element was certainly his high standards and the challenge they presented to the student. Students could see what they would have to do in order to count as mastering the subject, and at least some were stimulated to do it; Quine made clear that his approval would not be obtained cheaply.

Another aspect is the close integration of Quine’s teaching and his writing. Quine has told us that a lot of his writing in logic was done in connection with his teaching, in order to work things out for his courses. A consequence was that Quine taught through his writings. My absorbing elementary logic through my own study of *Methods* was an extreme example of a more general phenomenon. Although I thought myself able to follow Quine’s argument in his lectures on the philosophy of language, I can’t now separate what I absorbed from the lectures themselves from what I learned soon after from written presentations of the material.

The dissertation topic I had begun to develop with Dreben in Quine’s absence turned out to suit Dreben’s interests more than Quine’s. So I count myself as primarily Dreben’s PhD student. But Quine was the second member of the committee, and I must have discussed my work with him at regular intervals. I was able to delay trying again for the Society of Fellows until 1958 (thus missing a year when Quine was absent). There was nothing memorable in the interview that year, but I was successful. A consequence was that over the next three years I attended the Monday night dinners where Quine, as a Senior Fellow, was usually present. That helped me to develop a more relaxed relationship with him. I got to know the sociable, convivial Quine, and the well-informed and constantly curious general conversationalist. But I also observed the breadth of his intellectual force. I think there was some limit on what this interaction did to reduce the extent to which I found him intimidating.

Toward the end of my Junior Fellowship my thesis nearing completion. In March 1961, working twelve-hour days, I revised and retyped a long technical manuscript in order to hand it in by April 3, the deadline to obtain the PhD in June. I was not a good typist, and apart from that the manuscript must have had many bugs. But I took it to Emerson Hall and handed it in just before the deadline. I anticipated a defense with Dreben and Quine.

The defense in those days was just a session between the candidate and his committee, which usually had only two members. So it wasn’t the sort of ceremony that a doctoral defense is at many universities, especially in Europe. It turned out that I was to have even less. Shortly before the scheduled date, Dreben informed me that Quine had been hospitalized for pleurisy. He had been reading the thesis and, as I soon learned, continued to work on it while in the hospital. Apparently time did not permit waiting until he had been discharged; this was before hospital stays were made minimal to save money. It was agreed that I would visit Quine in
the hospital, where he would question me about the thesis, and afterward I would have a separate session with Dreben. So I visited Quine in his hospital bed. He had put together a long list of small problems with my manuscript, typographical errors, local unclarities, probably some logical errors. I think I had to explain some moderately important points, but I seem to have persuaded him that my proofs were correct.

That was my last meeting with Quine as a student, and it proved much more memorable than the later session with Dreben, no doubt in part because of the setting but also because of the rigorous conscience that was on display, not just in intellectual matters but in matters of presentation, down to the appearance of a typescript. Dreben told me that Quine had been rather upset by what I had handed in because of its somewhat messy character; he didn’t see how that could go into the Archives. So I still had work to do before the thesis could be bound and submitted in final form. It wasn’t in my power to make it what a professional mathematical typist would have produced. How much that disappointed Quine I do not know.

I continued to have various relations with Quine for nearly forty years more. Although I was no longer his student, I did not cease to learn from him. But that would be another story.

Notes

* What follows is an attempt to recapture and improve impromptu remarks made at a memorial for Professor Quine at Eliot House on February 13, 2001. I thank Professor Lino Perille and Mr. Nicholas Stang for inviting me to this occasion, Perille for inviting me to speak, and Stang for encouraging the idea of writing up my remarks. I also thank Dagfinn Follesdal and Joseph Ullian for commenting on an earlier draft.

1 Whitney was an eminent topologist and an austere and shy personality. Very soon after my encounter with him he left Harvard for the Institute for Advanced Study, so that I never took a course with him.

2 Methods of Logic, 2nd ed. (New York: Holt, 1959), 183. I might say that in my opinion, shared by many of the devotees of Methods, the second edition was the best.


4 What he presented on recursive functions and undecidability was written up in 1954 and published as “Church’s theorem on the decision problem” in Selected Logic Papers (New York: Random House, 1966); expanded ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).


6 Dreben probably inherited Quine’s system in this respect and did not feel free to depart from it.

7 That is the recollection of Dagfinn Follesdal, who was a TF in the course a couple of years after me. My recollection is not so distinct.


10 Not, however, in my first year, when he was again away on leave, his third year away in the 1950s. Not long afterward Harvard instituted a rule limiting the frequency of leaves for faculty members; it was rumored that Quine’s example inspired it.