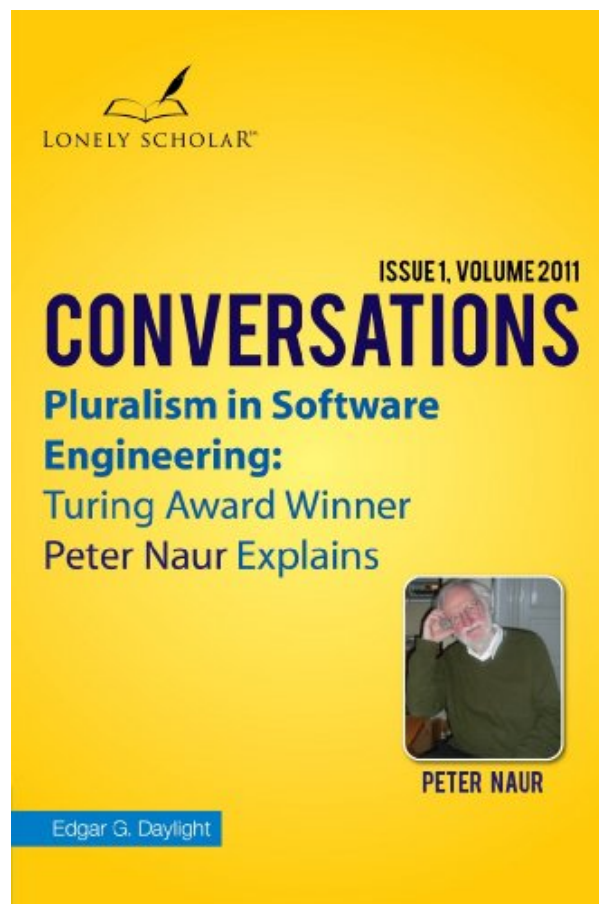


PLURALISM IN SOFTWARE ENGINEERING: TURING AWARD WINNER PETER NAUR EXPLAINS BY EDGAR G. DAYLIGHT



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LONELY SCHOLAR™

ISSUE 1, VOLUME 2011

CONVERSATIONS

**Pluralism in Software
Engineering:**

Turing Award Winner
Peter Naur Explains



PETER NAUR

Edgar G. Daylight

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Review

"What an absolutely cool guy!"

-- Dennis Shasha
New York University

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-- Robert Harper
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Table of Contents

- 1) Early Years
- 2) Cambridge: 1950-51
- 3) From Astronomy to ALGOL
- 4) Mathematical Rigor
- 5) Buying William James's Book
- 6) Structured Programming
- 7) Empirical Studies
- 8) SoCalled "Artificial Intelligence"
- 9) A Critique of Bertrand Russell's Account of Perception
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- 13) Syntax and Semantics
- 14) Dijkstra's "Pleasantness Problem"
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- 16) Understanding Turing's Universal Machine
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What mathematical rigor has and has not to offer to software engineers.

Peter Naur wrote his first research paper at the age of 16. Soon an internationally acclaimed astronomer, Naur's expertise in numerical analysis gave him access to computers from 1950. He helped design and implement the influential ALGOL programming language. During the 1960s, Naur was in sync with the research agendas of McCarthy, Dijkstra, and others. By 1970, however, he had distanced himself from them. Instead of joining Dijkstra's structured programming movement, he made abundantly clear why he disapproved of it. Underlying Naur's criticism is his plea for pluralism: a computer professional should not dogmatically advocate a method and require others to use it in their own work. Instead, he should respect the multitude of personal styles in solving problems.

What philosophy has to do with software engineering.

Though Peter Naur definitely does not want to be called a philosopher, he acknowledges having been influenced by Popper, Quine, Russell, and others. Naur's writings of the 1970s and 1980s show how he borrowed concepts from philosophy to further his understanding of software engineering. In later years, he mainly scrutinized the work in philosophy and mathematical logic & rules in particular. By penetrating deeply into the 1890 research of William James, Naur gradually developed his own theory of how mental life is like at the neural level of the nervous system. This development, in turn, helps explain why he always opposed the Turing Test and Artificial Intelligence, why he had strong misgivings about the Formal Methods movement and Dijkstra's research in particular.

- Sales Rank: #1709129 in Books
- Published on: 2011-10-19
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.02" h x .29" w x 5.98" l, .42 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 134 pages

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7 of 7 people found the following review helpful.

Insight into a solitary pioneer of computer science and software engineering

By Paul McJones

I read this book with the primary aim of gaining a fuller understanding of Naur's background, his involvement with Algol 60 (editing the ALGOL Bulletin and the ALGOL 60 Report and implementing Algol 60 on the DASK and GIER computers) and his later computer science and software engineering work. Parts I and II of this book contained useful material on these subjects. These sections also introduced me to Naur's increasingly negatives views about the work of other computer scientists, as well as philosophers and scientists in other fields. Part III covers Naur's synapse-state theory, which he proposes as the "neural embodiment of mental life". I don't have a background in neuroscience or psychology, so I could not judge these remarks, but his lack of refereed publications in this area is worth noting.

My rating is a compromise between, on the one hand, high respect for Daylight's preparation and patient interviewing technique and, on the other hand, frustration with the harshness of Naur's critiques of other researchers. Others will undoubtedly relish hearing Naur's remarks first-hand and gaining a better understanding of some of the rivalries that existed between the first generation of great computer scientists.

See all 1 customer reviews...

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