Grothendieck on Prizes

Montpellier, 9 July 1988

Dear Professor Axler,

Thank you for your invitation to write an article for the *Mathematical Intelligencer* in relation to my refusal of the Crafoord Prize. You describe the *Mathematical Intelligencer* as "intended for leisure reading for active mathematicians," yet I am not sure the issue you suggested that I write about properly belongs to the "leisure" compartment of a working scientist's life. It would seem that most scientists, at any rate those in positions of editorial responsibility, judge otherwise: a copy of my letter to the Swedish Royal Academy of Sciences, stating the reasons for my refusal of the Prize, was sent to *Science* (to which your letter refers) and to eleven other similar journals, each addressing a general international audience of scientists. As far as I know, none of them have included this letter, except some excerpts according to the editor's tastes.

What I have to say about declining ethical standards and its context I stated in the letter just referred to (copy included), and in greater detail in the full-scale reflection *Récoltes et Semailles* mentioned there. If you wish to fill the gap left by *Science* and other journals, you are welcome to publish this letter to the Swedish Academy, provided only that 1) the letter is included in its entirety, and 2) you include this short letter to you, as an explanatory introduction.

Sincerely,

A. Grothendieck
Department of Mathematics
Univ. Montpellier 2
Pl. Eugène Bataillon
34060 Montpellier Cedex, France

Montpellier, 19 April 1988

Dear Professor Ganelius,*

I thank you for your letter of the 13th of April which I received today, and for your telegram. I am touched by the honor given to me by the Royal Academy of Sciences of Sweden awarding

---

* *What follows is a translation of a letter published in the 4 May 1988 issue of Le Monde.*

this year's Crafoord prize, together with a significant sum of money, jointly to Pierre Deligne (who was my student) and myself. Nevertheless, I regret to inform you that I do not wish to accept this (or any other) prize for the following reasons.

1) My salary as professor, even my pension starting next October, is more than sufficient for my own material needs as well as those of my dependents; hence I have no need for money. As for the distinction given to some of my work on foundations, I am convinced that time is the only decisive test for the fertility of new ideas or views. Fertility is measured by offspring, not by honors.

2) I note moreover that all researchers of high level, to which a prestigious award such as the Crafoord prize addresses itself, have a social standing that provides them with more than enough material wealth and scientific prestige, with all the power and privileges these entail. But is it not clear that superabundance for some is only possible at the cost of the needs of others?

3) The work that brought me to the kind attention of the Academy was done twenty-five years ago at a time when I was part of the scientific community and essentially shared its spirit and its values. I left that environment in 1970, and, while keeping my passion for scientific research, inwardly I have retreated more and more from the scientific "milieu." Meanwhile, the ethics of the scientific community (at least among mathematicians) have declined to the point that outright theft among colleagues (especially at the expense of those who are in no position to defend themselves) has nearly become the general rule, and is in any case tolerated by all, even in the most obvious and iniquitous cases. Under these conditions, agreeing to participate in the game of "prizes" and "rewards" would also mean giving my approval to a spirit and trend in the scientific world that I view as being fundamentally unhealthy, and moreover condemned to disappear soon, so suicidal are this spirit and trend, spiritually and even intellectually and materially.

This third reason is to me by far the most imperative one. Stating it is in no way meant as a criticism of the Royal Academy's aims in the administration of its funds. I do not doubt that before the end of the century, totally unforeseen events will completely change our notions about "science" and its goals and the spirit in which scientific work is done. No doubt the Royal Academy will then be among the institutions and the people who will have an important role to play in this unprecedented renovation, after an equally unprecedented civilization collapse.

I regret the inconvenience that my refusal to accept the Crafoord prize may have caused you and the Royal Academy, especially because a certain amount of publicity was already given to the award prior to the acceptance by the chosen laureates. Yet, I have never failed to make my views about the scientific community and the "official science" of today known to this same community and especially to my old friends and young students in the mathematical world. They can be found in a long reflexion *Récoltes et Semailles* (*Reaping and Sowing*) on my life as a mathematician, on creativity in general, and on scientific creativity in particular; this essay unexpectedly became a portrait of the morals of the mathematical world from 1950 up to today. While awaiting its publication in book form, a provisional edition of 200 preprints has been sent to mathematical colleagues, especially algebraic geometers (who now do me the honor of remembering me). Under separate cover, I send you the two introductory parts for your personal information.

Again I thank you and the Royal Academy of Sciences of Sweden and apologize for the unwanted inconvenience. Please accept my best regards.

