# NOT ALWAYS WORTH THE EFFORT: DIFFICULTY AND THE VALUE OF ACHIEVEMENT

BY

SUKAINA HIRJI

**Abstract:** Recent literature has argued that what makes certain activities ranging from curing cancer to running a marathon count as achievements, and what makes achievements intrinsically valuable is, centrally, that they involve great effort. Although there is much the difficulty-based view gets right, I argue that it generates the wrong results about some central cases of achievement, and this is because it is too narrowly focused on only one perfectionist capacity, the will. I propose a revised perfectionist account on which an achievement is an activity that fully exercises or expresses any number of a range of perfectionist capacities.

## *1. Introduction*

Some of the activities we take to be achievements have results or products with great instrumental value: curing cancer, raising children, and creating beautiful works of art. But others do not. Among the achievements we typically value are activities like running a marathon, climbing Mt. Everest, or writing a piece of philosophy that no one reads. In these cases, the result of the activity has little to no instrumental value. Can we give some unified account of the value of achievement that explains why both curing cancer and climbing Mt. Everest are achievements of great intrinsic value?

One feature all the aforementioned activities have in common is that they require significant effort. If all achievements are difficult, it is natural to

*Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* •• (2018) ••–•• DOI: 10.1111/papq.12257

suspect that difficulty itself plays some role in explaining the nature and value of achievements. Indeed, recent literature has argued that what makes certain activities count as achievements, and what makes achievements intrinsically valuable is, centrally, that they involve great effort. Gwen Bradford, in her recent book *Achievement*, develops and defends the most worked out version of a difficulty-based account of achievement.[1] She argues that the value of the product of an achievement makes no contribution to its essential value. Rather, we should understand the value of achievements in perfectionist terms: achievements allow us to exercise characteristic human capacities, to fully express aspects of our nature, and to fully 'be all we can be'.[2] And chief among these capacities is 'the will'. When we exert great effort to overcome difficulty, we exercise this characteristic human capacity in an intrinsically valuable way.

Although there is much the difficulty-based view gets right, I argue that it generates the wrong results about some central cases of achievement, and this is because it is too narrowly focused on only one perfectionist capacity, the will. I propose a revised perfectionist account on which an achievement is an activity that fully exercises or expresses any number of a range of perfectionist capacities. The account, Aristotelian in spirit, better captures the way in which, as in the case of creative capacities, the value of a product of an achievement *does* make a contribution to its *essential* value. Likewise, it better captures cases of certain highly developed skills or abilities where part of what makes an agent's activity an achievement is that it is effortless for her. An additional attractive feature of this account is that it offers a perfectionist explanation of the badness of certain forms of injustice or bad luck: although they might provide an opportunity for the exercise of the will, structural injustice or bad luck often impedes the full realization of *other* perfectionist capacities.

In Section 2, I review the main features of the difficulty-based account, focusing on the view developed by Bradford. In Section 3, I suggest that difficulty-based accounts fail to capture cases where, it seems, the value of an achievement depends for its realization on the value of the product of an achievement. And, in Section 4, I argue that difficulty is itself not an essential feature of achievement, and an increase in difficulty does not necessarily increase the value of an achievement, other things being equal. In some cases, effortlessness itself is a source of value for an achievement. The underlying problem, I suggest in Section 5, is the difficulty-based account's over-reliance on one general capacity, the will, to explain the nature and value of all achievements. A more plausible perfectionist account should relativize judgments about achievement to a wider range of distinct capacities. Although the will is fully expressed in effortful activity independent of any result or product, other capacities are only fully expressed in a particular kind of product or in effortless activity. In Section 6, I propose an alternative: an achievement is a process

culminating in a product that is competently caused and that *tests the limit of an agent's perfectionist capacity*.

## 2.

Building on work by Simon Keller, Joseph Raz, and Thomas Hurka, Gwen Bradford defends the most comprehensive difficulty-based account of the nature and value of achievement.[3] It will be helpful to consider Bradford's view in some detail as a representative of the general strategy.

