

Milner's Physics Prize Is Best News in 10 Years

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Yury Milner, the billionaire business partner of Alisher Usmanov and graduate of the physics department of Moscow State University, made his fortune investing in Facebook and Groupon. He established the Fundamental Physics Prize and has already awarded \$3 million to each of the first three of nine winners.

This is the best news I have heard in the last 10 years.

It so happened that this news came during the Olympics. I must confess that I have never understood the idea of the Olympic Games. What is all the fuss over who swims the fastest? Fish swim much faster, anyway. And does it matter which human jumps the highest? Relative to body size, the flea jumps the highest of all. Why compare feats of physical prowess when animals far outperform humans in every way? Couldn't we just award an Olympic medal to the flea and be done with it?

I have always thought it more fitting to promote and give public recognition to accomplishments peculiar to humans — namely, for intellectual achievements.

The Fundamental Physics Prize differs from the Nobel Prize in two important ways. First, it is awarded in the field of theoretical physics, an area in which new findings are rarely proven through physical experiments.

Practically speaking, that means the prize is awarded to young researchers at the peak of their careers and not only to aging scientists whose significant work was performed decades earlier.

Second, the Nobel committee — like the Russian Orthodox Church, the International Olympic Committee or any other structure created long ago with good intentions — has gradually become a closed bureaucracy over the years, and the decisions made by closed bureaucracies are not always optimal.

Because Milner's organization is new and has not had time to ossify or become irrelevant, the award recipients were chosen by several leading physicists and Milner himself, who, apparently undistracted by other hobbies, has kept current with developments in his former field.

What's more, the Fundamental Physics Prize awards almost three times more money than the Nobel Prize. But the principle involved is even more important than the dollar amount.

The only justification for humankind's existence is our desire to understand the world around us. The structure of society is good only to the extent that it reflects this yearning for knowledge.

Milner's prize reminds us that we live not only to dress better, run faster or even vote better because politicians differ from one another little more than wart hogs do.

Regardless of how Russia's Olympic athletes fare in trying to outswim and outjump the fish and fleas of the world, three of the first nine recipients of the Fundamental Physics Prize are Russians who emigrated from Russia. They are Alexei Kitayev of the California Institute of Technology, Maxim Konstantinovich of the Institute of Advanced Scientific Studies in France and Andrei Linde, who works on cosmic inflation theories at Stanford University.

In other words, in the only fitting competition for humans, Russians have received more gold medals than competitors from any other country. The only problem is that our leading geniuses left long ago to play for other teams.

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