A. Grothendieck
Department of Mathematics
Univ. Montpellier 2
Pl. Eugène Bataillon
34060 Montpellier Cedex, France

Too Many Journals

But the number of the periodical repositories of mathematical literature has become so great, that papers consigned to them, although preserved, as we may hope, for all time, are in imminent danger of passing out of sight within a few years after their first appearance. They are preserved from destruction, but not from oblivion; they share the fate of manuscripts hidden in the archives of some great library from which it is in itself a work of research to disinter them.

H. J. S. Smith, 1882

KUNGLIGA
VETENSKAPSAKADEMIEN
THE ROYAL SWEDISH ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

1739 – 1989

Stockholm le 16 mai 1988
Le Secrétaire Perpétuel
Professeur Tord Ganelius/ks

M. le Professeur
Alexandre Grothendieck
Les Aumettes
F-84570 Mormoiron
Frankrike

Cher Professeur Alexandre Grothendieck,

Je vous remercie pour votre lettre du 19 avril, que j'ai lu avec grand intérêt, et je vous suis très reconnaissant des deux fascicules des Récoltes et semailles, que j'ai étudié et étudierai avec soin.

Avant tout je veux dire, que je comprends votre réaction et que je respecte votre décision de refuser le prix Crafoord (et chaque prix analogue). Comme mathématicien - analyste au niveau bas - j'ai en effet fait l'expérience de certaines des infirmités du monde scientifique. Après ces commentaires il est peut-être difficile de comprendre pourquoi je travaille pour une Académie, qui s'occupe - entre autres choses - des prix Nobel et Crafoord!

Mais c'est le cas, et je vais encore interroger, au risque de vous fâcher, si vous avez contemplé d'accepter l'argent et le disposer pour buts que vous trouvez d'une grande valeur (comme support aux jeunes chercheurs etc.)? Pourtant je présume et respecte que vous ne voulez pas entrer dans le jeu des prix.

Nous pensons toujours que vous et M. Deligne constituent un choix motivé et naturel pour notre prix en géométrie algébraique, et il n'est pas possible de rétracter cette décision, mais il est notre devoir (comme avec M. Sartre et le prix Nobel) de noter dans chaque contexte, que vous avez refusé d'accepter le prix.

Acceptant totalement votre réaction je suis triste, que notre décision visé comme un honneur, a causé ennui. Veuillez agréer l'expression de mes sentiments sincèrement dévoués.

Tord Ganelius

Postadress
Box 50005
S-104 05 Stockholm

Lokaler, *visiting address*
Lilla Frescativägen 4,
Frescati

Telefon
+46-(0)8-15 04 30

Telefax
+46-(0)8-15 56 70

Telex
17073 royacad s

Les Aumettes le 5.6.1988

Cher Professeur Tord Ganelius,

Je vous sais gré de votre lettre compréhensive et personnelle du 16 mai, elle n'a certes rien pour me "fâcher" ! Comme vous l'avez deviné vous-même, je ne pense pas revenir sur une décision qui pour moi ne pouvait qu'aller de soi. Pourtant, je puis vous rassurer qu'en ce qui me concerne, cet épisode du Prix Crafoord n'a aucunement "causé ennui" (et ceci d'autant moins que je suis persuadé que les fonds qui ne seront pas déboursés par l'Académie des Sciences de Suède en ma faveur seront utilisés par elle de façon non moins judicieuse que je n'aurais pu le faire moi-même). Bien au contraire, les très nombreux échos, surtout sous forme de lettres, qui me sont parvenus à la suite de la publication par le journal Le Monde de la lettre du 19 avril que je vous avais adressée, me montrent que les réflexions que j'esquisse dans cette lettre répondent à une inquiétude (restant souvent inexprimée) de beaucoup, aussi bien dans le milieu scientifique lui-même qu'en dehors de ce milieu. Aussi je crois que cela a été une excellente chose que l'attribution du Prix Crafoord ait été finalement une occasion pour porter au grand jour une inquiétude et un malaise qui restaient confinés dans l'ombre. C'est aussi la raison pour laquelle je me permets de vous suggérer de publier cette lettre parmi les conférences du Prix Crafoord, comme ma contribution de n o n - récipiendaire du Prix. Je n'ai aucun doute qu'une telle initiative sera comptée à l'honneur de l'Académie Royale des Sciences de Suède. Mais quelle que soit votre décision à cet égard, c'est mon plus vif souhait que cet épisode ne laisse en vous, pas plus que ce n'est le cas en moi-même, de trace d'un malaise ou d'une "tristesse" comme vous l'évoquiez dans votre lettre.

Dans cet espoir, je vous prie de recevoir, cher Professeur Ganelius et cher Collègue, l'expression de mes sentiments très sincèrement dévoués