Edmund Phelps was born in 1933 in Evanston and grew up in Hastings-on-Hudson. He earned his B.A. from Amherst (1955) and his Ph.D. from Yale (1959). He is the 2006 Nobel Laureate in Economics, the Director of Columbia's Center on Capitalism and Society, and the McVickar Professor of Political Economy at Columbia University.

Phelps's work can be seen as a program to put "people as we know them" back into economic models – accounting for the incompleteness of their information and studying the effects of their expectations on the market. He applies this perspective in studying unemployment and inclusion, economic growth, business swings and dynamism.

Phelps holds many honorary doctorates and professorships, including from the Université libre de Bruxelles (2010), Tsinghua University (2007) and the Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris (2006), among others. Phelps is a Fellow of the National Academy of Science and a Distinguished Fellow of the American Economic Association, and in 2001 a Festschrift conference was held in his honor. In 2008, he was named Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur and awarded the Premio Pico della Mirandola and the Kiel Global Economy Prize. The same year the UBA Law School established the Catedra Phelps and the Phelps Medal for Innovation. In 2010, he was appointed Dean of New Huadu Business School at Minjiang University in Fuzhou. In 2011, Professor Phelps received the Louise Blouin Creative Leadership Award and was named a Full Foreign Member of the Russian Academy of Sciences. In 2012, Professor Phelps was elected an Honorary Patron of the University Philosophical Society of Trinity College and was awarded the Mendeleev Medal for Achievement in the Sciences and the President's Medal of the National University of Ireland, Galway.