Epiphany or Magi?

The season of the Nobel awards and the ensuing ceremonials is upon us. As the current laureates prepare to graciously stand in line before the crowned heads of Sweden and Norway, it's an appropriate moment to reflect on what the prize has come to mean, and whether it still serves a useful purpose in today's world.

Although the Nobel Prizes are held in high esteem by the general public the world over, most laureates themselves are far from household names. Just ask someone in the street how many Nobel Prize winners they can recall. They are likely to struggle to remember even the laureates of the Peace Prize, by far the most publicly visible of the awards, most often citing those whose prizes were controversial (Kissinger, Arafat, Obama), rather than unsung heroes whose good deeds the prize was intended to recognize. Some relatively well-known laureates won the prize in a different category than popularly believed. French writer Elie Wiesel won the 1986 prize for Peace, not Literature, whilst for Winston Churchill (1953) it was the other way around. Even those who won the prize twice, such as Marie Curie (Physics 1903, Chemistry 1911), Linus Pauling (Chemistry 1954, Peace 1962) or Fred Sanger (Chemistry 1958 and 1980) are virtually unknown outside of the disciplines they represent.

Given the fuss and publicity surrounding the prizes, this all seems rather surprising. Most people can rattle off a list of names of rather minor movie stars, pop idols, sporting heroes or politicians, even at the risk of being considered pub trivia-quiz bores. So why is naming the world's most respected scientists so problematic?

The issue is possibly the impenetrability of the science itself, the demystification of which the prizes are supposed to promote. In this light, I'd like to make a simple proposal. Whilst the individuals in receipt of the prize can and should still be named,

I suggest that the discovery, invention or outstanding work on which the award is based should be mentioned first, as the object of the prize. The names of the key individuals who made the finding would then be cited alongside. Such a change would extend the award to the entire community of scientists, writers, economists or peace-activists involved in some way in the work being honoured. The named laureates would more properly come to be considered as the outstanding representatives of a group of people who have all contributed. They could perhaps have the prerogative of inviting other members of their wider community to share the honour of the award in some way, even though the prize money itself should not be further subdivided. But the prize should be for the science itself.

Thus, the 1921 Nobel Prize for Physics would have been awarded for the photoelectric effect, as discovered by Albert Einstein, with the contributions of Hertz, Planck, Thomson and others to the founding of quantum theory being implicit. Furthermore, the glaring absence of a Nobel Prize for Special (or for General) Relativity could have been more easily rectified, without Einstein appearing so blatantly to have crowded out others from the list of laureates, which was surely a factor in the omission.

There may, naturally, still be cases where a single, brilliant individual is wholly responsible for a prize-winning discovery, but this can be for history to judge. Works of literature are anyway most often the work of a single person, though editors, publishers and others contribute. Posthumous awards would also cease to be the problem they have become. This complication bedevilled the 2011 award to Ralph Steinman, who died several days before the prize was announced, a fact unknown to the Nobel Committee at the time. Surprisingly, the exclusion of posthumous awards was only instituted in 1974, after two had already been made. A discovery clearly outlives all who make

it, and the problem of having to remove a deceased scientist from the list of laureates would no longer be an inhibiting factor in recognizing a major advance in knowledge.

There are also many cases where the exact names of the laureates have been called into question, with accusations of favouritism, sexism or failure to distinguish the crucial contribution of a student or the inspiration of a mentor in the process of discovery. Whilst my proposal would obviously not quell all such arguments, it would shift the emphasis to the actual science, and encourage the media to focus more on this, rather than on a late middle-aged individual in a tuxedo shaking hands with a monarch.

Alfred Nobel's will could theoretically be an obstacle, since it states explicitly that each prize is awarded to a person. However, his will has already been extensively reinterpreted, the above-mentioned ban on posthumous awards being only one example. Another, starting in 1901, is prize-sharing between multiple individuals. Nobel also stipulated that the prizes should recognize the person who has made the most important discovery within each of the specified fields, in the preceding year. However, the significance of major discoveries cannot be evaluated until some time has passed, so established practice has been to ignore Nobel's requirement for immediacy. Nobel further required that the bodies charged with selecting the prize winners should recognize the worthiest recipient, "whether he be a Scandinavian or not". Clearly, this has been taken to include females, although some would argue that this particular revision has still not been fully implemented.

The importance of the Nobel Prizes has far outgrown the man who instituted them. They should similarly be used to promote science more than individual scientists.

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