



DISCOURSE ON ACHIEVEMENT

A Conversation About Difference, Explanation, and the Limits of Comfort

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Before the Conversation Begins

Some subjects carry emotional weight before a single argument is made. Differences in achievement between societies and populations are among them. Readers often approach the topic with expectations already formed — either that the discussion will attempt to justify inequality, or that it must avoid uncomfortable conclusions altogether.

Both reactions are understandable. History provides enough examples where claims about difference were used carelessly or cruelly. As a result, modern discussion has developed a reflex: when a subject feels morally dangerous, the safest response appears to be silence.

Yet silence has consequences of its own.

Observable differences in outcomes do not disappear when discussion becomes uncomfortable. They simply remain unexplained. When explanation is removed from responsible discourse, it tends to reappear elsewhere in simplified and often more extreme forms. The absence of careful discussion rarely produces fairness; it more often produces confusion.

This essay begins from a different premise. It assumes that explanation and judgment are not the same thing. Describing differences between populations does not require assigning moral value to individuals. Averages describe statistical realities; they do not determine human worth.

The difficulty arises because modern societies attempt to hold two principles simultaneously. The first is the pursuit of truth through open inquiry. The second is the moral commitment to equality and dignity. When these principles appear to collide, discussion becomes tense, and participants often retreat into defensive positions before arguments are even heard.

The purpose of this essay is not to resolve that tension. It is to make discussion possible within it. What follows is not presented as settled science or final authority. It is an attempt to think through a difficult question openly, to state assumptions clearly, and to separate explanation from endorsement. Readers may disagree with the conclusions. That disagreement is expected. The hope is only that disagreement occurs after the argument is understood rather than before it is allowed to begin. The reader is therefore asked to do something simple but difficult: to suspend immediate judgment long enough to follow the reasoning as it unfolds. Only then can the conversation move beyond reaction toward understanding.

1. The Conversation That Wouldn't Stay Simple

The discussion began without ambition. Two old friends talking, moving casually from history to politics to the question that eventually unsettled everything:

Why do some societies consistently produce more science, technology, stable institutions, and cultural output than others?

At first, the question seemed harmless. But within minutes it became clear that the difficulty was not in answering it. The difficulty was in asking it at all.

My friend resisted not the examples, but the framing. The word *achievement* itself sounded suspect. Who defines it? By what standard? Isn't it simply a disguised judgment?

That moment revealed something important. The modern discomfort surrounding this topic is not primarily scientific. It is moral. We are no longer certain that differences can be described without implying hierarchy.

So instead of describing them carefully, we often stop describing them altogether.

Reality, however, does not disappear when language becomes uncomfortable.

2. A Word People No Longer Trust

The unease around the word *achievement* is understandable. History provides enough examples where claims of superiority justified domination or exclusion. The instinct to avoid such language is therefore not irrational; it is protective.

But protection comes at a cost. If we abandon the ability to describe accumulated outcomes, we also abandon the ability to explain them.

Societies clearly differ in what they produce and sustain. Some generate continuous scientific innovation. Some build institutions that function across centuries. Others struggle to maintain stability even under favorable conditions. These observations need not imply admiration or condemnation. They simply exist.

In this discussion, achievement is used descriptively. It refers to accumulated capability — the capacity of a society to generate, organize, and transmit complexity over time. Science and engineering belong here, but so do law, literature, governance, and institutional trust.

The problem begins when description is mistaken for moral judgment. Once that confusion enters the conversation, analysis becomes nearly impossible.

3. Intelligence Is Too Small a Word

Public debate tends to compress complex outcomes into a single term: intelligence. This simplification is part of why the conversation repeatedly fails.

No society functions because of intelligence alone. Long-term success depends on combinations of traits — cognitive ability, discipline, cooperation, impulse control, long-term planning, and the willingness to sustain shared rules even when inconvenient.

I began thinking about this combination as a **toolbox**.

The metaphor matters. A toolbox is not a hierarchy. Different tools serve different purposes. But the distribution of tools affects what can be built. At the level of societies, outcomes emerge not from individual excellence alone but from statistical distributions across populations.

This shifts the focus away from judging individuals and toward understanding systems.

Individuals vary enormously within every population. What matters at scale is not who people are, but how traits are distributed.

4. Environment: Cause, Effect, or Both?

My friend's explanation emphasized environment. Education, upbringing, institutional access, historical injustice — all powerful forces, and none easily dismissed.

I agreed with much of this. Yet something felt incomplete.

Upbringing itself is not created in isolation. Educational expectations, institutional reliability, and cultural norms are themselves products of prior conditions. Societies with strong institutions tend to reproduce them. Societies without them often struggle to do so.

This creates feedback loops. Achievement produces environments that reinforce achievement. The absence of achievement produces environments that make improvement difficult.

