

Close Encounters With The Holy Trinity

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The philosophical logic and formal semantics scene has long been blessed by the work of three Amsterdammers who have contributed an enormous amount to the field. Henceforth, this set of three will here be denoted The Holy Trinity, a description that will refer directly to all three, enabling me to write about the set without enumerating its members. They are, of course, none other than the people to whom this book is devoted.

Other people than I are better placed to explain how the Trinity have changed researchers' understanding of phenomena such as generic statements, information update, anaphora, and questions. Others are also better placed to point out how their institutional brain child, the Amsterdam Colloquium, has shaped the above-mentioned research area, by helping to knit together a community. But Frank and Martin and Jeroen have also had a substantial influence on me as a person – and this is where I can offer some expertise. Remarkably, their influence continues to make itself felt long after my academic apostasy, which caused me to leave the path of philosophy, choosing the path of computing science instead, an area of academia that's a bit like the proverbial foreign country, because (some) “things are done differently there”. I feel their influence even stronger in recent years, when I'm looking at connections between computing and philosophical logic.

More than anything else, the Trinity managed to instil in me a sense of how to be an academic. Let me illustrate this by telling a few anecdotes, because it was small events like these – no doubt forgotten by everyone else than me – that formed me. Each anecdote will be ascribed to the Trinity as a whole. This is not only because, like that other Trinity, they are essentially one person, but because, in some cases, I have difficulty remembering whether it was Jeroen or Martin or Frank who played the lead role in the events that I will be relating.

1. Getting started. I came to Amsterdam as a young student in 1978, from the University of Leiden. This unusual transfer had left me with a badly defective background. What's worse, I wasn't aware of the defect. At one point, it became undeniable that something was wrong. Desperate, I walked into a room where the Trinity were gathering and told them about the problems that I was experiencing. Having taken note of my situation, they kindly explained to me what courses I should take (I think these answered to the poetic names of Logica 1 and Logica 2) before I'd be able to learn more interesting stuff (including something called Logica 3). I remember asking "Do I really need to take these courses?" One of them responded, with a nod to the Classics: "Unless this knowledge happens to be innate in your case – Yes, this is what you need to do." That got me started.

2. Knowing your limits. After learning about Cantor's diagonal argument and related matters – it must have been around 1980 – I spent a weekend penning a hare-brained alternative to Cantor's treatment of cardinality. I put my notes on a Trinitarian desk and stuck a sticker on it that asked: "Brilliant or silly?" The owner of the desk returned my notes to me the next day. Helpfully, the first two words had been crossed out. A discussion followed that made it clear to me that the verdict was correct, and that my approach had been rather less than brilliant. These days I teach the same subject matter to my own students sometimes and I regularly think back to this episode, particularly when they stumble over the same obstacles as I did at the time.

3. Working on a good problem. One day – it must have been around 1982 when I was a Teaching Assistant in Amsterdam – a member of the Trinity walked up to me and said "Generalized Quantifiers are an interesting new area of research. Do you want to introduce the department to it, giving us 3 lectures about it?" For me as a mere Teaching Assistant, this felt like a huge honour, so I acquitted me of my task as well as I could. This set me off on a research path that brought me into contact with Johan van Benthem (still in Groningen at the time) who, much later, was to become my PhD thesis supervisor. The Trinitarian suggestion could hardly have been more fruitful. It also taught me, very usefully, how stimulating it can be for a person to be given a big and hairy task.

4. Beyond science. There are good times and bad ones. This was a bad time. A conflict had broken out at another part of the university, which had escalated considerably: someone had even gone on a hunger strike. One of the philosophers had an official role in the matter and was asked to give an interview. When asked what should be done about the hunger strike, the philosopher, instead of offering a closely reasoned position, had broken down in tears. When a member of the Trinity heard about this, he said, in view of the sadness of the hunger strike: "I cannot think of a more eloquent response." – I could not think of a more eloquent response than *that*.



Figure 1: The author receiving his “doctoraal” diploma from Renate Bartsch and two members of the Trinity. Amsterdam, 23 May 1984

Reflecting on these anecdotes, one realises that being an academic is not something we learn from a book or a course, where the matter is explained on a blackboard or on Powerpoint slides. There are aspects to the job that we can only learn by observing role models. The best academic role models show us lots of things without even being aware of it. They show us, for example, what makes an interesting research question and a promising answer, and they show us what makes an objection worth worrying about. They also show us (by working hard, for a start) how much they care. They instil in us an almost moral code, not by talking about it but by showing it in action.

I consider myself lucky to have found as many as three such role models at an early stage, when I was only an undergraduate student. (In fact, there were four, since Renate Bartsch must be mentioned here as well.) I found them so early because Martin Stokhof, Jeroen Groenendijk and Frank Veltman believed in exposing us undergraduate students to the academic world, in taking time to talk with us, and generally treating us like grown-ups.

I am grateful to them to this day.