
When It Comes To Awards, Just Say Yes

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Few awards in science, outside the Nobel prizes, are as distinguished as the Crafoord Prize. Yet until perhaps last month, many in the science community knew relatively little about it.

Established in 1981 by Anna-Greta and Holger Crafoord, chairman of the medical supply company Gambro AB, the Crafoord Prize is intended to reward outstanding achievement in areas of science not recognized by the Nobels. On a rotating basis, the award is given annually to researchers in mathematics and astronomy, in earth sciences, and in biological sciences. The prize: \$270,000.

This year it was mathematics that claimed the spotlight. The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, which is charged with selecting the honorees, chose Pierre Deligne of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, N.J., and Alexandre Grothendieck of the Université des Sciences et Techniques de Languedoc in Montpellier, France, for "fundamental research in algebraic geometry."

But there was a stunning hitch: Professor Grothendieck said no.

In his letter to the Swedish Academy he wrote, "I regret to inform you that I do not wish to receive

this prize or any other." He went on to say that, in the first place, he doesn't need the money. As for the recognition, he stated that time is the only true judge of fruitful ideas. "Moreover, I find that high-level researchers who typically receive an award such as the Crafoord Prize are all of such standing that they already have an abundance of material well-being and prestige in the field of science," he wrote. "Is it not clear that the overabundance for some can only be achieved at the expense of the necessities of others?"

Most surprising, however, was his indictment—it was not less than that—of his world of science. "Ethics in the science profession (at least among mathematicians) have dropped to such a degree that pure and simple pillaging among colleagues (especially at the expense of those who are not in a position to defend themselves) has practically become the general rule," he wrote.

"Under these conditions," Grothendieck concluded, "to take part in the game of prizes and rewards would also be to stand for developments in the scientific world that I recognize as profoundly unsound."

Obviously, Grothendieck speaks from his own perspective and ex-

periences. One readily grants certain deficiencies of award-giving in science, such as the relative neglect of younger researchers, but to dismiss it all as a “game” is unfair.

Prizes and awards serve several important functions. First, within a discipline they recognize outstanding work. But more than that, prize-giving can make an impact far outside the narrow world in which it takes place. Through the media attention they receive, honors like the Crafoord can create interest in other professional quarters and even among the public. Young people who see that society can honor a

mathematician—and not just an athlete, film star, or rock-musician—may be more inclined, and may actually be inspired, to pursue mathematics as a profession.

In my view Grothendieck missed a chance to bring to a wider world the satisfaction he took from a life spent in mathematical thought. If reform is what he wants, and he so indicates in his letter, he ought to do everything possible to bring new members into the profession. As it is, his bleak views may turn a few prospects away.

And that would be a shame. ■