At that point, environmental explanations begin to circle back on themselves. If environment explains outcomes, what explains the environment?

This was where our disagreement deepened. We were no longer discussing evidence but causal priority.

5. The Genetic Question

Eventually, the discussion reached the subject that makes conversations tense even before arguments begin.

Genetics.

My own position — which I recognize as controversial — is that underlying human distributions likely play a dominant role in long-term differences in achievement. Environment and institutions matter enormously, but primarily as amplifiers or suppressors of traits that exist statistically within populations.

This is not an argument about individuals. Individuals constantly defy averages. Nor is it an argument about inevitability. Genes do not dictate outcomes.

It is an argument about probability and distribution.

Behavioral genetics has long shown that many cognitive and behavioral traits are substantially heritable within populations. If variation exists within populations, it seems unlikely to me that all populations must share identical distributions across all traits. Over long periods, even small differences could compound through cultural and institutional feedback.

At the same time, modern genetics does not offer simple answers. Human populations are genetically similar overall, and complex social outcomes cannot be traced to single biological causes. The model I describe remains an explanatory framework rather than a settled conclusion.

My friend saw this differently. To him, the historical misuse of biological explanations made the risk unacceptable. The danger of misinterpretation outweighed the value of inquiry.

We were no longer arguing about data. We were arguing about what kinds of thinking society should tolerate.

6. The Shape of the Curve

At one point I tried to reframe the issue using statistics rather than categories.

Many human traits approximate normal distributions. In such distributions, small shifts in averages or variance can produce large differences at the extremes. A slight change may dramatically alter how many individuals appear at the highest levels of performance.

This matters because complex societies often depend disproportionately on small numbers of highly capable individuals — scientists, engineers, organizers, innovators.

My hypothesis is that small differences in distribution shape could accumulate into meaningful long-term differences in societal output. Mathematically, this is straightforward. Empirically, it remains debated. Current research does not conclusively establish genetically driven distribution differences between large population groups.

But the statistical logic remains compelling to me as a possible explanatory mechanism.

The disagreement here was not about mathematics. It was about interpretation and risk.

7. The Moral Fear Beneath the Argument

By this stage of the conversation, I understood my friend's resistance more clearly.

The fear was not that differences might exist. The fear was what people might do with that idea.

History gives that fear legitimacy. Biological explanations have been abused before. The instinct to prevent repetition is understandable.

Yet suppressing inquiry creates another danger. When serious discussion becomes impossible, explanation does not disappear. It moves to places where nuance disappears as well.

The only workable boundary, in my view, is a clear one:

Aggregate differences, even if demonstrated, do not determine individual worth.

Averages describe populations. They do not define persons.

8. Two Ways of Protecting Society

By the end of the conversation, it became clear that we were trying to protect different things.

My friend wanted to protect society from harmful conclusions.

I wanted to protect inquiry from prohibition.

Both impulses arise from legitimate concerns. Both can become harmful when taken too far.

A society that allows explanation to become moral hierarchy loses its humanity. A society that forbids uncomfortable questions risks losing its intellectual honesty.

The tension between these goals may never fully disappear.

9. Why This Conversation Matters

This debate ultimately extends beyond genetics or achievement. It concerns whether modern societies can tolerate complexity without retreating into slogans.

The temptation today is to simplify difficult questions into safe narratives. But reality rarely conforms to simplicity. Differences persist. Systems succeed or fail. Outcomes diverge.

If explanation becomes taboo, understanding disappears. And without understanding, improvement becomes impossible.

10. Ending Where It Began

The original question remains unresolved, and perhaps it always will be.

Why do societies differ in achievement?

My answer is that underlying human distributions — shaped significantly by biology — provide the primary substrate upon which environment and history act. Others believe environment explains nearly everything.

The disagreement continues.

What matters more is whether we remain capable of having the conversation itself — without fear, without contempt, and without confusing explanation with judgment.

Because when that ability disappears, both truth and compassion become casualties.

Closing

Some conversations remain difficult not because they lack answers, but because they force us to confront the limits of our comfort. Differences exist, explanations remain incomplete, and certainty is rarely available where emotion is strongest.

The tension explored in these pages is therefore unlikely to disappear. Modern societies attempt to hold two commitments at once: the pursuit of explanation and the preservation of human dignity. When these commitments appear to conflict, discussion itself becomes uneasy, and silence can seem safer than inquiry.

If this essay has a purpose, it is not to resolve that tension but to argue that conversation must remain possible within it. Difficult questions can be examined without contempt, and disagreement need not lead to dehumanization. The willingness to think carefully about uncomfortable subjects may ultimately matter more than the conclusions reached.

Because when conversation itself becomes impossible, both understanding and empathy begin to erode together.