There are three parts to Bradford's account for achievement. First, an achievement is characterized by a process–product structure: all achievements have a process that culminates in a product. Sometimes the product is some result or outcome beyond the activity itself, such as writing a novel, whereas sometimes the product is itself the activity, such as playing a piece of music. Second, an achievement must be difficult.[4] Intuitively, for someone able-bodied, tying one's shoelaces is not an achievement in the relevant sense. However, it may well count as an achievement for someone with advanced Parkinson's disease. Third, an achievement must be a process culminating in a product that is *competently caused*. An individual who unwittingly stumbles on the cure for cancer has not achieved something great, notwithstanding that her accidental discovery has great instrumental value. It isn't an achievement *for her* because it isn't caused by her in the right kind of way.[5]

Having established the features that she takes to be essential to achievement, Bradford asks what accounts for the *value* of achievement. She rejects one initially plausible view, which she labels the Simple Product View, according to which an achievement is only as valuable as the end it accomplishes. On this view, curing cancer, creating an enduring work of art, and writing a piece of philosophy that advances the literature are all valuable achievements because the ends they accomplish have great instrumental value. If the end isn't valuable, then the activity is not an achievement.

Although a natural way of capturing the value of these kinds of achievements, Bradford argues that the Simple Product View cannot be right because it fails to capture the value of achievements in cases where the products have zero value. Climbing Mt. Everest is, intuitively, an achievement of great value. But, Bradford points out, simply being at the top of a mountain is, by itself, of little intrinsic value. If the end of this activity is being at the top of Everest, the Simple Product View can't seem to distinguish between the value of climbing Mount Everest and the value of taking a helicopter to the top. Indeed, on the Simple Product View, it looks as though climbing rather than flying to the top is simply pointless, wasted effort.[6]

Defenders of the Simple Product View might respond that it is the *process* of climbing Everest that is itself a valuable end. Here, however, Bradford

worries that any way in which the defender of the Simple Product View develops this response – by appealing to the way in which climbing Everest is a great display of tenacity, physical strength, or courage – will amount to an appeal to difficulty to explain the value of the process of climbing Everest.

If the value of the end that is accomplished doesn't explain the value of achievements, what does? Bradford offers the reader a thought experiment, A Tale of Two Novels:

A Tale of Two Novels

Smith and Jones are both writers. They both write novels of equal value. Smith's experience writing the novel is fairly typical, alternating between the usual frustrations of the writing process, and periods that are enjoyable and productive. By contrast, Jones encounters tremendous obstacles while writing his novel: he loses his wife, his house, his dog, he struggles with mental health issues, and finds the writing process utterly agonizing.[7]

Bradford argues that Jones' achievement is clearly the better achievement. And, she notices, the Simple Product View cannot capture this intuition: again, on this view, all that matters is the value of the product of the achievement. The extreme difficulty that Jones faces relative to Smith is irrelevant for the value of the achievement. What this example suggests, Bradford argues, is that it is the difficulty itself that accounts for the greater value of Jones' achievement. After all, by stipulation, the only difference between these two cases is the greater difficulty Jones faces. If the more difficult activity is more valuable, other things being equal, the most natural explanation is that the difficulty itself is the source of this additional value.

It might seem odd to talk about difficulty itself as being a source of value, but Bradford offers a perfectionist story to capture how Jones' achievement is greater than Smith's. Perfectionism says that the exercise and development of characteristically human capacities is intrinsically valuable. Bradford suggests that difficulty is valuable because it involves the exercise of a distinct and characteristic human capacity: the will. Difficulty is a matter of exerting effort for Bradford, and exerting effort is just what it is to exercise the will. Overcoming difficulty involves the exercise of a characteristically human capacity, and so, according to perfectionism, an activity that involves overcoming difficulty will be valuable, even if the product of the activity has zero value. Moreover, the value of achievements increases as the difficulty increases, other things being equal.[8]

Difficulty isn't the only source of value for achievements on Bradford's account. Insofar as part of what it is to be an achievement is to be competently caused, achievements also involve the exercise of one's rational capacities, and this rational activity is also a source of value. Moreover, because achievements involve the exercise of both one's will and one's rational capacities in a single process culminating in a product, Bradford suggests there is value to

this activity insofar as it is an instance of 'unity in diversity': achievements are organic unities and, as a unity of diverse elements, have greater value than the diverse elements themselves were they a mere aggregate.[9]

To be clear, Bradford also allows that other factors, such as the value of the process or product, will at times contribute to the value of an achievement, but crucially, the way they do so is *not* in virtue of the essential features of achievement. Consider a variant on the aforementioned case, A Tale of Two Songwriters[10]:

A Tale of Two Songwriters

Taylor and Katy are both songwriters. Although they both love songwriting, and both devote equal effort to it, Taylor has a great deal more natural talent than Katy. Due to favorable circumstances and great dedication, they both write the best songs they could have possibly written given their creative abilities. However, Taylor's songs are beautiful, moving and exhibit a great deal of technical proficiency, while Katy's songs are mediocre and uninspired.

