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## Judging Quality of Human Achievement

**Robin Barrow**

### ***Abstract***

This paper defends the commonsense view that judgments about the quality of human achievement in the arts can be true or false and shown to be so by objective reasoning, as against both subjectivist views and, more particularly, the view that they can be quantitatively expressed and scientifically demonstrated. It focuses on Charles Murray's recent attempt to rank-order the great achievers in an objective manner, arguing that it is fundamentally flawed, especially in confusing the quantification of references with an argument for quality. Any attempt to justify a judgment relating to the quality of achievement must involve expertise in the sense, at least, of a thorough understanding of the nature of the activity in question. Nothing in Murray's lengthy book in fact relates to justification for any of the judgments. The paper concludes that the trappings of science do not make for science; that expertise in a field is necessary for making sound judgments in that field; that the broader the judgment, the harder it is to justify; that objectivity is to be distinguished from precision (as truth is from certainty); and that understanding of what counts as literature (art, sculpture, etc.) is an indispensable part of arguing for the quality of a work or an artist.

### ***I***

The commonsense view has it that judgments can be made about the relative quality of human achievements, with some degree of objectivity, in fields as disparate as sport, art, mathematics, and engineering. In other words, it is not simply a matter of taste or subjective opinion that Sibelius is an important composer, da Vinci a genius, Donald Bradman a great cricketer, or Brunel a leading engineer. On the contrary, these are valid judgments, judgments that may be classified as sound and true. But the commonsense view, while insisting that such judgments can be objective in the sense that they are based upon more than taste and can sometimes be shown to be true or false, nonetheless recognizes that they are not scientifically demonstrable in the sense that one can prove their truth or falsity by physical demonstration, direct observation or experiment. It also accepts that, in practice, judgments about quality often have to

be qualified and circumscribed to a degree. Thus, it is true that Bradman was a great cricketer, but one would be foolish to assert that he was the greatest cricketer who ever lived. It is one thing to say that Sibelius is an important composer, another to say that he is superior to Mahler. Thus, the commonsense view is that judgments can be made and defended rationally; they can be true or false; but they are often a little imprecise, and the appropriate manner of justification is reasoning rather than demonstration or calculation.

This view is subject to attack from the one side by the simple counterassertion that such judgments are subjective, and from the other by the claim that they are not matters of judgment, but can be quantified and thereby objectively demonstrated. The former view has been canvassed throughout history but has recently become extremely fashionable as an aspect of the so-called postmodern tenor of our times, which holds essentially that there is no such thing as objectivity or truth as conventionally understood in any sphere. The latter view is relatively new and startling. Charles Murray, a co-author of the much heralded *The Bell Curve* (1994), which controversially argued that intelligence differs among ethnic groups, has now tried to do much the same thing for human achievements in the arts and literature: to quantify and measure quality, as previously he quantified and measured intelligence (*Human Accomplishment*, 2003). This work has been variously hailed as “a remarkable tour de force: a rigorous analytic, quantitative study of what is generally thought to defy such a mode of analysis” (Gertrude Himmelfarb), “a task worthy of his great talents as a preeminent social thinker of our time—that of opening up for us a new science of human accomplishment” (Michael Novak), and “measuring the topology of excellence in the arts and sciences . . . in a world of cultural relativism and sentimental diversity . . . [daring] to expound a theory of hierarchy founded on . . . objective ideals” (George Gilder).<sup>1</sup>

