

(09) BILL HOWARD - STAN, MYHILL, WEIL, AND ME

Subject: Stan, Myhill, Weil and me.
From: Howard, William A.
To: robtully
Date: Thursday, 18 August 2016, 8:47

Dear Rob,

Feel free to make use of my emails about Stan and company in any way you want (unless there is something that might offend somebody, but there is nothing of that sort in the emails I have sent you up to now).

You mention Weil and Bourbaki in your section Spring 1966 - Winter 1966. Here is something that will amuse you, especially since it includes Myhill and (in a separate story) Mac Lane. It is a post, by my colleague John Baldwin, of a couple of emails I sent him.

<http://homepages.math.uic.edu/~jbaldwin/pub/howonbour.pdf>

Recollections of some connections of Bourbaki with logicians, by William A. Howard, July 27, 2013.

I don't know how much personal contact Stan had with Weil during our student days, but in the late 1960s, when Weil was at the IAS, Stan had established a personal relationship with him. At U. of C., Weil pronounced his name as in "Vile" but later changed it to Vey, possibly to avoid confusion with Hermann Weyl; also there was his famous sister, Simone, but that is another story. In any case, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Stan used to go up to Weil and say, "Oy, it's Mr. Oy Vey!" They got a kick out of each other.

Weil's learning was formidable. He studied Sanscrit in India, could quote Plato in the classical Greek, etc., etc. One day, in the fall of 1972, Stan and I were at the IAS tea, when Weil and a group of formally dressed elderly men came through the door. Stan said to me, "That's the archaeology seminar. They are terrified of him."

Jonathan describes the fight at the IAS against Kaysen's plan to create a new "School of Social Science" alongside the existing three faculties of mathematics, physics and history, with Robert Bellah as head. Weil was in the vanguard of the opposition. In an interview with the New York Times, Weil said, "Yes, I have read Bellah's worthless book," etc. It was probably "Tokugawa Religion: The Values of Pre-Industrial Japan." Weil could be impulsive, at times.

Stan used to tell me what went on in the faculty meetings; e.g., Gödel got up and made a convoluted analysis of Bellah's theory, the upshot being (in Stan's words, not Gödel's): "It is wrong." I asked Stan, "How do you know what went on in these meetings?" His answer: "I have spies." Later it became clear to me that Hasler Whitney was giving him a detailed report. Through Stan, I got to know the Whitneys and we became good friends.

At the IAS Stan had a good friend, Sue Walker (now Sue Walker Toledo). She was Whitney's assistant in a math education project, and in that capacity had an office (it was, I think, Gödel's old office). Stan often slept there. I would go there in the morning and the office would be a shambles: coke cans, remains of sandwiches, cigarette butts all over the place. We spent a lot of time in Sue's apartment. Stan's daughter Susan (then about 17) was staying with Sue; Susan had befriended a young woman who was pathologically shy (who typically sat in a corner with her hair over her eyes), and Stan was trying to help her; also Domingo Toledo (whom she later married) was often there. I remember once when Stan became uncontrollable, Susan shut him down by saying, firmly, "You will not disrupt this domesticity."

I met Sue Walker through Stan at the month-long conference on intuitionism and proof theory at Buffalo University, summer of 1958, and we became good friends. You say in your memoir, "Uncharacteristically [Stan] met Ayn Rand, complimented her work, but was unable to engage her further than that." I wonder in what venue? Wikipedia says that throughout the 1960s and 1970s she gave talks at various universities.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ayn_Rand

In any case, I'll bet Stan sought her out because of Sue Walker, who was much taken by Ayn Rand's Objectivist philosophy and talked about it a lot at the Buffalo meeting.

There were various episodes with Stan at the Buffalo meeting. Here is one of them (I am excerpting it from my reminiscences for Smullyan's 90th birthday). One evening, Stan wanted us to hear his son, Peter (who was then 9 or 10), play the organ. We got into the concert hall. This involved somebody climbing in the window to get the door open, as I recall. Peter played nicely. This was backstage. Then Raymond spotted a grand piano on the stage. We took seats in the auditorium (there were eight or ten of us) and Raymond played Schubert's A-Major Sonata: a massive forty-minute piece. About halfway through, the janitor appeared.

"What are you doing here?"

WE: "Listening to Schubert's A-Major Sonata."

HE: "You can't do that!"

WE: "Sure we can. We're professors."

He left. Then all the lights went out. The janitor had, no doubt, pulled the master switch.

That did not faze Raymond; he played the second half of the A-Major Sonata in the dark. A magical performance.

But I am flying off of the original topic (Weil, etc.), so I'll end here.

Best,

Bill