Although it is tempting to think that Taylor has achieved more than Katy, Bradford's view is that the *essential value* of their respective achievements is in fact equal. Again, achievements are *essentially* valuable in virtue of their being difficult, competently caused, and organic unities. And, by stipulation, the achievements of both Taylor and Katy involve equal amounts of effort, while also being competently caused and organic unities. So, although Taylor's songs might have much greater instrumental value than those of Katy – they delight millions of people, they generate enormous revenue for her record company, they inspire a new generation of songwriters – the essential value of Taylor's achievement is no greater than that of Katy's.

Notice that just as the value of the product does not contribute to the essential value of an achievement, so also an agent's natural talents or abilities do not make a difference to the value of her achievement. Bradford's account of achievement is, in this way, remarkably egalitarian: anyone can achieve something great, regardless of their natural endowments or opportunities, so long as they put in the effort.[11] An amputee's running a mile might be no less an achievement than an elite runner's winning the Boston marathon, so long as they exert an equal amount of effort. Likewise, a third grader's solution to a simple mathematical equation might be no less an achievement than a brilliant mathematician's discovery of a new proof, so long as they exert an equal amount of effort.

## *3.*

Bradford is, I think, right to reject the view according to which the value of an achievement is reducible to the value of the product. If we are to do justice

to our intuitions, we want an account that can capture the intuitive value of activities like running marathons and climbing mountains. Moreover, I think it is a promising strategy to look to perfectionism for an account for the nature and value of achievement. It is natural to think that the value of running marathons and climbing mountains has something to do with realizing our potential, 'being all that we can be'. But, I argue in this section, it doesn't follow from the rejection of the Simple Product View that the value of the product of an achievement makes *no* contribution to its essential value.

### 3.1.

To see how the value of an achievement might depend on the value of the product, consider an example adapted from Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*: A Tale of Two Poets.[12]

#### A Tale of Two Poets

William and Judith are siblings in Elizabethan England. They are both naturally gifted poets; let's suppose they are equally talented, curious, and passionate about writing. But, whereas William is sent to grammar school from a young age, given freedom and resources to explore the theatre and pursue his passion in London, Judith is kept busy at home with household chores, discouraged from creative activities and married against her will at a young age. Suppose that Judith, in the little spare time she has, is able to piece together a literary education from her brother's books, and occasionally manages to scribble sonnets on scraps of paper. However, without access to the resources and time necessary to develop her abilities, the sonnets she writes are of middling value. By contrast, William produces some of the most enduring literary classics of the Western world.

Again, by stipulation, William and Judith are equally talented. Had material conditions been different, Judith too would have produced works of outstanding literary quality. Indeed, this is precisely Woolf's point in imagining Judith's story: she argues that it is not lack of talent but lack of resources and opportunities that explains why there have historically been so few women writing great works of literature. And, Woolf invites us to think, this is a tragedy. Conditions in Elizabethan England and elsewhere have robbed women for generations of the opportunity to develop and express their creative abilities.

What does the difficulty-based view say about this case? This depends on the level of difficulty that William and Judith respectively encounter. Suppose first, as seems plausible, Judith faces greater difficulty than William. Beyond the struggles of the creative process, beyond her finding the time and emotional resources to write, we can suppose that Judith is faced with humiliation, abuse, and ridicule for her literary attempts.[13] On the difficulty-based view, although William's achievement in writing literary

masterpieces is surely greater than Judith's in various ways, the *essential* value of his achievement is less than that of Judith's, and this is because he faces less difficulty than her and so exercises his will to a lesser degree. Indeed, on Bradford's view, the *essential* value of Judith's achievement is greater in her current circumstance than it would have been had she experienced less difficulty and, as a result, wrote significantly better poetry.

This strikes me as a counterintuitive result, especially for a perfectionist account of achievement according to which there is something valuable about the development and exercise of one's capacities. It seems natural to think that Judith in her current circumstance fails to achieve what she otherwise might have and that her failure is a result of the unjust conditions she finds herself in. That is, it seems natural to think that Judith's achievement would have been greater had she encountered fewer obstacles and had she had the chance to develop and express her creative abilities in the way that William does. Likewise, it seems to me natural to think that William is able to achieve something more valuable than Judith, and this is because he faces fewer obstacles to developing and expressing his talents. But, on the difficulty-based view, the difficulty Judith faces does not prevent her from achieving something as valuable as what William achieves; on the contrary, the greater difficulty she faces is an additional source of value for her achievement relative to William.