I shall say no more directly about the fashionable relativist or subjectivist positions, beyond the fact that they are untenable, if taken to imply the extreme position that a judgment such as that I am an inferior pianist to Richter cannot be objective, or even true or false—it being, rather, simply a matter of fluctuating individual or cultural taste. Obviously, one problem with such debates is that terms such as “subjective,” “objective,” “true,” “false,” and “scientific” are not necessarily used in the same way by different people, but the point worth arguing about is surely whether a judgment about the quality of an individual’s writing, philosophy, or music or the caliber of particular writers, thinkers and artists overall, can be shown to be based on evidence that is not itself contentious or disputed, rather than simply the whim, taste, or opinion of the speaker. Implicit in my argument against Murray’s attempt to find that evidence in a statistical analysis of other people’s judgments is the view that such evidence is available, but it is to be found in a thorough understanding of the nature of the activity in question: the criteria that define football, philosophy or literature are also the criteria that enable us to distinguish the better and the worse in these fields. Even here there is a need for caution and qualification: the criteria that define a field are often themselves disputed and are certainly subject to change over time. None-

theless, what are taken to be the defining criteria at any given time must necessarily be referred to in any attempt to establish the quality of a work, even though they do not provide sufficient conditions of that quality. To determine the plausibility or otherwise of judgments of quality is always a matter of reasoned understanding and can never be a matter of quantification; and it will always be a matter of assessment rather than measurement.

In concluding this introductory section, I must stress that I am not arguing (I do not believe) that in the arts there can be objectivity of the same kind or to the same degree as in science. Indeed, I am arguing precisely against that view. But I shall be arguing that some judgments may have some degree of objectivity in the sense that they are based upon criteria and argument that are publicly accepted as relevant in the same way that, at any given time, the appropriate procedures for establishing something objectively in the sciences are publicly agreed upon. I shall be arguing that suitably qualified judgments, such as that X is a good composer as distinct from the world's best composer, can be made and assessed objectively as opposed to being merely matters of individual taste.

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In *Human Accomplishment*, Charles Murray compiles inventories of the people who are most significant in literature, music, art, philosophy and the sciences in rank order. (In literature, music and philosophy, to which I shall confine my attention, he has separate inventories for Chinese, Japanese, and Western figures.) Thus, Shakespeare is ranked the most important individual in Western literature, followed by Goethe, Dante, Virgil, and Homer, down to Walter Scott and Ibsen at numbers 19 and 20 respectively, to a total of 1,918 named individuals. In Western philosophy 473 individuals are listed, with Aristotle leading the pack, followed by Plato and Kant (with gurus of postmodernism such as Derrida, Foucault, and Lyotard failing to make an entry).

Murray argues, and on this point coherently and successfully, that there are better and worse, superior and inferior, human achievements and that we can make judgments about their relative quality in an objective manner. There are questions of quality, and they can be engaged with and at least in some cases answered.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, he argues, rather as John Stuart Mill did in reference to grading pleasures, that expertise is needed to make judgments: your opinion is not necessarily as good as mine. He is again quite correct: it takes understanding of ballet to judge ballet dancers, and that remains true even though we must acknowledge that expert judges sometimes disagree. But it is noteworthy that, in arguing this point, he avoids altogether the question of in what the requisite expertise consists. He does not, for instance, recognize the importance of questions such as “Does one have to be a painter to judge painting?” or “In what does the expertise of an art critic consist?” Thirdly, he is prepared to stand by some unfashionable conclusions that his approach leads him to, such as that most of the great human achievements have been the work of Dead White European Males. This, though it may be unpopular in some quarters,

is hardly contentious, given, as Murray notes, that white European males have largely dominated the world throughout history. However, another slight indication of the flaw in his approach is provided by the fact that he does not appear to consider whether this conclusion might not also be to some extent a product of the process whereby he establishes his conclusions.<sup>3</sup> Fourthly, though this is a rather different kind of point, I personally do not have any major problem with his judgments. I shall pick up on some particular quibbles to illustrate more general points below, but I do not think that Murray's conclusions are, generally speaking, implausible.

