



BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIRS

WILLARD VAN ORMAN QUINE

June 25 1908 –December 25, 2000

Elected to the NAS, 1977

*A Biographical Memoir by Dagfinn Føllesdal
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THE PHILOSOPHER WILLARD VAN ORMAN QUINE shaped philosophy in the twentieth century in profound ways, first in mathematical logic and set theory and then by challenging the standard understanding of the relationship between language and meaning. Among his early major contributions were to challenge the logical positivists' distinction between analytic and synthetic (or empirical) truths and his insistence that philosophy is continuous with science broadly conceived. Many of his later contributions concerned ontology and epistemology: about what there is and how we know it through language and science.

Willard Quine was born in Akron, Ohio, on June 25, 1908. Quine's father, Cloyd Robert Quine, founded the Akron Equipment Company and was a historian of the city. His mother, Harriett E. Van Orman, had gone to college—unlike her husband—and was a schoolteacher. Quine received a bachelor of arts degree from Oberlin College in Ohio. Reading the works of Bertrand Russell and Alfred North Whitehead's *Principia Mathematica* led him to major in mathematics. He won a scholarship to Harvard University in 1930 and earned his doctorate in 1932 under the supervision of Whitehead, who also introduced him to Russell when the latter was lecturing at Harvard. Quine published his dissertation as *A System of Logistic* in 1934.

Quine studied and taught at Harvard for the rest of his life, with the exception of a break in 1932–33 as a Frederick Sheldon Traveling Fellow, which allowed him to meet several of the foremost mathematical logicians and philosophers



Figure 1 Willard V. Quine. Photo credit: Jane Reed/Harvard University.

of the day. He visited Vienna to study with the Vienna circle of logical positivists, including Herbert Feigl and Moritz Schlick, and Warsaw, where he worked with Alfred Tarski. His most rewarding destination was Prague, where he studied with Rudolf Carnap, an opportunity he later described as his “most notable experience of being intellectually fired by a living teacher.” From 1933–36, he was a Junior Fellow at Harvard, and in 1941 was named a full professor there. During 1942–45, he served with the U.S. Navy in naval intelligence, decrypting messages from German submarines. From 1956 until 1978, he held the Edgar Pierce Chair of Philosophy.



Quine, known by his friends as “Van,” was among the most influential philosophers of the twentieth century. He was much discussed by other philosophers but less known to the general public. That may be more understandable with regard to his important contributions to mathematical logic and set theory. Until 1943, he mainly contributed to logic, including such influential articles as “New Foundations for Mathematical Logic” (1937). His other output was not inaccessible or marked by a heavy or difficult style of writing. To the contrary, he was concise, lively, and always sparkingly clear even when he addressed the deepest, most profound issues. Perhaps his condensed style put non-philosophers off. Yet several of his phrases have become familiar slogans, as when philosophers speak of “recalcitrant experiences” that clash with what we expect and force us to revise our opinions into a more consistent “web of beliefs.”

Quine contributed across several fields of philosophy, including metaphysics, ontology, and epistemology—about what there is and how we know it. Ontology remained one of his key philosophical concerns, and he was concerned to be as austere as possible. He also notably rejected received views about language and meanings. Traditional accounts of language learning hold that we connect the meanings of words with linguistic expressions. This allows us to communicate with others who attach the same linguistic expressions to the same meanings. Quine denied such a realm of meaning and instead emphasized that language is social: we learn language from other people by observing the mouthing of words under certain intersubjective circumstances. Language learning happens not by associating words to meanings, but to things in shared surroundings. Quine developed this account in his main work on language and communication, *Word and Object* (1960). Meanings that presumably exist in others’ heads are inaccessible and therefore do not feature in the process of learning a language. If meanings do not help explain language acquisition, there is no reason to assume that they exist.

A puzzle that arises for this account came to occupy Quine for much of his career, until his last book, *From Stimulus to Science* (1995). How can a language learner know what other speakers of the language perceive? We do not perceive sensory waves of sound and light, but rather experience things. We structure what we see by means of a mental element. How, then, do we comprehend what others perceive? Quine argued that we conjecture what they perceive in order to understand what they mean. And we must make assumptions about what they mean to understand what they perceive. What we perceive and what we take others to perceive are crucial in language learning and language use. Thus, for Quine, semantics and epistemology are closely intertwined. His epistemology is naturalistic: it is part of

empirical psychology, itself a part of natural science. And this epistemology in turn accounts for the evidential bases of natural science—and thus empirical psychology itself. This circular enterprise connects Quine’s arguments about what there is—indeed what existence amounts to—and how we know it.