There are a number of responses available to the difficulty-based view in the face of this sort of concern. To the extent we have the intuition that William's achievement is greater or more valuable than Judith's, Bradford might insist this is in virtue of its nonessential features. Again, Bradford's view allows the value of a product can make a contribution to the value of an achievement, not just a contribution to its essential value. The literary works that William produces are great achievements in an agent-neutral sense: they have enormous literary value and have delighted and enriched people for generations. This explains why we might be more impressed by what William does than by what Judith does. It is only with respect to the *essential* value of the achievement that Judith's is greater than William's. And, Bradford might insist, our intuitions are not a reliable guide to the *essential* as opposed to nonessential value of an achievement.[14] Bradford can also just resist the intuition that William's achievement is obviously greater than Judith's by pointing to the great difficulty that Judith would have had to overcome to write even mediocre sonnets. There is something deeply impressive about Judith producing anything at all under the conditions she finds herself in, and Bradford's view is well placed to capture this. Judith exercises her will in overcoming the structural injustices she faces as a woman, and as such, her achievement is of great value despite the mediocrity of the product. Our intuition that William's achievement is greater than Judith's might stem in part from a failure to be attentive to the greater obstacles that Judith faced and the remarkable determination she exhibited in the face of

them. If her achievement was more difficult, then Bradford might say, her achievement has greater essential value for her than William's does for him.

I worry however that, these responses notwithstanding, there is still something that the difficulty-based view is unable to capture about this case. Suppose, for simplicity's sake, that William and Judith encounter an equal level of difficulty and so also exert an equal amount of effort, although William produces enduring literary classics and Judith produces middling poetry. And suppose we grant the difficulty-based view the judgment that the essential value of their achievements is the same. Notice, however, that even if the *amount* of difficulty they face is equal, the source of difficulty in their respective cases is very different. Suppose William spends most of his waking hours writing, obsessively editing, and revising until he feels satisfied with the finished product. And, suppose, although Judith spends less time struggling with the writing process itself, she encounters a different sort of difficulty: she struggles to find the time to write amidst her other responsibilities and, when she does find the time, she struggles emotionally to convince herself that her writing isn't just a trivial distraction, one inappropriate for a woman in her position. Even if their achievements are of equal essential value, they are, in some important sense, different kinds of achievements. The difficulty William faces is largely what we might think of as intrinsic to the writing process itself. The effort he exerts is in exercising his creative abilities to realize a certain kind of product. His achievement, it is natural to think, is a creative one. By contrast, much of the difficulty that Judith faces is in overcoming the barriers to her attempting to write at all: much of the effort she exerts is not in the writing process itself but in negotiating obstacles and frustrations extrinsic to the writing process. Her achievement, to the extent she has one, is largely a kind of psychological one.

The difficulty-based view cannot distinguish between the kind of achievement Judith is capable of in her current unjust circumstances and the kind of achievement she would be capable of were she to have the same opportunities and resources as William. Otherwise put, the difficulty-based view is insensitive to whether the difficulty involved in an achievement is intrinsic or extrinsic to a particular process.[15] What we want to say about Judith's case is that, although she exerts her will to a high degree in her current situation, she is robbed of the opportunity to fully realize her creative abilities, to produce the kind of poetry she is capable of: the difficulty she encounters makes possible one kind of an achievement but only at the expense of another. Again, there is something admirably egalitarian about Bradford's view: achievements are available to any agent who tries hard enough. But what this case suggest is that there is a corresponding problem for Bradford's view: it is excessively optimistic about whether achieving something is in our power. On Bradford's view, so long as it is competently caused, an activity counts as an achievement just in case the agent exerts a sufficient degree of effort. And presumably, it is nearly always up to an agent whether she

exerts a sufficient degree of effort. But, in cases like Judith's, what we see is that factors outside of one's control – ranging from bad luck to systematic structural injustice – can prevent an agent from fully expressing or making manifest the abilities she has. Intuitively, what is so tragic about Judith's writing only mediocre sonnets is, in part, that she fails to fully realize a talent she has, fails to fully be all she can be as a writer.

### 3.2.

So far, I've suggested that Bradford's view cannot capture the way in which the difficulty Judith encounters prevents her from achieving what William is able to achieve, even if this difficulty makes possible the exercise of her will to a high degree. Her view cannot distinguish between difficulty that is intrinsic or extrinsic to a particular achievement because it is indifferent to the result or success of achievement-related processes.

We might think what Bradford's account is missing is some reference to the goals of an agent. Perhaps, if an activity is to count as an achievement, an agent must actually reach the goal that she has set herself. If an achievement requires a reached goal, we can explain how Judith fails to achieve what William does. Both Judith and William, we can imagine, set for themselves the goal of writing great literary works. William is successful while Judith, despite her best efforts, fails to achieve this goal.

