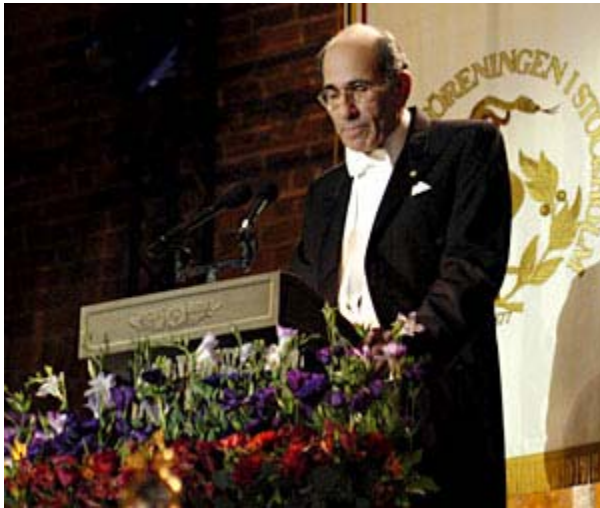


# Banquet Speech

Richard Axel's speech at the Nobel Banquet, December 10, 2004



Richard Axel delivering his banquet speech.

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Your Majesties, Your Royal Highnesses, Your Excellencies, honored guests, ladies and gentlemen.

Émile Zola asked in an address to students, “Did science promise happiness? No, I don’t think so,” he replied. “It promised truth and the question is whether truth will ever make us happy.” Last month, science afforded me enormous happiness.

This evening Linda Buck and I received a medal which is inscribed with three words, *Creavit et promovit*. He created and he promoted. The words do not honor us. They honor the vision of Alfred Nobel, the Nobel Prize that importantly encourages the freedom to acquire knowledge. This freedom cannot be taken lightly. Both myth and history reveal the conflict between intellect and power. With the tasting of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden, with Prometheus’ deliverance of fire to mankind and the opening of Pandora’s Box, we observe man’s intellectual curiosity punished by suffering. Ironically, it is this intellectual creativity that allows man to overcome his punishment, his suffering, to allow man to prevail. Indeed, the advancement of knowledge is too often perceived as transgression.

The conflict between intellect and political and religious authority will intensify as we continue to address questions concerning the origin of man, the nature of our genes, and how they define our biological character and most elusively, the relation between genes and behavior, emotion, and cognition. This knowledge too often elicits discord and even fear. This fear has led to the disturbing notion that there is knowledge best left unknown. This thinking undermines the scientific process. We must choose either to have science or not to have it, and if you have it you cannot dictate the kinds of knowledge that will emerge and this knowledge will inevitably have the potential for both good and evil. With this knowledge, our lives and those of our descendants will be inexorably changed and it is our shared responsibility to assure that this change is for the better. As we read in "The Ascent of Man," "It is not within the business of science to inherit the earth, but to improve it."

Tonight I speak for Linda and myself in thanking all of you for this honor and this spectacular celebration. This award is made not to me as a man, but for my science and for me science is a joyous obsession. Linda Buck and I have combined molecular genetics with neuroscience to approach the previously tenuous relationship between genes, perception and behavior. We have asked how the brain builds an internal representation of the external sensory world and how the recognition of olfactory stimuli might lead to meaningful thoughts and behaviors. While performing these experiments, in watching the data unfold remarkably before our eyes, it seemed inconceivable that we could experience a moment of greater joy or fulfillment. But tonight we stand with you, with Their Majesties The King and The Queen, with fellow scientists, with honored guests and friends, amidst the lights, the music, the trumpets, the wine and feel an affection that adds a new and very human dimension to our science. In the midst of this joy of these festivities, I raise my glass to celebrate you. Skål!

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