

The Role of Prizes in Reinforcing Science–Math Bureaucracies

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>>From Osher Doctorow

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The Nobel Prize and the Fields Medal and Wolf Prize (the latter two in Mathematics, the former excludes Math but includes Physics, excludes Psychology but includes Economics) have mixed histories of benefit and harmfulness in regard to Physics and Mathematics Bureaucracies. On the one hand, they have encouraged competition and have indeed had surprising accuracy in finding real Creative Geniuses although my estimate is that the awarders haven't the faintest clue where to look for at least 50% of Creative Geniuses (they might have to look in the "trash bin", which is close to where they would have found Mozart, Beethoven, etc.). On the other hand, Material Rewards and Knowledge/Discovery don't really cohere in a fundamental sense. You can value concrete objects like money, buildings, sex objects, DVDs, TVs, or you can value abstract objects like ideas and inventions, but concrete and abstract aren't the same thing and keeping them roughly balanced at 50% raises the question of why they should be so balanced.

I think that the Abstract and the Concrete should be roughly balanced in daily life because going overboard on one or the other in exploration of ideas leads to divorce from Reality including past and present and future Reality which contains history and Hope, but – and this is a big qualification – both the fundamentals and the rewards and the goals of physics and mathematics are Knowledge and nothing but Knowledge, though the topic of Knowledge can and should have relationships to Reality.

In looking at the Nobel and Wolf and Fields awards, I find that in addition to their surprising accuracy in finding perhaps somewhere less than 50% of the Creative Geniuses in these fields, they play a remarkable role in preserving Fads and the Status Quo. In this respect, the Clay Prize of the Clay Mathematics Institute (CMI) of Cambridge Massachusetts may be somewhat better. Its Science Advisory

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Board is chosen presently from Imperial College U.K., Yale, MIT, Harvard, Princeton, though I'm not sure whether its inclusion of Edward Witten is an advantage or disadvantage. Instead of the usual obsession with algebraic geometry and algebraic topology, its last 5–6 years have been noteworthy for awards in dynamic systems/differential equations, analysis, number theory (including Andrew Wiles, who was passed over by the Big Boys elsewhere although they "recognized him", whatever that means), probability, geometry. They did choose Witten in 2001 (who is into algebraic topology and algebraic geometry) and Alain Connes was chosen in 2000 with one foot in geometry and physics and another foot in operator algebras.

This thread doesn't specifically address the Nobel Peace Prize and the Nobel Prize for Literature, although there is an interesting symptom of Bureaucracy there. Those prizes are almost completely politicized, with Peace worse than Literature. They appear to have been awarded for Cold Wars, Hot Wars, Good Acting (terrorists pretending to be peacemakers), Social Movements, Fads, and even Stereotypes.

Ultimately, I think that Elitists including several sci.physics.research and sci.math.research people point to Nobel, Fields, Wolf, and other types of awards (I think there's even a Fox award, if I don't have my animals mixed up) as indicators of trends or directions that "should" be followed as justification for excluding postings by some Non–Elitists. In Academia and Politics and even the Military, people point to awards, medals, recognitions to justify Mediocrity and Ingenious Imitation, although sometimes especially in the Military (not so much Academia) real merit slips through.

I have to admit that it took me about 45 years of my life before I began stopping to look for Material rewards, and I still look with some envy at Rolls Royces, but I eventually found that it really takes minimal Material reward or even recognition to justify discovery and Knowledge and Creative Genius. That type of fact has been actually used by some Dictators/Tyrants to squeeze Creative Genius out of scientists and mathematicians who have almost no power. Other Dictators have given small perks to scientists and mathematicians that other people don't get, but I'd wager a non–monetary bet that it's more the recognition and not starving to death that motivates the awardees – and they don't even usually like the people who're awarding them :>)

Osher Doctorow

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◆ ***Re: The Role of Prizes in Reinforcing Science–Math Bureaucracies***

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The Role of Prizes in Reinforcing Science–Math Bureaucracies

- Prev by Date: ***Re: The Universe Isn't Infinite***
- Next by Date: ***Re: planets, moons, & orbits***
- Previous by thread: ***How Do the Europeans Get Rid of Nuclear Waste?***
- Next by thread: ***Re: The Role of Prizes in Reinforcing Science–Math Bureaucracies***
- Index(es):
 - ◆ ***Date***
 - ◆ ***Thread***