

Norbert Wiener Biography

Norbert Wiener

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Biography

Born in Columbia, Missouri, Wiener experienced an atypical childhood; able to read and write by the age of three, Wiener's early years lacked much of the fun associated with childhood. Wiener's father, a professor at Harvard University, was a strict taskmaster and pushed his son toward success. Wiener entered Tufts College at the age of eleven, but had a difficult time when choosing his major field of study. He enrolled in Harvard to study zoology; however, he later changed majors and later schools to study philosophy at Cornell University. His interests in philosophy also shifted and Wiener ended up receiving a Ph.D. in mathematics from Harvard at age eighteen. Intrigued by the field of mathematical logic, Wiener studied at Cambridge University and Göttingen in Germany after his graduation. With the arrival of World War I, Wiener tried to enlist, but was rejected due to his poor eyesight. In 1919, he joined the faculty of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), an alliance which lasted forty-one years.

It was during his early years at MIT that Wiener produced some of his most notable work in mathematics, including Brownian motion and the Fourier transforms. By 1932, Wiener had advanced through the ranks of MIT, achieving the status of full professor. During World War II, he developed radar and missile guidance systems, utilizing his knowledge of automatic controls and information feedback. After the war ended, Wiener began a deeper study into these subjects, particularly the similarities between the animal nervous system and the feedback mechanisms employed in early computer systems. In 1948 he summarized his findings in a book entitled *Cybernetics*, a Greek term meaning "steersman." The book was popular both in and outside the scientific community, and served to create a new realm of automatically controlled machines. The word cybernetics is now commonly used to designate communication and feedback control in machines and humans. In the years following the publication of *Cybernetics*, Wiener continued to lecture on the advantages of cybernetics in the workplace as well as to warn of its dangers. In 1950 he published *Human Use of Human Beings*, a warning of the dangers made possible by humankind's exploitation of the computer's potential. In 1960 Wiener retired from MIT. Two months before his death in Stockholm, Sweden, he was awarded the National Medal of Science.