I cannot do justice to the question of how goals and achievements are related, but suffice to say, I do not think this proposal resolves the present problem. Building 'reached goals' into an account of achievement generates the result that Judith's achievement would be greater if her ambitions were limited to what she could actually accomplish in her unjust circumstances. This seems to me a perverse result. Intuitively, what prevents Judith from achieving what William does is the constraints society places on her and not the way she has failed to curb her ambitions to match her restricted opportunities. Moreover, it seems to me that Judith's failure to fully develop and express her creative abilities would be tragic even if she never set for herself the goal of writing a literary masterpiece. We can imagine that the oppressive conditions of Elizabeth England prevent her from accurately judging what she is capable of. Although Judith feels the impulse to create, she never dreams herself capable of writing anything remarkable. Even if she is pleased with the middling sonnets she writes, she has still failed to achieve what she is capable of.

More generally, I am not compelled by the idea that part of what it is for an activity to be an achievement is that it accomplishes some goal that an agent sets herself.[16] Intuitively, William would accomplish something great by writing a literary masterpiece even if he had set himself the wildly unrealistic goal of producing the best novel ever written. Likewise, William would have failed to accomplish something great if he had limited his ambitions to

merely writing a mediocre sonnet, when he was in fact capable of writing a literary masterpiece. An agent's goals seem important to the question of how an agent's achievement contributes to her well-being. But, like Bradford, I take this question to be separate from the question of determining the nature and value of achievements themselves.[17]

Perhaps, instead, the problem with Bradford's account is that she provides an insufficient account of the difficulty essential to achievement. Von Kriegstein argues that Bradford's understanding of difficulty wholly in terms of effort is not sufficient for capturing the role difficulty plays in determining the value of an achievement. Specifically, von Kriegstein worries, Bradford's account cannot capture the intuition that, for example, a naturally gifted athlete who runs a record-breaking race has achieved something greater than a recreational runner who exerts the same amount of effort to just barely finish the same race. Von Kriegstein suggests that Bradford's account needs to be supplemented with an agent-neutral dimension of difficulty to capture the way in which natural talents or abilities can augment the value of an achievement. Von Kriegstein proposes that an activity is difficult in this agent-neutral sense to the extent that an adult human being with average capabilities is likely to fail when they try to do this activity. So an achievement is 'the successful (and competent) performance of an activity that an adult human being with average capabilities would be likely to fail at'.[18] Some activities are achievements because they involve substantial effort, as on Bradford's view. Some activities are achievements because they are successful despite a low probability of success. And, von Kriegstein suggests, the greatest achievements will be those that are difficult in both senses: they are activities that most people would fail at and that require a substantial amount of effort.

I am sympathetic to the idea that effort alone is insufficient to explain our judgments about the value of achievement in certain cases. But I do not think von Kriegstein's proposal helps with the worry I am pressing here. Consider what this account tells us about A Tale of Two Poets. Relative to what an average human being is capable of, William has carried out something exceptionally difficult in writing great literary masterpieces. So it seems on von Kriegstein's account that although William exerts the same amount of effort as Judith, his achievement is greater than Judith's by being difficult in an additional, agent-neutral way. But, we might think, the sonnets that Judith does manage to write, although middling, are still better than what an average human would accomplish in her circumstances; there is an agent-neutral sense in which what she does has a low probability of success given the oppressive conditions she finds herself in. Von Kriegstein's account is meant to capture the way in which 'internal endowments' like natural talents and abilities enhance the value of achievement; he wants to distinguish these from 'external endowments' like wealth that do not enhance the value of an achievement even though they make possible

accomplishments that would not otherwise have been available to the agent.[19] But what William is able to accomplish seems to be the result of both an internal endowment, his natural literary talent, as well as an external endowment, the absence of the oppressive conditions faced by his sister. What does von Kriegstein's view tell us about the overall value of William's achievement relative to Judith?[20]

If von Kriegstein's view says that William's achievement is greater than that of Judith's because he succeeds in doing something with a low probability of success whereas she does not, the view does not seem to sufficiently distinguish between internal and external endowments.[21] William is naturally talented, but he is also privileged with opportunities and material resources that Judith does not have access too; the fact that Judith fails where William succeeds is not explained by her lack of talent but rather by the way in which her circumstances prevent her from fully realizing that talent. If, on the other hand, the view says that Judith's achievement is greater than that of William's because what she succeeds in doing has a low probability of success given the adverse conditions she faces, the view gives us the counterintuitive result that Judith is better off with respect to the value of her achievement in her unjust circumstances than she would be were she to have the same opportunities as William.

