



Eugene Wigner
The Nobel Prize in Physics 1963

Banquet Speech

Eugene Wigner's speech at the Nobel Banquet in Stockholm, December 10, 1963

I wish to thank first in the names of Drs. Maria Goeppert Mayer and Jensen, as well as in my own name, for the honor we received and for the beautiful celebration, for the truly heart-warming festivities, which we all enjoyed. We are all deeply grateful. However, new gratitude should never efface old ones and I wish to say at this occasion a few words on a subject about which we think little when young but which we appreciate increasingly when we reflect on our intellectual development. I mean our indebtedness to our teachers.

Man's knowledge has become man's knowledge rather than individual knowledge because he has developed codes in which sound signals correspond to objects and actions and he can learn one of these codes early in life in some mysterious way. Hence, people can communicate their knowledge and teach each other. Much of what we know, and most of the science which we know, was taught to us in this way. This process may be called manifest teaching-learning. Much can be said about this, in fact much has been said about it, but this is not my concern this evening.

What I wish to draw attention to is how much of our interest in science, and how much of our attitude toward science, we owe to our teachers. My own history begins in the high-school in Hungary where my mathematics teacher, Ratz, gave me books to read and evoked in me a sense for the beauty of his subject. I can not mention all to whom I am indebted but I do wish to mention the inspiration received from Polanyi. He taught me, among other things, that science begins when a body of phenomena is available which shows some coherence and regularities, that science consists in assimilating these regularities and in creating concepts which permit expressing these regularities in a natural way. He also taught me that it is this method of science rather than the concepts themselves (such as energy) which should be applied to other fields of learning.

We have not only teachers who are older than we, we learn also from contemporaries and younger colleagues. The contemporary from whom I learned most - in fact immensely much - was von Neumann but that was mostly mathematics. In leadership a young man at that time, Ray Herb, was my tutor. My scientific attitudes were greatly influenced also by students - some of whom had a more mature outlook than I. Perhaps I better not mention names lest they ask for a return of the tuition fee. To all of them I am deeply grateful, as we are to you for all that we have experienced today.

From [Les Prix Nobel en 1963](#), Editor Göran Liljestränd, [Nobel Foundation], Stockholm, 1964

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