

Human Accomplishment: The Pursuit of Excellence in the Arts and Sciences, 800 BC to 1950

Charles Murray

Excerpts

What varieties has man found out in buildings, attires, husbandry, navigation, sculpture, and painting! What millions of inventions has he [in] arms, engines, stratagem, and the like! What thousands of medicines for the health, of eloquent phrases to delight, of verses for pleasure, of musical inventions and instruments! How large is the capacity of man, if we should dwell upon particulars!

Augustine, *City of God*

- At irregular times and in scattered settings, human beings have achieved great things. They have discovered truths about the workings of the physical world, invented wondrous devices, combined sounds and colors in ways that touch our deepest emotions, and arranged words in ways that illuminate the mysteries of the human condition. *Human Accomplishment* is about those great things and the people who did them, from the age of Homer 2,800 years ago to our own time.
- The argument of the book is based on historiometric analyses that are long on numbers and graphs and short on good stories. But the underlying stuff of human accomplishment does indeed consist of good stories, and a sense of that stuff is essential if the numbers and graphs are to be kept in context.
- What causes streams of accomplishment to begin and decline? The mainspring for human accomplishment is the inborn impulse of humans toward excellence. Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is the source for this argument, distilled by philosopher John Rawls into what he labeled "the Aristotelian principle": *Other things equal, human beings enjoy the exercise of their realized capacities (their innate or trained abilities), and this enjoyment increases the more the capacity is realized, or the greater its complexity.*
- *Purpose* and *autonomy* determine how insistently and effectively human beings with the potential for excellence will try to realize that potential, given the chance. The thesis regarding *purpose* is that a major stream of human accomplishment is fostered by a culture in which the most talented people believe that life has a purpose and that the function of life is to fulfil that purpose. The thesis regarding *autonomy* is that a stream of human accomplishment is fostered by a culture that encourages the belief that individuals can act efficaciously as individuals, and encourages them to do so.
- The existence of what are called *elite cities* is also associated with accomplishment—not just because artists and scientists flock to them to do their work, but also because they are nurturing environments for the development of talent in the new generation. Finally, there is the role of freedom of action. Political freedom in the modern sense of that word has existed for only a few centuries, but governments of all kinds, including autocracies, have sometimes found ways to give their artists and scientists de facto freedom of action. Those are the governments that have also been associated with major streams of accomplishment.

Talk delivered by Charles Murray at the Cato Institute

Six years ago, for reasons unknown, it popped into my head that a cool title for a book would be *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of Human Accomplishment*. My immodest idea was to do for human accomplishment what Adam Smith did for economic growth in *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*—explain how, where, and why it happens. The title did not survive, and I am under no illusion that the book is in the same league with *Wealth of Nations*, but it did get written. It will appear in October as *Human Accomplishment: The Pursuit of Excellence in the Arts and Sciences, 800 BC to 1950* (HarperCollins).

I expect libertarians to read *Human Accomplishment* as I read books by libertarians who have strayed from policy issues into other fields, curious about how the author's political philosophy affects his analysis. Here are the answers from my perspective:

On a few issues, the story turned out as I expected. Economic growth is strongly related to the appearance of what I call *significant figures* in the arts and sciences, even after controlling statistically for a variety of other factors. Totalitarian regimes quash human accomplishment—no surprise there. But I knew from the outset that there could be no easy fit between the story of human accomplishment and the principles of a free society, for an obvious reason: the bulk of great achievements in the arts and sciences did not occur in free societies. Even the imperfect liberal democracies of the West have been around for only the last two centuries, and human beings plainly managed to produce spectacular artistic creations and scientific advances before that. And there was indeed no easy fit.

The first lesson I had to absorb was humility about the role of the United States. Americans often use "West" when talking about our civilization, as if Europe and America had produced it as partners, but the data collection for *Human Accomplishment* forced me to realize how presumptuous that is. In his landmark *Configurations of Culture Growth* (1944), written during the 1930s, A L Kroeber observed in passing that "it is curious how little science of highest quality America has produced"—a startling claim to Americans who have become accustomed to American scientific dominance since 1950 (the stopping point for *Human Accomplishment*). But Kroeber was right. Americans are right to brag about the Yankee ingenuity that converted science to technology, but throughout the 19th century and into the first decades of the 20th, the explosion in basic scientific knowledge occurred overwhelmingly in Europe. In the arts, a large dose of American humility is in order. Much as we may love Twain, Whitman, Whistler, and Copland, they are easily lost in the ocean of the European oeuvre. What we are pleased to call Western civilization was in fact European civilization throughout the period I studied.

