



# THE ROCKEFELLER UNIVERSITY

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OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

July 13, 1978

Dr. Harriet Zuckerman  
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Dear Harriet:

These are just a couple of comments a few hours after having read your piece on Nobel Prizes II. I have not rechecked the original text to see whether my comments are totally fair, namely that you may have already covered these points to your satisfaction.

As you know, I fully share your scepticism in the last sentence of your paper. Having had to confront the question of whether to accept the Prize, as you also know, I also had to question myself about the social functions of the system and I will again send you a copy of the sermon that I composed for that occasion. Leaving to that text the arguments about support for a global culture, I wonder if you would not consider in Nobel Prizes III some further examination of their social function. Try to do the contrafactual exercise of a world in which neither the NP's nor any of their imitators could plausibly have emerged?

I have never doubted that the net utility of the Prizes within the scientific system are negative but one would have to explore how far this is balanced by their impact on the other side. By providing an index, however precarious, for achievement the Prizes have been a reward and incentive much more for institutions and countries probably even than for individual scientists. That brings us back to a very interesting question about the overall role of net indicators and the side-effects of their imperfections. It is also interesting how often we need to have some way of keeping score in order to stay in the game at all.

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But undoubtedly the most important role of the Prizes has been as public relations for science and especially for the inspiration of youngsters contemplating entry into a scientific career. Here I think we do have a paradox: From my own experience both introspectively and with students, very few of us ever identified directly with the Prize or could seriously anticipate a chance of achieving one. However, the culture hero provides an access of aspiration where virtual unattainability still does not diminish the attraction of the goal. Even without winning a Prize there is some gratification in the very process of emulation and aspiration: One might have to look into hagiography to get the next best metaphores.

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Whether the net balance here is altogether positive, and whether it balances out the substantial internal costs of the Prize system are worthy subject for further discussion.

Back to your last sentence, I wonder by what procedure it would ever be possible to know "whether the Prize's have actually advanced science". That point is, of course, quite different from the manifest rationale for reforming the criteria for the Prizes as you also suggested.

Yours

Joshua Lederberg

JL/gel