So what is wrong? What is wrong is his wish to ape the natural sciences in a field where it is inappropriate to do so. What is wrong is his wish to prove his conclusion scientifically, his determination to quantify in order to give substance to a qualitative judgment and the associated assumption that judgments can be finely calibrated. What is wrong is the confusion of the trappings of scientific procedure with science itself: scientific procedures only lead to science when they are applied in the limited domain of physical matter. It is true that objective judgments can be made in respect of human achievement, and that they depend upon expertise; it is true too that many traditional judgments should stand, regardless of passing fashions for this or that and notwithstanding the fact that some achievements by some individuals owe something to historical circumstance. But the objectivity of these judgments does not depend on, is not enhanced by, is in fact quite unconnected to, scientific procedure. It is a fact that Shakespeare is a great writer, but Murray, in 668 pages and taking into account all the data collection and statistical analysis that lie behind them, has done nothing to demonstrate that he is.

Murray includes several pages on statistics and seems to think that his case depends upon the proper use, and a proper understanding on the part of the reader, of statistics, and of course he is correct inasmuch as misuse or misunderstanding of statistics cannot advance an argument. But the question of the validity of the statistical work doesn't even arise, if the process whereby the data (the figures) are initially collected is in some way inadequate, and that is the problem here. For, despite the length of this study, the process whereby the great human achievers are located and rank-ordered essentially boils down to this: a series of reference books is located for each of the various divisions into which the variety of human achievement has been broken down (e.g., Western art, Japanese art, Chinese philosophy), and the number of pages of reference to various individuals is then tabulated. And that, as they say, is that. It is true that it is at this point that various statistical moves are made to ensure that, e.g., the sources are representative or that different sources wouldn't lead to, say, the inclusion of more women. But the fact remains that the basic measure of achievement is nothing more than the number of pages devoted to an individual in a small number of reference books.

The books used for reference are not discussed (still less justified as representative or the work of those with expertise) in the main text, though they are listed in an appendix. The philosophy sources specific to the West are seven in all, and include Copleston's *History of Philosophy* (1975), Russell's *History of Western Philoso-*

phy (1945), Tarnas's *Passion of the Western Mind* (1991), and Kenny's *Oxford History of Western Philosophy* (1994). I am familiar with all of these books, and concur with the view that they are in their various distinctive ways good books, and that, broadly speaking, they "cover the ground." If the question were whether these are reasonable or representative, or even among the better surveys of Western philosophy, one would probably say "yes," although it remains astonishing, particularly in a context where the premium is on objectivity and dispassionate truth, that Murray sees no need for any kind of case to be made for his selection. Still, if the question was "Is the judgment of these authors to be respected?" the answer would be affirmative. But that was not the question. The question is "Can we establish the truth of their judgment?"

The literature sources specific to the West consist of nine volumes, six of which are Spanish or German and with which I am not familiar, the remaining three being Bloom's *Western Canon* (1994), Benet's *Reader's Encyclopedia* (n.d), and Paxton and Fairfield's *Calendar of Creative Man* (1980). Here the choice seems much more questionable. Why, for example, no reference to any of Bloom's predecessors such as Northrop Frye or F. R. Leavis? Why no concern for the lists of writers and books, precisely on Murray's theme, provided by Arnold Bennett, Somerset Maugham, Cyril Connolly, or Anthony Burgess? I have already accepted that Murray has, by the use of statistics, established that the picture does not change significantly if one enlarges the number of reference books, or specifically includes special interests such as reference books on women. But it cannot, in the nature of things, be the case that it simply doesn't matter what sources of reference we use: it is a matter of fact that if I took the lists of best books provided by Maugham, Connolly, Bennett and Burgess, instead of Murray's selection, I would arrive at a significantly different list of authors.

The fundamental point remains: what we are being given is not an independent argument or a set of evidence to establish the quality of achievement on the part of certain authors and philosophers; and indeed, interestingly, no word is written about the quality of any work or author/composer at all in any of Murray's voluminous text. It is true that he tries—not in my view very effectively—to distinguish "fame" from "eminence," and true in any case that "fame," if it is tied to popular awareness, is both distinct from "eminence" and no guarantee of quality. But the fact remains that whatever we take "eminence" to mean in the abstract, in practice we are defining it in terms of the relative number of words of reference to be found in a very small sample of generally admired reference books. (I shall comment further below on "eminence.")