The data also forced me to think hard about the complicated relationship of freedom to great accomplishment. Levels of political freedom varied widely across time (Britain before the Glorious Revolution versus Britain after; Britain before and after the great liberal reforms of the 1830s) and across countries (18th-century France versus 18th-century Britain), but this variation was not statistically related to the appearance of significant figures. If you don't trust statistics on such matters, look at the qualitative record. The same absolutist France that oppressed peasants and jailed political dissidents was such a vibrant center of achievement in both the arts and the sciences that no comparison with post-revolutionary France can favor democracy and liberalism over absolutism. What's the explanation? The answer takes the better part of three chapters in the book, but part of it has to do with the de facto freedom of action that a regime accords to its creative elites. It is not an appealing truth, but it seems to be a truth nonetheless: great artistic and scientific achievement doesn't require freedom for everyone, just for those who are likely candidates to produce great work. Historically, absolutist regimes have done as well in that regard as democratic ones.

Most of the other hard thinking that the data forced on me led in more optimistic directions. Two of the dynamics that animate human accomplishment are what I call purpose and autonomy, and their meanings are close to Randian. Here's my proposition regarding purpose: "A major stream of human accomplishment is fostered by a culture in which the most talented people believe that life has a purpose and that the function of life is to fulfill that purpose." And here's my proposition regarding autonomy: "A major stream of human accomplishment is fostered by a culture that encourages the belief that individuals can act efficaciously as individuals, and enables them to do so." Conclusions like these should get a nod of approval from Ed Crane and David Kelley alike. And, I am happy to report, they have the advantage of being not only attractive but historically true.

As I pursued these ideas, I went through one of those evolutions that are the point of spending all that time and effort learning something new (new to me, anyway). It is summarized in this proposition: "A major stream of accomplishment in any domain requires a well-articulated vision of, and use of, the transcendental goods relevant to that domain." The transcendental goods to which I refer are the classic

triad: truth, beauty, and the good. A “well-articulated vision ” means one with gravitas. Chinese artists of the Song dynasty and Italian artists of the Renaissance had different visions of beauty, but both were explicit, carefully thought out, and rooted in insights about what is aesthetically pleasing to human beings. Confucius and Aristotle had different visions of the good, but both are profound and rooted in deep insights about the human condition. Andy Warhol ’s vision of beauty (if he had one) doesn’t cut it, nor do New Age clichés about being a nice person.

My conclusion regarding science (including social science) is that where scholars do not have allegiance to ideals of truth, the work tends to be false. That much is not open to much dispute. But I also conclude that where artists do not have coherent ideals of beauty, the work tends to be sterile, and where they do not have coherent ideals of the good, the work tends to be vulgar. Lacking access to either beauty or the good, the work tends to be shallow. These conclusions are subject to all sorts of objections. Among other things, I am by implication writing off some huge proportion of 20th-century art, literature, and music as sterile, vulgar, and shallow.

Some libertarians, sensitive to invocations of the non rational, will also detect a whiff of religiosity in these themes. This was for me the biggest surprise in the writing of the book. I have always been respectful of the great religions, but I remain an agnostic. And yet I came to the end of the book convinced that the role of religion is indispensable for igniting great accomplishment in the arts. I use religion at once loosely and stringently. Going to church every Sunday is not the definition I have in mind, nor even a theology in its traditional sense. Confucianism and classical Greek thought were both essentially secular, and look at the cultures they produced. But they were tantamount to religions, as I am using the word, in that they articulated a human place in the cosmos, laid out a clear understanding of the end toward which a human life aims, and set exalted standards for seeking that end. That brings me to the sense in which I use religion stringently: Confucianism and Aristotelianism, along with the great religions of the world, are for grownups, requiring mature reflection on truth, beauty, and the good. Cultures in which the creative elites are not engaged in that kind of mature reflection don’t produce great art.

And so *Human Accomplishment* offers targets to my friends who occupy the severely rationalist corners of libertarianism, along with a host of targets for the left (the chapters on the dominance of Europe and of males in human accomplishment see to that). But lest you think I have strayed too far, let me give you *Human Accomplishment*’ s bottom line, from the opening of the last chapter: "If the last several hundred pages can be said to have a principal message, it is this: Excellence exists, and it is time to acknowledge and celebrate the magnificent inequality that has enabled some of our fellow humans to so enrich the lives of the rest of us." The libertarian beliefs we share are about how to free everyone to reach whatever heights are in him. *Human Accomplishment* is the story of the outer limits of those heights.

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