

# Nobel Aspirations

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Over the last few months, the Nobel Prize has generated much controversy—again.



More than 3,000 scientists contributed to the most high profile science event of 2012: the discovery of the Higgs boson subatomic particle. Yet the Nobel can only be split between three laureates. Was the Nobel Prize finally obsolete, the press fretted, in one angst-ridden blog after another?

What was the Nobel committee to do?

Ultimately, it dodged the issue, awarding the 2012 Nobel Prize in Physics to Serge Haroche and David J. Wineland “for ground-breaking experimental methods that enable measuring and manipulation of individual quantum systems.”

But this caused another controversy.

“The Higgs boson discovery didn't win the Nobel Prize in Physics this year despite being the sexiest and perhaps the most significant physics discovery in the last 50 years,” Alexander Abad-Santos despaired on *The Atlantic Wire*, echoing one horrified blogger after another. “You might even be asking yourself why, and pondering the meaning of life, now that the Nobel jury didn't recognize the God Particle.”

A few days ago, in February 2013, the Nobel took another blow, when three internet gurus offered \$3 million each to 11 life scientists. (The gurus: Russian entrepreneur Yuri Milner, Facebook titan Mark Zuckerberg, and Google creator Sergey Brin.) The

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Breakthrough Prize represented the world's biggest package of individual science prizes—and yes, the press fretted ad nauseam, it was *much* bigger than the Nobel.

Now was the Nobel obsolete?

If history is any indication, the answer was, of course: no. Many awards have offered more money than the Nobel—valued last year at \$1.2 million. Many have honored fields the Nobel does not. Many awards, in fact, out-Nobel the Nobel.

Life goes on.

Samuel Yin, for example, this January established the \$1.4 million Tang Prize—which the press instantly dubbed the “Asian Nobel,” if noting the payout was greater than the Nobel. One scornful blogger noted the \$1.4 million Tang made the \$1.2 million Nobel look like “chump change.”

Yuri Milner had actually outdone the Nobels once before, in July 2012, when he established, and gave to nine physicists, the Fundamental Physics Prize. The \$3 million prize trounced the Nobel three times over again. Also unlike the Nobel, its goal was to help scientists toward the start of their careers, not the end.

But it was immediately dubbed “The Russian Nobel” anyway.

There *has* been a long history of quiet attempts to deliberately out-Nobel the Nobel. The Templeton Prize for Progress Toward Research or Discoveries about Spiritual Realities was established in 1972 by Sir John Templeton with the stipulation it always be worth more than the Nobel.

The reason was to underscore Templeton's belief that advances in spiritual discoveries can be more significant than those recognized by the Nobels. Last year, the Templeton was worth \$1.7 million.

The Balzan Prize tends to offer less money. Last year its awardees received some \$804,000 each. But it too has evolved into a prize specifically targeted at areas not expressly covered by the Nobel, like sociology and political science.

Indeed, some prizes are defined, start to finish, by the Nobel. The \$100,000 Wolf Prize in Israel is widely known as a good predictor for future Nobel winners in physics. Its prizes in physics and chemistry are often described as second only to the Nobel. In medicine, the Wolf Prize is third in line for Most Prestigious, after the Nobel and the \$100,000 Lasker—the latter of which, in turn, is oft-touted as “the American Nobel,” and another prize that identifies future Nobel winners.

The Wolf Prize in Mathematics is often referred to as the “Nobel of Mathematics,” because the more illustrious \$15,000 Fields Medal is only given to mathematicians under 40, every four years. But one mustn't forget the \$1 million Abel Prize, given by the King of Norway, which is *also* frequently anointed the “Nobel of Mathematics.”

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Even the Swedish Royal Academy of Sciences--the Nobel Committee—regularly out-Nobels *itself*. It issues the \$60,000 Rolf Schock Prizes in Philosophy, which honors work in philosophy, mathematics, music, and the fine arts (aka “Philosophy's Nobel.”) It also issues the \$500,000 Crafoord Prize (aka “The Mini Nobel.”)

The Right Livelihood Award is routinely referred to as “The Alternative Nobel,” established after a failed attempt to persuade the Nobel Foundation to offer prizes in environmental protection, sustainable development, and human rights.

But sometimes a grant doesn't want to be compared to the Nobel or anything else. Sometimes a grant would just like to grow up, move out, and be *itself*. Is that too much to ask?

Apparently: yes. Fred Kavli, a distinguished entrepreneur, investor, and physicist, established the \$1 million Kavli Prize to help researchers in fields he personally felt would lead the future: neuroscience, astrophysics, and nanoscience. Yes, they were not explicitly covered by the Nobel, but so are a good many others.

Kavli also made sure the awards go to scientists toward the beginning of their careers, not the end, as often occurs with the Nobel, so the money would advance their work: a key distinction.

But the press made the whole thing all about the Nobel anyway. The name Kavli may draw a “blank stare,” *Time's* lede read, but perhaps (said *Time's* headline) Kavli is “The Next Nobel?” *The New York Times* was unequivocal about it: “Philanthropist of Science Seeks to be its Next Nobel.”

Then there is the \$630,000 Kyoto Prize (to the press: “Japan's Nobel”). There is the \$200,000 Gruber Prize (to the press: “the cosmology prize second to the Nobel”). Finally, there is the “Ig Nobel,” which last year was given to scientists conducting the study, “Leaning to the Left Makes the Eiffel Tower Seem Smaller”—among others.

The Nobel's influence is so profound that even most Ig Nobel Laureates show up for their award ceremony in Cambridge, to collect no money, and their Not a Nobel At All prize.

Reports of the Nobel's death may always be greatly exaggerated. On the other hand, maybe not. The tyranny of the Nobel is more a media thing than a science thing. In any given discipline, at any given time, any number of whiz kids are performing acts of wonder. Everyone in those disciplines knows it.

As the internet continues to weaken the influence of the general interest media, will specialized bloggers weaken the influence of the Nobel?

Or will we continue indulging our obsession to the point where we start issuing monetary prizes to awards “Most Like the Nobel?”

Time will tell.

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