The Nobel Peace Prize

A Better Understanding of the Will that Shapes the World

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Nominations for the Nobel Peace Prize closed on January 31. Now, the Norwegian Nobel Committee faces the difficult task of deciding on a worthy winner of this – perhaps the world's most prestigious – prize. The criteria upon which they base that decision is a few brief lines in Alfred Nobel's 1895 final will, originally written in Swedish. Yet the English translation of the will hardly fully captures Nobel's intentions. If we are to understand who should be awarded this sought-after prize, the English text should better reflect the spirit of the Swedish original. Accordingly, the prize seeks to benefit the work of those who pursue peace among nations as well as those who promote peace within them.

The current English translation of the will

The will states that the interest on Nobel's considerable fortune should "be distributed annually as prizes to those who, during the preceding year, have conferred the greatest benefit to humankind." This may be seen as the overriding purpose, and it is then accompanied by slightly more detailed criteria for each of the five original prizes awarded within physics, chemistry, medicine, literature, and peace.

For the "Nobel Peace Prize" (the will refers to the prize "for champions of peace") this is the "the person who has done the most or best to advance fellowship among nations, the abolition or reduction of standing armies, and the establishment and promotion of peace congresses."

But does this translation fully capture Nobel's intentions? In particular, the important phrase "advance fellowship among nations" may benefit from further scrutiny.

The original in Swedish

Nobel chose to write the will in his native Swedish, and he used the expression *för folkens förbrödrande*. The term *förbrödrande* used to be translated as "brotherhood" or "fraternity" but is now more commonly translated as "fellowship". This is, as has been pointed out by Heffermehl (2010), not strictly correct as *förbrödrande* refers to change, or alternatively the result of change, while "fellowship" is something existing.

Nevertheless, the more controversial part is the meaning of *folkens*. While it is not incorrect to translate the term *folkens* by referring to "nations", the Swedish word *folk* (like e.g. the German *Volk*) may also mean "people", and the term *folkens* can be seen to refer to "the peoples'" rather than, or together with, a reference to nations. And as it turns out, this might matter quite a lot.

Why it matters

If *folkens* is limited to "nations", the Nobel Committee's focus should only be on peace efforts as *between* nations. However, if the term is translated as "the peoples'", the focus may also include work aimed at peace *within* nations. This fuller picture allows work addressing matters such as civil war and the suppression of human rights within a State to fall within the scope of Nobel's will. It also ensures that efforts countering the division within nations fit within the parameters of the Nobel Peace Prize, an important message indeed in our world today. The latter interpretation would give the Norwegian Nobel Committee a bit broader scope in their determinations, and it would take the sting out of the criticism directed at the Nobel Committee for the occasions the prize has been awarded for human rights protection and other more

domestically focused efforts supporting peace in a more indirect manner.

Against that background, to capture the full meaning of Nobel's will, I propose that a better translation would be "advancing fellowship among peoples" or perhaps better still, "advancing fellowship among, and within, nations". The latter, I argue, captures the meaning of the Swedish original best even though I acknowledge that it is a less literal translation.

Arguments in favour of a new translation

There are several arguments in favour of a new translation broadening the understanding of the term *folkens* as suggested above. First, the linguistics angle is already clear from the above, and I am neither the only, nor the first, to point this out. For example, in 2005, Abrams noted: "A better translation even at the time could have been 'for fraternity between peoples'."

Critics of a revised translation may argue that the peace movement at the time of Nobel's will was centred on nations. This is correct. At the same time, however, it could be argued that Nobel no doubt was aware of this, and that there must have been a reason why he chose the term *folkens* instead of alternatives explicitly limited to "nations" (such as the Swedish term *nationernas*). Indeed, Peter Nobel (a descendent of Alfred's brother Ludvig Nobel), has reported that, at the time, Alfred Nobel was developing a plan for a "League of Peoples" as an alternative to the peace community's strong focus on an international tribunal, thus hinting at a use of the term "peoples".

Second, it is also worth making the point that, under Swedish law that governs the will, a will is to be interpreted with a focus on what the individual testator meant. This means that we ought to take into account Nobel's mindset and person. One thing stands out in that context.

By all accounts, Nobel did not seek to micromanage the awarding of the prizes he instigated. Rather he kept the instructions provided in the will brief. While the will itself, e.g., with its specific reference to "peace congresses", is easily dated to the end of the 1800s, it is difficult to imagine that anyone instigating a prize to be awarded over hundreds of years, or indeed eternity, imagines that the world will not change over time. This may be particularly true for a person like Nobel, who all his life was driven by innovation, fresh insights, and change. All this may be seen to suggest that he intended capable hands to guide the understanding of the will over time. Consequently, it may be argued to be unlikely that Nobel would have been offended by events such as when the former chair of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, Berit Reiss-Andersen, announced that "the fraternity [fellowship] criteria cover, among others, human rights contributions to peace" – hinting at a broader understanding of these criteria for the prize.

Third, focusing on "advancing fellowship among, and within, nations" corresponds better to how the Nobel Committee has acted so far with the prize being awarded for achievements e.g. in human rights on several occasions. The Nobel Committee has, thus, clearly acted in accordance with the formulations in the Swedish original text. The 2021 award to Maria Ressa and Dmitry Muratov "for their efforts to safeguard freedom of expression, which is a precondition for democracy and lasting peace" is illustrative.

Fourth, as a matter of practicalities, it is difficult to imagine fellowship among nations without sufficient fellowship within those nations. This clearly favours the understanding advanced here.

Fifth, as noted above, the overriding aim of the Nobel prizes is to encourage and reward those conferring the greatest benefits to humankind. Also, this may be seen to speak in favour of giving a broader interpretation of the aim of advancing fellowship.

Finally, it should be noted that the translation of the will has not remained static. For example, while the gender-neutral Swedish term *mensklighеten* used to be translated to "mankind", it is now translated to the more accurate, gender-neutral term, "humankind".

Where does all this leave us?

While the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize is not decided by Norway as such, Norway is still regularly put under pressure or criticised in relation to the choice of laureate. The Nazis declared that the 1935 award of the prize to Carl von Ossietzky would be

considered an "unfriendly act". The Soviet Union condemned the awards to Andrei Sakharov in 1975 and Lech Wałęsa in 1983. Communist China attacked the award given to Liu Xiaobo in 2010. And more recently, the Trump administration has lambasted Norway for not awarding the Peace Prize to Donald Trump. Perhaps all this can be seen as an indication of the enormous influence the Nobel Peace Prize has on world affairs.

The prize itself is a powerful tool for peace due to the attention it generates, and it is crucial that we safeguard the most accurate interpretation of the will at a time when the English language version gets far more attention than the original Swedish version. Acknowledging that the prize rewards efforts to advance fellowship among, and within, nations, allows us an appropriate focus and it highlights the enduring relevance of this remarkable prize instigated by a remarkable man some 130 years ago.

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