

Princeton University
Honors Faculty Members Receiving
Emeritus Status



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The biographical sketches were written by
colleagues in the departments of those honored.

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Paul Benacerraf



Paul Benacerraf was born in Paris on March 26, 1931, to a Moroccan father and an Algerian mother. Paul's earliest years were spent in Paris, until 1939 when the family moved first to Caracas, and then, when Paul was nine, to New York. Paul is proud that he still retains French citizenship. Two years later, when he was 11, Paul's parents returned to Caracas, and he entered the Peddie School in Hightstown, New Jersey, as a boarding student.

In the fall of 1948, Paul entered Princeton University as a freshman, where he has remained ever since. Paul was not initially an eager student. Indeed, he told the *Princeton Weekly Bulletin* in November 1998 that in his junior year "the dean and I agreed that both Princeton and I would profit from a brief separation." But he returned to Princeton after a year's leave, and decided to major in philosophy. That proved to be a very wise decision. The following year, classes with professors John Kemeny in the philosophy of science and Robert Scoon in the philosophy of religion made a deep impression on him. Paul became passionately interested in philosophy. He graduated in 1953 and entered the graduate program in philosophy at Princeton, where he received his Ph.D. in 1960. While at Princeton, Paul studied with professors Paul Ziff and Hilary Putnam, who directed his dissertation. With Putnam he later edited the anthology, *Philosophy of Mathematics*, which was to shape that discipline for the rest of the century.

Paul joined the faculty as an instructor in 1960, was an assistant professor from 1961 to 1965, associate professor from 1965 to 1971, and has been a professor since 1971. In 1979 Paul was named the Stuart Professor of Philosophy, and since 1998 he has been the James S. McDonnell Distinguished University

Professor of Philosophy. He has also served in the University administration, first as associate dean of the Graduate School (1965–67), then as associate provost for special studies (1968–70) and finally as Provost of the University (1988–91). Paul served as chairman of the Department of Philosophy during two crucial periods, from 1975 to 1984, and from 1992 to 1999. He was a major factor in building a lively intellectual community and a first-rate research department that is known throughout the world. Paul has also been active in the larger community of analytic philosophers. For many, Paul is the public face of analytic philosophy in the United States.

While Paul's work has been widely influential, particularly in metaphysics and the philosophy of mathematics, two papers stand out for the way in which they raised questions that are still with us.

The first of these papers is "What Numbers Could Not Be" (1965). Paul ends the paper with the following paradoxical statement: "If the truth be known, there are no such things as numbers; which is not to say that there are not at least two prime numbers between 15 and 20." In the paper Paul argues against a Platonistic conception of mathematics on which the subject matter of arithmetic is constituted by a special kind of object, the numbers, which exist in their own ideal realm. Rather, he argues mathematics is concerned with abstract structures. In this way he can say both that in the strictest sense there are no numbers while, at the same time, in another sense, there can be at least two prime numbers between 15 and 20, if we understand that as a statement about certain abstract structures.

The second of these papers is "Mathematical Truth" (1973). There Paul is concerned with the relation between the semantics of mathematical language and the epistemological question as to how we can know about the truths of mathematics. Paul argues that one cannot have both. An adequate account of the semantics of mathematical statements posits the existence of abstract mathematical objects. However, our conception of

knowledge requires that we have causal contact with the things known, a condition difficult to satisfy for abstract entities outside of space and time. In this way, truth and knowledge seem to diverge for mathematical statements. This problem, which has come to be called “Benacerraf’s dilemma” and goes beyond mathematics and into any realm in which abstract objects have a role to play, is still very much discussed in the literature.

Paul’s influence has also been felt in the countless students whom he taught, supervised, and mentored. Much of his important philosophical writing has been in the form of detailed comments on the work of students and colleagues. Paul worked with students on subjects well beyond his own specialties, sometimes with students who for some reason or another were having difficulties, but who were able to overcome them through Paul’s help and support. It is not surprising, then, that Paul has had a central role in the education and intellectual development of some of the most prominent and distinguished figures in the profession.

Paul has had a long and distinguished career, both at Princeton and in the larger world. He has been a wonderful colleague, a deeply cultured person who was always happy to share his knowledge of wine and art and share his home with the department for receptions and parties. He also has been a model citizen of the department, an inspiring teacher who has shaped generations of students and whose work and character have influenced generations of colleagues, the institutional memory of the department, and the person to whom you could turn for advice and wise counsel. He was, one might say, the departmental sage, the philosopher’s philosopher. We hope that he will remain so even after he retires.