Neither an appeal to the goals of an agent nor an account of difficulty as low probability of success seem to me to help distinguish between the difficulty that is intrinsic and the difficulty that is extrinsic to Judith's creative achievement. What A Tale of Two Poets suggests to me is that, at least in some cases, the value of an achievement depends in part on whether an agent succeeds in making a particular kind of product. It seems to me natural to think that the only way Judith can fully realize her creative talents is by actually writing something of literary value. However much effort she exerts, Judith cannot, in her current situation, fully develop and express her creative talents, and this is reflected in the middling quality of her work. Intuitively, part of what it is to fully express or realize one's creative talents – to achieve something creative – is to actually make or create something that reflects those talents.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that the value of certain kinds of achievements is reducible to the value of their products; again, I think Bradford is right to reject the Simple Product View. Rather, I'm suggesting that, for some achievements, the value of the achievement depends for its realization on a particular result or product. Judith's creative ability is, by its nature, directed at a certain kind of a product, excellent poetry. And, on account of factors beyond her control, she is never able to make this product, and so a certain kind of achievement is unavailable to her. In the same way, we can imagine a skilled craftsman who doesn't have access to the supplies necessary to bring his imagined creations into being or a skilled cellist who must perform a difficult piece on a faulty instrument.

Moreover, this phenomenon of the essential value of an achievement depending in some way on the value of the product that results is not isolated to cases of creative accomplishments. Consider a talented scientist whose samples are contaminated by a jealous colleague with the result that she fails to discover the cure for a rare disease. We might be inclined to think that, although no fault of her own, she is unable to fully realize or express her ability qua scientist. Likewise, an athlete who, after training for months, sprains her ankle during a race and has to hobble to the finish is unable to achieve the result she is otherwise capable of; she is unable to fully realize or express her ability qua athlete. In all these cases, my suggestion is, the individuals are unable to fully express their talents or abilities *because* they are unable to bring about a certain kind of result or product. As such, they are unable to realize a certain kind of perfectionist value, to 'be all they can be' in some activity.

I offer a deeper diagnosis of the problem for the difficulty-based view in Section 5 and propose an alternative perfectionist account in Section 6. First, however, I want to consider in more detail the role of difficulty in achievement.

## *4.*

As we saw, one natural intuition to have about the Tale of Two Poets is that there is something truly impressive about Judith's overcoming great obstacles to write poetry. Bradford's view is well placed to explain this. On her view, difficulty is an essential feature of achievement, and the exercise of the will is part of the essential value of an achievement. However, I have suggested, even if this is part of the story, it cannot be the full story for explaining the value of achievement: at least some of the time, the quality of the resulting product also contributes in some way to the essential value of achievement. I now want to put pressure on the idea that difficulty is an essential feature of achievement at all. Not all achievements are difficult, I argue, and the value of an achievement does not necessarily increase with increased difficulty, other things being equal.

Consider a potential counter example to Bradford's account that she herself discusses. Her difficulty-based account says that something is only an achievement when it is difficult for the person who does it. But suppose a violin virtuoso effortlessly tosses off a flawless performance of a Paganini caprice. If the virtuoso's performance is effortless, it is not an achievement on this account however marvelous and impressive it is. This might strike us as surprising; a highly talented musician performing a difficult piece with ease might seem to be a paradigmatic example of an achievement. More surprising still, Bradford's account seems to imply that the virtuoso's performance, if it counts as an achievement at all, will be less valuable than that of the mediocre amateur who blunders his way effortfully through the same piece.[22]

Bradford argues that the virtuoso case is not, in fact, a counter example to her view. Although the Paganini caprices are difficult for the average violinist, and indeed, even for outstandingly talented violinist, they are not difficult *for* the virtuoso. As such, Bradford suggests, his performance is difficult relative to the comparison class of talented violinists and so counts as an achievement in some general sense, qua performance, but it is not an achievement for him, insofar as it is not difficult for him.[23] To the extent we have the intuition that the virtuoso's performance is an achievement, we are thinking about the performance qua performance, relative to the comparison class of talented violinists. However, if we are truly attentive to the skill of the virtuoso, and to the effortlessness of his performance, we can appreciate that his performance is no achievement for him; it requires no great exercise of the will or exertion of effort.