There are other points to be made about the details of this process too. Some of what an author says about a given individual may be highly critical, as Bertrand Russell was about Plato, for example. This doesn't of course mean that Plato is not eminent (even in Russell's judgment), but it does highlight the obvious point that the length of time, or more precisely the number of words, spent discussing a person is not necessarily an indication even of the author's estimate of that person, let

alone his objective standing. It is surely indicative of the vulnerability of the whole approach that, when it comes to discussing the rank-ordering, Murray himself rather dismisses the pretension to scientific precision. Thus Aristotle has an index score of 100 in Western philosophy and is therefore at the top of the poll. Plato comes second with 87. Murray comments: "Aristotle and Plato are separated by a large enough gap to warrant treating their scores as different," but he then adds, "with the continuing warning not to make too much of it." It is hard not to see a contradiction between arguing that tabulating a rank order in numbers in the manner in question is scientific and saying that we "shouldn't make too much of it." In respect of Western literature, he has this to say of the top five: "The first five places are hard to argue with. Shakespeare, Goethe, Dante, Virgil, and Homer are giants in Western literature by anyone's standards. Shakespeare stands noticeably apart even from the other four. Of all the giants in all the fields, Shakespeare is the one who seems to leave historians stretching for some way to convey his awesome impact not just on literature but on the modern West." It seems odd that Shakespeare, who scores 100 to second-place Goethe's 81 should be said to "stand noticeably apart," whereas the difference between Aristotle's 100 and Plato's 87 should not be "made too much of." The reference to Shakespeare's "impact on the modern West" is also confusing: is this a criterion for great literature? But the strangest thing of all is that Murray appears to be defending his system of measuring great achievement by claiming that it leads to conclusions that can be independently judged, and in fact are.

Besides, although I agree that these five are great literary figures and don't want to get carried away with too much argument about the merit of various individuals, one should not assume from these fairly widely accepted judgments that all the conclusions Murray "establishes" are equally uncontentious. To regard Rousseau as the sixth most important figure in Western literature, for example, is plainly absurd to anybody who knows anything about literature, as fascinating and in some ways important a thinker as Rousseau is. Again Murray's comment undermines his own case: "the ratings [for Rousseau and Voltaire, seventh] partly reflect their combined fiction and nonfiction. But even when I recomputed indexes based exclusively on fictional work, they ranked high, because of the difference between histories of literature and of the other arts. . . . Histories of literature spend more space on the influence of authors . . . on social and political movements." Well, actually, of course, it depends which histories of literature you select, just as it does indeed make a difference if you consider somebody's fiction and nonfiction output together, rather than only one group of works. It brings to the fore the point that we are so busy counting references in a few source books chosen on no identifiable criteria, that we have forgotten that no attempt has been made to determine what counts as good or great literature. How can one determine the quality of Rousseau's or anyone else's work in literature without having a view of what good literature is? Similarly, others must make their own judgments, but I find a list of the 20 most eminent Western musicians that includes Schoenberg (at 13) and Stravinsky (at 7) but does not include Mahler or Sibelius more or less incomprehensible. Whether I am right or wrong

(and it should be remembered that Murray and I share the view that there is room for correct and incorrect responses, however hard to discern or establish), I should make it clear that I am not at any rate confusing my taste with my judgment: Berlioz is my favorite composer, but I am very surprised to see him (at 12) above Brahms (at 14), and the notion that Brahms, who is not a particular favorite of mine, ranks below Stravinsky stands in need of some kind of supporting argument, which cannot of course be provided by anything that Murray has done.

