

## The Season for Cheers and Prizes: Science and Technology Superheroes and the Mega Awards

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The Nobel award announcements that began in early October are over for now. Coming before the winter holidays, this is a season of gift giving and cheer. Amazing how the Nobel has sunk into our academic schedules, shortly after the fall semester lectures start, many are sure to query when is the Nobel going to be this year? Someone would reply- the second Tuesday of October. All of us wondered who will be the new Laureates. Some hoped the winners will be friends or colleagues. Graduate students and faculty would hold energetic discussions – last couple of years was experiment this time the prize is likely to be for theory and the like- finally a list of departmental favorites will emerge. A few excitement junkies might even wager on-line. In the end, at least in physics the odd-makers Thomson-Reuters included were on target this year, indeed the award announced in Stockholm [1] on October 8<sup>th</sup> went exactly to Francois Englert and Peter Higgs!

These days there are quite a number of big awards, that are often labeled 'mega prizes, especially the new ones and at US\$ 3.0 a pop two of them the Breakthrough Prize in Life Sciences and Fundamental Physics Prize (FPP) are clearly mega, the Tang Prize, Queen Elizabeth Prize for Engineering and the venerable Nobel are all in this million dollar class, then there is the Millennium Technology Prize~US\$1.5, awarded once every two years, on even numbered years (Finland), also depending on the vagaries of Ruble –US\$ parity the Rusnano Prize, at three million rubles may be counted in this uber club.

It is fair to ask, why we pay so much attention to these prizes. Also, how is this fascination different from collecting baseball stats or the having the latest Royal Madrid soccer scores at ones finger tips? No denying there is this human aspect of gang mentality trying to be part of something bigger plus reflected glory, greatness by association. One feels good saying, "Oh- really, so and so got the award" how nice- great researcher! I know her, we have published a paper together, or just reminisce about the time the Laureate had visited 'my lab'! Also, it is like the Oscar, 'the Stockholm glam' and the big name dropping game that we crave to be part of. I said 'we' to include all of us the in the trenches, some of whom may become the laureates but I also include the award givers as well; because, how else would a billionaire Nuevo rich get the opportunity to share the lime light with a 'certified genius'?

What has driven the phenomenon of these new prizes? Some would say the urge to cash in on media hype, if branding helps then let us copy the Nobel business plan and increase 'our' visibility, it has worked for Sweden. Others have nobler aspirations- they reason, since science has lost much of its fascination in the west, perhaps so may be the allure of a power ball size prize will direct the disillusioned youth towards the sciences, basically the 'wanting to create superheroes' strategy.

According to a story [2] published in Nature the 2013 FPP Laureate, Princeton University's Polyakov is reported to have quipped "Such big prizes could become very influential and they can have positive impact, or they can be very dangerous" – doing science because it will make one a superhero might not be quite the right kind of motivation- but no question doing science is a good thing.

In my opinion, the Nobel phenomenon is much more interesting.

Many like John Ziman [3] have recognized that science is not a mere pursuit of seeking 'the truth', it is much more than that and it is also a game of competition. Not necessarily with losers. But definitely games with reconditioned winners and awards of medals and prizes. There has been a symbiotic interdependence between institutionalized awards and 'good science'. The most prestigious is the Nobel Prize. Especially, physics has an eminent place in the will of Alfred Noble where he identified physics as the first [1]; "[Thus,] [t]he said interest shall be divided into five equal parts, which shall be apportioned as follows: ... one part to the person who shall have made the most important discovery or invention within the field of physics...". It is arguable as to what comes first, the esteem of the great scientists, or their "inventions" or the prominence of this prize. Nevertheless, it will be fair to assume that at the time of the first awarding in 1901 Roentgen himself had more name recognition than the prize itself.

One would expect that in the early 1900s every leader of science was a "shoe in" for a Nobel- for they were at the right place and it was just a matter of time; not quite- remember that Arnold Sommerfeld never got one! But then there is always Einstein whose prize was 'a given'; his divorce papers with Mileva Einstein nee Maric includes agreement regarding the apportioning of the prize money of the then yet to be won Nobel!

There are a few laureates, Gabriel Lippman (1908), Nils Gustaf Dalen (1912) and Charles Edouard Guillaume (1920) that history has forgotten. But on the whole, the prize has played a key role in the emergence of science and technology. Especially in chemistry and physics, the acceptance of the atomic hypothesis and quantum mechanics was greatly promoted by the Nobel awards. It has also made scientists such as Niles Bohr and Marie Curie household names all over the world. The prize and science has played a symbiotic relationship, for example [4] eleven of the of thirty one authors that were cited by Bohr ( included himself) in his now famous trilogy papers [5,6] were conferred ten Noble prize awards, seven Laureates in physics and four in chemistry. According to its web site the eight most popular Physics Laureates in increasing order of popularity are – Planck, Marconi, Thomson, Roentgen, Feynman, Bohr, (Marie) Curie, and Einstein. Now in 2013, the prize that has accrued in stature and the Nobel academy has morphed into one of the most influential non-academic 'institutions' in science. Hopefully, as in the past century science and

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technology community will continue to be well served by the selections of the award organizations old and new.

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