I don't think this response fully captures our intuitions about the virtuoso's performance. There is something surely right about the idea that what counts as an achievement for someone should be relative to the skill or ability she has. When I run ten miles, this is an achievement for me, but it would not be for a seasoned ultra-marathoner. But this is different from insisting that when an ultra-marathoner, after months of training, runs a smooth, fluid race at a record pace, her achievement counts for less to the extent it felt effortless. Bradford's claims about the virtuoso generalize to any case where an individual has acquired such a degree of skill that her exercise of that skill feels easy, from the poet whose words flow from the pen to the ballet dancer who dances with a weightless grace.

Take the case of an extremely talented and well-trained violinist. When this violinist plays a very simple tune – one that would only be challenging to a beginner – he does so with ease. He knows he is capable of playing a significantly more complicated piece and does not feel any special pride or sense of accomplishment in playing such a simple tune flawlessly and with ease. Now, imagine the same violinist performs an extremely complex piece after months of practice – a piece that someone with any less talent, skill, and practice would struggle to play – and does so with ease. Here, it seems to me, it would be perfectly natural for the violinist to feel pride and a great sense of accomplishment. And it would be natural for him to feel proud not just that he played the piece without mistakes but also that he played it without exerting significant effort or struggling. The effortlessness of his performance is, I want to suggest, part of what makes his performance feel like an achievement for him. The effortlessness reflects the degree to which he has honed and developed his skill and then succeeded in realizing this skill in the performance. I think this intuition is very naturally understood in perfectionist terms: the effortlessness of his performance expresses or makes manifest the degree to which he has perfected his musical ability. Perfectionism tells us that the development and exercise of certain characteristic capacities is intrinsically valuable, and in the virtuoso case, the violinist is

exercising a capacity that has been developed to such a degree that his performance is like second nature to him. Had he trained less, developed his skill to a lesser degree, such that his performance, although flawless, was laborious for him, he would not be *fully* expressing or realizing his ability qua musician.[24]

Here, Bradford might offer a different suggestion for why the violinist's effortless performance appears to be an achievement for him: she might suggest it is not the performance itself, but the years of effortful training and practice, that are an achievement for the violinist. Insofar as achievements are processes culminating in products, Bradford might think that the history of the violinist's training is the process, culminating in violinist's developed skill that is the achievement explaining our intuitions about the case. But this response still does not seem to fully capture our intuitions about the case. Specifically, it seems to me that the violinist's *exercise* of his developed skill in his flawless, effortless performance is a further achievement, above and beyond his acquisition of that skill through years of training. Suppose the violinist, after years of training, and months practicing a particular piece, injures his wrist before the performance. It seems to me that he has achieved less in this case than he would have had he been able to actually perform the piece effortlessly, expressing or making manifest the skill he had developed.

This idea, that ease can express or make manifest the perfection of one's capacities, is familiar to us from Aristotle. For example, in the case of ethical virtue, Aristotle famously distinguishes between the fully virtuous agent and the merely *enkratic* or self-controlled agent. Both agents correctly identify the best action to perform in some circumstance, and both perform this action, but the virtuous agent acts effortlessly, whereas the *enkratic* agent acts grudgingly, struggling to overcome strong conflicting desires. The virtuous agent has perfected her non-rational desiderative states to such a degree that, when she judges that she ought to perform some action, she desires to perform it, takes pleasure in it, and experiences no strong conflicting desires to perform a different action. By contrast, the merely self-controlled agent does experience strong desires to act against what her reason judges to be best; she does the right thing but has to force herself to do so, overcoming her other impulses.[25]

Aristotle thinks that the fully virtuous agent is a better moral agent than the merely self-controlled or *enkratic* agent. Of course, this claim that the agent who acts with ease is better than the agent who must overcome her inclinations has been challenged in the Kantian tradition. But set aside the question of which agent is morally better or more deserving of praise. What is relevant for our purposes is that, as in A Tale of Two Poets, we likely have competing intuitions depending on where we focus our attention. On the one hand, if we focus just on who encountered more difficulty in her action and who exercised her will to a greater degree, we are likely to think that the self-

controlled agent achieved something impressive. But, on the other hand, if we ask who had more fully developed and expressed her capacity for moral agency, we are likely to think it is the virtuous agent, for whom acting virtuously is second nature. And this latter impression should be especially pronounced for someone who is moved by the perfectionist idea that there is something deeply valuable about developing and expressing our characteristic capacities. If we think it is strange for an account to deny that the virtuoso's performance is a genuine achievement in part in virtue of its being effortless, we should think it especially strange for a perfectionist account. And this, notwithstanding that it is also impressive to overcome obstacles and struggle. In what follows, I suggest there are resources within perfectionism to capture both of these intuitions in an account of the nature and value of achievement.