It is surely absolutely clear that what is actually being established by Murray is no more than that most people who have an interest in and to some extent are accepted as knowledgeable judges in their field, when called upon to survey that field, believe that time should be spent on the various authors and composers in question. There are many reasons that have nothing to do with judgments about eminence or quality of achievement which might cause one to spend more time discussing one individual than another, such as the relative complexity of work, current popularity or relevance, size of output, and so forth, so that ranking these individuals on the basis of quantity of reference to them is plainly not reasonable. The truth is that the amount of reference accorded to an individual, even if it were computed in a less haphazard way, would at best serve as an imprecise index of the current judgment of the (presumably) knowledgeable authors as to the value of and need to explicate or discuss the writers, philosophers and musicians in question. Any objectivity involved in the exercise relates only to the assessment of the body of opinion; nothing in this entire exercise relates to the justification for making any of the judgments, still less to providing objective justification.

So what is revealed by Murray's work? Given the relatively wide sweep of his inquiry, it suggests that there is some consistency in the tradition or canon. Plato, for example, quite regardless of what one thinks of him, is generally regarded as a fairly eminent or significant philosopher, so that Russell, while taking strong exception to his supposed political views, treats him with respect and at some length. But it is the fact that he is widely judged, by other criteria and for other reasons, to be important that leads Russell and others to refer to him, and not the fact that he is referred to, that proves his eminence. As a matter of fact early Renaissance writers do not devote much time to Plato, being overawed and preoccupied by Aristotle, but that has nothing to do with his worth then or now. And the lists are by no means as secure as they first look: it would be entirely plausible to argue that George Gissing, the Victorian author of *New Grub Street*, *Born in Exile*, and *The Odd Women* amongst other novels, who does not appear in Murray's entire inventory (containing thousands of names) is infinitely superior to, say, Walter Scott, who comes in at a staggering 19!

It is true that Murray's conclusions happen to give some comfort to those of us who thought, for instance, that the contributors to so-called Radical Philosophy in the 1960s were going nowhere or who feel that Derrida and Foucault are insignificant. But anyone with an eye to history would know that there is a mainstream current in thought and art that flows on even through true revolutions (which are

in fact very rare). What the book and the research behind it clearly do not do is contribute anything to the attempt to establish that Beethoven, Shakespeare, and Aristotle, for example, are preeminent; it does not even contribute to establishing that they are eminent, unless we define eminence as something along the lines of “taken seriously by some acknowledged experts.” But we know that they are very eminent in that sense, and that is very different from the much more interesting question of whether we can objectively establish the quality of the work of certain writers, thinkers, and artists.

What are the lessons to be learnt from this? First and foremost that the trappings of science do not make for science and that a methodology that is in itself “objective,” “scientific,” “quantitative,” or anything else smacking of hard and indisputable proof does not produce proven or demonstrated conclusions concerning anything other than what the methodology actually deals with. In this case, assuming the methodology is as unambiguous as Murray (incorrectly) suggests, it gives us demonstrated conclusions pertaining to the amount of space devoted to various people in reference works, and nothing relating to the quality of their work.

Second, expertise does matter when it comes to making judgments, as Murray says, but it is a necessary and not a sufficient condition of sound judgment. Someone with no expertise may “correctly opine” that Rudolph Nureyev is a better ballet dancer than I am, but they cannot meaningfully be said to have made this judgment if they lack understanding of the nature of ballet. Conversely, the fact that experts do disagree indicates that expertise is not sufficient. That having been said, more needs to be done to answer such questions as whether there is identifiable expertise in all areas, and, where there is, how one judges it and in what it consists. Simply assuming that prominent reference books are themselves the work of experts is increasingly hazardous, as publishers hire editors and authors in a more and more haphazard way. And while one of the main points that Murray tries to make is that he has shown statistically that it doesn’t make much difference which source books one uses for reference, it remains clear that experts in those fields often do disagree very strongly. For example, I remain quite unconvinced that either Wittgenstein or Foucault is a truly important philosopher, yet many colleagues would hotly dispute this, and yet again Wittgenstein makes his way into Murray’s inventory and Foucault does not.