This view has startling implications across many topics in philosophy. Quine’s account notably acknowledges the existence of something mental, and consciousness—so he did not hold a reductionist view that only material objects exist. One of his most influential early contributions was “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” (1951). In this work, he rejected the received distinction between analytical and synthetic statements, in which the former are true simply by virtue of the meaning of their words whereas the latter’s truth depends on our experiences of the world. This challenged the understanding of mathematics as analytic, which Rudolf Carnap and other logical positivists maintained. He also challenged the notions of logical necessity and possibility.

Quine also denied that we ever can confirm or disconfirm a single statement, because we can accommodate recalcitrant experiences by adjusting one of several parts of our holistic web of belief. His account did not allow any absolutely certain foundation for our beliefs. To the contrary, even our most fundamental beliefs may in principle be mistaken. The role of philosophy is not to identify such a secure vantage point or to provide a point of view from outside our experiences. He was a naturalist in the sense that he maintained that it is within science itself rather than in a “prior philosophy” that we identify and describe reality. We can only seek to understand and improve our theory of the world from within. This aspect of his theory is well captured in the epigraph he chose for *Word and Object* by Austrian philosopher and social scientist Otto Neurath (*Protocol Statements*, 1932): “We are like seafarers, who must rebuild their ship in open sea, without being able to take it apart in a dock and build it up of its best constituents from the bottom up.”

Quine lived up to Neurath’s simile in his academic career. He was always in *Pursuit of Truth*, the apt title of his 1990 book, published when he was eighty-two. He did not seek to foster doting disciples but rather fellow creators of a better *Web of Belief* (1970) about our world. His students and his colleagues always found him eager to hear well-reasoned objections and ready to revise and improve his views in response. Morton White was struck by how Quine always seemed prepared to surrender even his most fundamental beliefs in any philosophical conversation:

“I have spoken of Van’s open mind, and what I mean is that he seemed willing to consider surrendering his most fundamental beliefs in any philosophical conversation I

ever had with him. I don't mean that he lacked confidence in his beliefs. I mean that he did not treat himself as an institution or as a philosophical pope, as constitutionally unable to listen to an opposing argument or unable to consider yielding a point to his interlocutor so long as he regarded him as serious and not as a mere debater or a point-scorer. Perhaps it was this trait of Van that led Nelson Goodman to say to me, somewhat peevishly, after Van had abandoned their once jointly held nominalism: 'Van defines a philosophical belief as one that he is prepared to give up first.'"ⁱ

Among his many students who went on to contribute substantially to philosophy in their own right were Donald Davidson, Daniel Dennett, Burton Dreben, Gilbert Harman, Saul Kripke, David Lewis, Charles Parsons, Hilary Putnam, and Morton White. Other notable students were the mathematician-songwriter Tom Lehrer and Theodore J. Kaczynski, the Unabomber.

Ernie Lepore observed that Quine's affinity for parsimony as an epistemic virtue never compromised his capacity for generosity. Quine once visited Lepore's undergraduate seminar concerning Quine's work for which in preparation the students each had sent Quine a written question. Quine read out each of the more than thirty questions and then his handwritten response to each. When he finished, the more than one hundred philosophers politely applauded and the undergraduates stormed the stage.ⁱⁱ

Quine was elected to the National Academy of Sciences in 1977 and was a member of several other academies, including the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (1949), the British Academy (1959), the Institut de France (1978), and the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters (1979). He received several prizes, including the first Rolf Schock Prize from Stockholm University (1993) and the Kyoto Prize in Tokyo (1996).

Quine was married twice. With Naomi Clayton, he had two children, Elizabeth and Norma, and with Marjorie Boynton he had two children, Douglas B. and Margaret. Douglas B. Quine maintains an extensive home page for his father.ⁱⁱⁱ Quine and his family donated a large collection of his papers to the Houghton Library of Harvard University. Among the secondary literature in the collection, at least one merits mention: *The Philosophy of W. V. Quine*, edited by Lewis E. Hahn and Paul A. Schilpp.^{iv}

Willard Van Orman Quine died in Boston on December 25, 2000, survived by his four children, six grandchildren and one great-grandchild.

NOTES

i Quine, D. B. Family Obituary, Willard Van Orman Quine, December 26, 2000, <https://www.wvquine.org/wvq-obit4.html#PPMW>.

ii Lepore, E. Harvard University Memorial: Willard Van Orman Quine, March 21, 2001, <https://www.wvquine.org/wvq-obit5.html#HHEL>.

iii Willard Van Orman Quine, 1908–2000, Philosopher and Mathematician, www.wvquine.org.

iv Hahn, L. E., and P. A. Schilpp, eds. 1986. *The Philosophy of W. V. Quine*. Library of Living Philosophers, Volume 18. La Salle, Ill.: Open Court. A second edition was published in 1998.

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