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Roger Wolcott Sperry 1913-1994

Roger W. Sperry, Nobel laureate and Board of Trustees Professor of Psychobiology, Emeritus, at Caltech, died early Sunday, April 17, 1994. He was 80.

A native of Hartford, Connecticut, Sperry earned his bachelor's degree in English literature from Oberlin College in 1935, then focused his attention on psychology, earning his master's in that subject in 1937, also from Oberlin. For his doctorate, he studied zoology, earning his degree from the University of Chicago in 1941.

His academic career was equally diverse. He held fellowships at Harvard from 1941 to 1946, where he worked in the Yerkes Laboratories of Primate Biology, and performed military service from 1942 to 1945 by taking part in the OSRD Medical Research Project on Nerve Injuries. He taught as an assistant professor in the University of Chicago's department of anatomy until 1952, then in 1952/53 served as an associate professor of psychology at the same school and simultaneously as the section chief for neurological diseases and blindness at the National Institutes of Health. In 1954 he became the Hixon Professor of Psychobiology at Caltech, where he remained until his retirement in 1984.

Sperry's best-known research involved "split-brain" patients, people who had had the connection between their left and right brain hemispheres surgically cut. His work showed how the two hemispheres function, independently and in concert, and continues to have important implications not only for medicine but for education and philosophy as well. Among his many other important accomplishments, he pioneered new territory during the 1940s in the functions of brain cells and in the study of vision. In the early 1960s he presented the foundation for a new theory explaining how neurons grow, assemble, and organize themselves in the brain by means of amazingly intricate chemical codes that are controlled by heredity.

In later years, Sperry's ever-active mind turned more and more to philosophy. According to the January 1994 issue of *Humankind Advancing*, which was dedicated to Sperry, "Reflection on the manifestations of conscious awareness in the surgically divided brain led Sperry, in 1965, to publish the first of a remarkable series of philosophical papers." In these papers, Sperry proposed a new theory of mind that, though greeted with initial skepticism, was destined within ten years to replace behaviorism as the dominant foundational philosophy of behavioral science. It is for this, more than his studies of vision, neuronal growth, or split-brain patients, that Sperry wanted to be remembered.

Besides sharing the Nobel Prize in 1981 with David H. Hubel and Torsten N. Wiesel, Sperry also received the National Medal of Science in 1989 from then president George Bush, the Wolf Prize in Medicine and the Albert Lasker Medical Research Award in 1979, and the California Scientist of the Year Award in 1972.

In addition to his talents as a researcher, he was "the most artistic person I've ever known," said long-time laboratory assistant Lois MacBird in a 1981 interview. "He sculpts phenomenally. [The Sperry's] home is filled with his work." Sperry was also an avid paleontologist, with an extensive collection of prehistoric mollusks.

"He was one of the premier experimental neurobiologists of his time," said Norman Davidson, the Norman Chandler Professor of Chemical Biology, Emeritus, and Executive Office for Biology at Caltech. "Those of us who have known him since those early years will always remember the courage and tenacity with which he continued to carry on his work in later years in spite of a debilitating degenerative disease. It was an inspiration to all who knew him."

Sperry is survived by his wife of 45 years, Norma Deupree Sperry of Pasadena; his brother, Russell L. Sperry, of Bend, Oregon; his son, Glenn Tad Sperry, of Philadelphia; his daughter, Janeth Hope Sperry, of Cleveland, and two grandchildren.

The family asks that, in lieu of sending flowers, donations be made to the Muscular Dystrophy Association, or to the Children's Lung Fund, Cleveland, Ohio.