

## Transcendental Goods

Charles Murray discusses art, accomplishment, faith, and doubt.

Ronald Bailey and Nick Gillespie

CHARLES MURRAY is the W.H. Brady Scholar in Culture and Freedom at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, D.C. His 1984 book *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980* was a devastating dissection of welfare programs and is widely credited with helping inspire the welfare reforms of the 1990s. In 1994 he co-authored the immensely controversial *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*. (reason's critique of the book, authored by future Nobel laureate James J. Heckman, is online at [reason.com/9503/dept.blkHECKMAN.text.shtml](http://reason.com/9503/dept.blkHECKMAN.text.shtml).) And in 1997 he wrote an eloquent defense of human liberty, *What It Means to Be a Libertarian: A Personal Interpretation*.

Last fall Murray published *Human Accomplishment: The Pursuit of Excellence in the Arts and Sciences, 800 B.C.-1950* (HarperCollins). As one reviewer summarized it, "Murray sets out to describe the main human achievements from 800 BC to 1950 in music, literature and the visual arts, as well as medicine and the physical sciences. He also tries to identify the institutions, beliefs and practices—the culture—that facilitate outstanding achievements." In December reason Science Correspondent Ronald Bailey and Editor-in-Chief Nick Gillespie met with Murray to discuss *Human Accomplishment*.

**reason:** Why did you write this book?

**Charles Murray:** I wrote a book that I wanted to read. I am fascinated

by greatness. I am fascinated by people who operate at the edges of human capacity, and I am also fascinated by excellence in different cultures.

**reason:** You argue that the "transcendental goods" are vital to motivating human accomplishment. What are they?

**Murray:** Truth, beauty, and the good, in the classic sense. The proposition is that artistic achievement and scientific achievement used ideals of the transcendental goods as source material. In some cases, as inspiration. In other cases, as templates against which you measure yourself.

**reason:** You say that we're in an era of decline—that the rate of human accomplishment has slowed in both the arts and the sciences—because we've turned our backs on the transcendental goods.

**Murray:** With the Enlightenment, we started a whole series of major acquisitions of new knowledge about how the world works. These were important and real and had great amounts of truth to them. They also played hell with the old verities. I'm thinking of the rule of reason as against traditional religion. I'm thinking Darwinism. I'm thinking Freud. And Einstein.

In all sorts of ways, you had body blows to the ways of looking at the world that gave concepts such as truth, beauty, and the good their meaning. Take the good as the obvious example. If we are bundles of chemicals and religion is irrelevant and we have no souls, etc., etc., etc.—I can go through the whole litany—the good is sort of stripped of texture and richness.

**reason:** But the Enlightenment view is essentially correct, right? We are chemicals....

**Murray:** Here's the central dilemma.

If the new wisdom is correct, then all of the anomie and the alienation and the nihilism and the rest of it make a lot of sense. As I note in the book, if that's all true, then one novelist suggests that all we can do is maintain a considered boredom in the face of the abyss. There have been a wide variety of efforts in the 20th century to come up with a rationale for positive action, but I actually think that the only way to maintain one's energy and sense of purpose is by being deliberately forgetful. That's why Camus was so miserable. He couldn't be forgetful enough.

I'm an agnostic, but I should add that I think the most foolish of all religious beliefs is confident atheism.

**reason:** So you're laying down a 21st-century variation of Pascal's wager? You don't really believe the transcendental goods are ordained by God, but we have to act as if they're true if we want to live purposeful lives?

**Murray:** You're right. I'm not a believer, but I am also not nearly as confident as intellectuals were 50 or 60 years ago that I do know the truth. I am much less willing to say, boy, was Johann Sebastian Bach deluded [because he believed in God].

**reason:** What do you think of the conservative argument that there really can't be morality without religious belief?

**Murray:** I am sympathetic to the idea that a society needs something other than laws to make it work.



I'm very Burkean in that regard. I think that there are a variety of ways in which that can be supplied. I think that the rigidly secular approach is pretty thin gruel in this regard. Let's say you are aggressively secular and I pose the question, Why should I refrain from using you for my ends,

using force if necessary? What is the ultimate reason why this is wrong?

At the end of the book, I say we're coming out of our adolescence as a society. I believe that we are going to be wiser 100 years from now as a species than we are now. I think we'll create a synthe-

sis of old wisdoms and new.

**reason:** Why aren't you a conservative?

**Murray:** Too many conservatives are too happy to mess with me in ways I don't think they have any right to mess with me. I don't think it's any of their business, anybody's business, if I want to use drugs. I do use a drug. I use alcohol. I enjoy it thoroughly. I don't think that the government ought to be in the business of encouraging or discouraging marriage, for example. I think that healthy social institutions almost invariably come from leaving them alone rather than messing with them.

**reason:** What motivates you? You don't believe in God, yet you're writing all these books.

**Murray:** For whatever reason, I am hopeful, and so here is what I do. I am genuinely an agnostic. I genuinely would like not to be an agnostic, and so I go to Quaker meetings, and sometimes I sit in silence and just think, as we're supposed to think, although I find my [thoughts] wandering at that point. But I take a Bible along with me, and I read it because I don't read the Bible ordinarily. That sort of encapsulates what motivates me.

I take all of these issues very seriously. If I'm a betting man, what do I think the odds are that the cosmos has a meaning and I have a place in it? Probably 80/20 against. But by God, I glom onto that 20 percent.



Charles Murray, Quincy, Mass. by Michael Ochs Photography



## Text Lit

Charles Paul Freund

THIS COMMON CELL phone may strike you as unremarkable, a familiar telecom device that, in this photo, is displaying the text message, “Yeah, yeah. Sure, sure. Whatever.” But look again, because this device is morphing into something different: a linguistic and literary influence.

This winter, a French writer named Phil Marso published a short novel aimed at young readers and written entirely in France’s own intricately developed cellphonic argot. It’s an anti-smoking story titled *Pa Sage a Taba* (*Smoking Isn’t Smart*). Agence France Presse has quoted a passage from Marso’s text: “6 j t’aspRge d’O 2 kologne histoar 2 partaG le odeurs ke tu me fe subir?” (“What if I spray you with cologne so you can share the smells you make me suffer?”)

It’s notable that the first work of cellphonic fiction has appeared in a culture as notoriously protective of language as France, with its official usage cops. Yet Scotland was struggling a year ago with student-written essays in text-message English (see “Text Talk,” June 2003). This appears to be a spreading phenomenon.

Many experts have assumed that digital media would transform reading and have predicted the eventual triumph of the e-book. YYSSW. We’re still waiting. In fact, it may be self-expression that’s being reshaped, one message at a time. ■

