

Banquet Speech

Torsten N. Wiesel's speech at the Nobel Banquet, December 10, 1981

Your Majesties, Your Royal Highnesses, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a privilege and pleasure to speak on behalf of the three laureates in Physiology or Medicine, Roger Sperry, David Hubel, and myself. We wish to express our deep gratitude to all concerned for the very high honor you have bestowed upon us.

A colleague at Harvard sent me a note of congratulations with a quotation from Dante's *Inferno* which in translation reads "and turning our stern to the morning we made of our oars, wings for the mad flight." - It states beautifully our dream as scientists, a dream only rarely realized. Perhaps it is more accurate to compare a scientist's life with the fate of Sisyphus, the shrewd and greedy king of Corinth, except that we feel blessed, not doomed, in our labors, - and our greed is for discovery, not for power and wealth. Today, of course, the quotation from Dante seems most appropriate since we were literally winged to this beautiful city as a result of our labors.

Many people wonder if it is ever going to be possible to have a complete understanding of the brain, this enormously complex and powerful organ. Can the brain really understand itself? Many students may assume that there are no limits to the depth we can probe into the mysteries of the brain, but still they hesitate to say that all the richness of human behavior and culture can be explained in biological and physical terms. Others may have less respect for the wonders of the brain and believe that computers will do better by the year 2000. In our quest to discover how the brain works we can easily find social and medical benefits in new knowledge, but can we see any dangers in the future? Most of us are probably not concerned at present, but I was taken aback the other day as I was asked "*When* will you be able to control human behavior?" My immediate answer was "*Never*, I hope."

Freedom of the mind has been threatened through history and today is no exception. I can *not* think of a greater symbol of human resistance and courage than our Nobel laureate colleague [Andrei Sakharov](#).

Tonight in this festive hall let us have hope for the future, and let us celebrate, on this Day of Human Rights, the freedom of thought and the pursuit of truth.

Thank you.

From [Les Prix Nobel](#). *The Nobel Prizes 1981*, Editor Wilhelm Odelberg, [Nobel Foundation], Stockholm, 1982

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