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Acceptance speech for the AFIPS Harry Goode Memorial Award 1974

Before focussing on today's occasion, viz. my receiving the AFIPS Harry Goode Memorial Award, I would like to say a few things about awards and getting them in general. You see, it has been argued that the whole system of giving awards and bestowing distinctions is obsolete and that therefore we should stop doing so.

One argument in favour of abolition is that it is so difficult to select the recipient in all fairness, both fairness to those candidates that don't get the award and fairness to its past recipients. The argument is that nearly always one is faced with either too many or too few eligible candidates. I cannot regard this as a valid objection: something cannot be wrong just because it is difficult to do it well! Besides that, the past history of the Harry Goode Memorial Award has shown the way out of this dilemma: the abundance or lack of suitable candidates has resulted in a shared award in some years and no award at all in other years. That such a wise policy maintains and even enhances the value of the distinction is something of which --as you can guess-- I am painfully aware.

A next argument on favour of abolition is that they are superfluous, because one only wants to give them to first rate scientists and they are sufficiently known via their work anyhow. But are they? Well, certainly in some circles, including the selection committee. But a wise committee realizes that such distinctions also act as signposts, as a kind of reading guide for the general public and I would not like to deprive responsible bodies of such means of exerting a hopefully beneficial influence. For the recipient that is aware of this aspect, the whole happening becomes somewhat embarrassing and perhaps even frightening, but that is his problem.

A third objection against the whole award system is that the distribution of fame suffers, by its very nature, from a built-in instability, so why aggravate it? The only thing you do is to make the already famous still more famous! But in all honesty: "What else can you do with a famous man?"- Now serious: underlying this last objection is the doubt as to whether "fame" as ^{an} institution in our civilization is a good thing or not. I think it can be a good thing. There are all sorts of things that should be said

but will only be noticed when said by someone supported by fame: we may not like this state of affairs, but for the time being it seems a fact of life. Fame creates responsibility at both sides: the famous have the obligation to decide wisely when, where and how to open their mouth, their audience has the complementary responsibility not to accept everything they say unchallenged, just because a famous man has spoken. Trying to abolish fame is trying to shrink from those responsibilities, and I do not think that our civilization should do that.

In short, I am greatly in favour of honours, titles, awards, distinctions, golden medals etc. and you find in me not only an experienced, but also enthusiastic recipient!

So much about awards in general; now about getting them. When such a distinction hits you, and particularly when this happens during one of those agonizing periods of doubt and despair, it can be an encouragement stronger than I can describe it in words, it can revive one to the extent that suddenly one can hear again the angels singing in one's heart. It can evoke a frightening joy.... And when it happens to you, I must warn you not to be disappointed when you discover that you can share this joy with only very few people: again you will find yourself very lonely....

Let us now switch from the general considerations to this specific occasion. I interpret this granting of the Harry Goode Memorial Award as a symptom of a broadening recognition of the relevance of a cause to which I have devoted more than the last decade of my life, and as such it is very gratifying. I have not been the only one to promote it, but I am willing to accept the point of view that I have been its principal advocate and in that capacity I accept the Award in name of all those colleagues, known or unknown, who have contributed. The cause in case is the conviction that the potentialities of automatic computing equipment will only bear the fruits we hope, provided that we take the challenge of the programming task seriously and provided that we realize that what we are called to design will get so sophisticated, that Elegance is no longer a luxury, but a matter of life and death. It is in this light that we must appreciate the view of programming as a practical exercise in the effective exploitation of one's powers of abstraction, it is in this light that we must appreciate all current efforts towards raising the level of confidence in the correctness

of our programs, the reliability and robustness of our machines, all efforts to discover the intellectual disciplines needed for controlled design.

We are in the midst of an exciting process of clarification, of improvement of our understanding of the true nature of the programming task and its intrinsic difficulties. A few notes of warning, however, are not out of place, because, to my great regret, already now progress is being oversold. Simple souls have been made to believe that we have a retail shop in Philosopher's Stones that, by magic, will cure all diseases; in a few years time it will, of course, become apparant that there are still a few diseases uncured and then the same simple souls will denounce us as quacks. Secondly, as one may expect, programming discipline reflects itself in a coding discipline, but this does not justify the expectation that the problems of programming can be solved by a few measures such as a new, clean programming languages or a new management structure or a new mechanical aid! Such measures may assist, certainly, but only provided that we do not overestimate their significance.

I would like to end my brief acceptance speech with a quotation from the English artist William Blake, who lived from 1757 until 1827:

"He who would do good to another must do it in minute particulars
General Good is the plea of the scoundrel, hypocrite and flatterer
For Art and Science cannot exist but in minutely organized particulars."

I thank you for your attention.

prof.dr.Edsger W.Dijkstra