Third, the previous comment raises the suggestion that part of the problem of making such judgments is that we make them too wide; it is more manageable to make a judgment about the best soccer player than the best sportsman, and more manageable still to make a judgment about the best soccer goalkeeper. Judging Rousseau in terms of literature makes little sense, for by what criteria do you compare the work of Shakespeare and Rousseau? Even comparing Epictetus (who makes the inventory) with Karl Popper (who doesn’t) runs the risk of being an instance of the proverbial apples and oranges.

Fourth, a point half-heartedly conceded by Murray but nonetheless at a variance with his whole approach, while objectivity and a degree of certainty may be

attainable in such judgments, precision is not. One may be reasonably certain that a judgment relating to the high quality of Shakespeare's work is sound, and one can make such a judgment with a greater or lesser degree of objectivity; but one cannot establish the precise degree of his quality as compared with other eminent writers.

Fifth, more work needs to be done on the meaning of "eminence," if that is the favored term. I would suggest, in fact, that it is not the ideal term—it is not really what we want to know, and though it can be distinguished from fame, it still retains overtones of popularity or, at least, the degree of interest shown in the individual. The question of interest, and the position from which Murray seems to have started, is "What works are of the greatest quality?" (or "Who are the people who produce work of the highest quality?"), and it is obviously possible to be a great but unrecognized artist. Does it make sense to claim that an artist who is not recognized because nobody has ever valued his work is nonetheless great? Of course it does.

Sixth, in addition to narrowing the field of comparison (e.g., from literature to comic literature, or poetry, or belles lettres), it is crucially important to define these terms, whatever they are. It is quite astonishing that in trying to establish the most eminent literary persons, musicians or philosophers, no attention was paid at all to the question of what constitutes good literature, music, or philosophy. It is the definition of such terms that provides the criteria whereby we are able to make objective judgments about the quality of work. Without an acknowledged and shared definition, objective judgments are indeed not possible. (Again I should stress that not all judgments can be objectively established and that the criteria that define a sphere are necessary but not sufficient criteria for objective assessment.)

Seventh, justification is by its nature a form of argument. There is no argument at all pertaining to the judgments thrown up by Murray's research. But no methodology can be treated as a substitute for reasoning, so at some point any attempt to establish the conclusion that Shakespeare is a writer of high quality has to involve argument relating characteristics of his work to a concept of quality in literature. There is quite literally no conceivable alternative.

In conclusion, let me emphasize the general issues which matter to me more than the somewhat peculiar mechanics of Murray's endeavor. I have acknowledged that some of Murray's judgments coincide with mine and have stressed that the criteria that define an activity, while crucially important to making value judgments in that sphere, are only necessary, not sufficient, to that purpose. But they are crucial, and it barely makes sense to produce a book devoted to objectively evaluating works of art and artists which contains no reference at all to any such criteria. My view, that the commonsense position with which I began has a lot to recommend it, must be understood to involve the qualifications that, first, only some judgments can be regarded as objectively demonstrable, and second, that many such judgments will be objective to a degree rather than absolutely. Thus one can provide a considerable degree of objective support for a judgment such as that Graham Greene was a good novelist, regardless of his current eminence, whatever that means, and

regardless of the individual tastes of those considering the matter, but one could not similarly “establish” that he is among the top ten novelists of the last century. What one cannot conceivably do, despite this clear allegiance to a degree of objectivity, is scientifically establish the rank-ordering of human achievement, least of all by confining the “science” to number crunching a more or less random set of opinions.

## Notes

1. All these quotations are taken from the dust jacket of *Human Achievement*.
2. Murray, it may be recalled, is committed to the view that one can rank-order artists objectively. I am not; I argue only that some judgments can be made that are to a reasonable degree objective.
3. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer who very properly makes the point that we all face the problem that our conclusions might be the product of the process we employ. True, but it helps if one’s “process” includes clear concepts and coherent argument!

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