## 5.

So far, I have suggested there are cases where the value of the product makes a difference to the value of an achievement, and moreover, there are cases where difficulty is not necessary for something to count as an achievement. In both sorts of cases, I have been gesturing at the idea that our intuitions about what counts as an achievement depend on the capacity in question. In A Tale of Two Poets, it is natural to think that for Judith's creative ability to be fully expressed, she needs to actually produce poetry of a certain quality. Likewise, in virtuoso case, it is natural to think that the violinist fully expresses his musical skill when he plays a complex piece with ease. In both sorts of cases, it also seems natural to think that, when agents encounter obstacles, they are provided the opportunity to exercise something like what Bradford calls the will, and this exercise of the will also strikes us as intrinsically valuable.

What these cases suggest to me is that we tend relativize our judgments about what counts as an achievement to the capacity in question. Qua creative capacity, Judith fails to achieve anything great. But qua force of will, Judith does achieve something impressive. Likewise, qua musical ability, the virtuoso achieves something great. But qua perseverance in the face of difficulty, the virtuoso does not. One initially attractive feature of Bradford's view is that it gives a highly general account of what achievements are and of their essential value. But these cases suggest that the view purchases this generality at too high a cost: Bradford needs to posit some one capacity, the will, that is present in every case of achievement, but it isn't obvious that we need to do this nor that we should do it. The virtuoso doesn't exercise his will to any great degree, but it is easy enough to explain why his effortless performance counts as a great achievement just by appeal to his musical ability. Judith exercises her will to a high degree but is prevented from fully

expressing her creative ability. It seems to me entirely consistent with our intuitions to say that her writing mediocre sonnets counts as an achievement in one respect and not in another.

As a first step in offering a positive alternative, I suggest we reject a difficulty-based account of achievement in favor of one on which there are multiple capacities, and the full expression or realization of any of these capacities will count as an achievement *relative* to that particular capacity. Return to A Tale of Two Novels, the example that Bradford uses to motivate the essential role of difficulty in achievement. Smith and Jones are novelists with equal talent, and they produce novels of equal quality, but Jones exerts significantly more effort in the process of writing his novel. Again, Bradford suggests that, if two novelists produce books of equally good quality, but Jones faces enormous obstacles in producing the book but Smith does not, Jones' achievement is intuitively much greater. And, she suggests, it is in virtue of the difficulty Jones faces that his achievement is greater. My account so far offers a somewhat different answer. Qua creative ability, the achievements of Jones and Smith are equivalent. Qua force of will, Jones' is greater.

It is true that, on either account, the verdict is similar: Jones achieves more than Smith, and this is true in virtue of the greater difficulty he faces. But the accounts diverge in their judgments when we toy with the details of the example. Suppose Jones faces great obstacles in writing his novel, and his novel turns out to be significantly worse than that of Smith's as a result. Here, Bradford's account seems to say that Jones' achievement still has a greater essential value than Smith's, notwithstanding that Jones fails to write the novel he could have written had he not faced such great obstacles. By contrast, when we relativize our judgments to distinct capacities, we get the same result as we did in the case of Judith. Qua force of will, Jones' achievement is greater than Smith's, but qua creative ability, Smith's is greater. We don't get a single decisive judgment about the value of their relative achievements, but again, this seems to me entirely consistent with our intuitions about this sort of case.

As I suggested in Section 3, the reason that our judgments about achievement come apart in both the Tale of Two Novels and the Tale of Two Poets is that many of the difficulties that the agents face are what we might think of as extrinsic to the activity they are engaged in. Jones loses his house, his wife, and his dog in the process of writing his novel; these challenges interfere with his ability to write, but they are not difficulties that are parts or aspects of the writing process itself. Likewise, Judith is kept busy with chores and is married against her will. She struggles to find the time and energy to write. These difficulties prevent her from writing at all; they are not difficulties that characterize her process of writing. In these sorts of cases, the conditions that make possible the exercise of the will to a high degree also impede the exercise of some other capacity. Compare this with the example of climbing

Mount Everest. This is an enormously difficulty activity, but plausibly, most of the difficulties an agent typically faces climbing Mount Everest are intrinsic to the activity itself; it requires great effort in the form of physical endurance, patience, and unwavering concentration. The conditions that require the exercise of the will to a high degree are also, plausibly, the conditions that require a high-level exercise of other characteristic human capacities: physical ability, technical skill, practical reason, and so on. In these sorts of cases, the conditions that make possible the exercise of the will to a high degree also demand the exercise of other capacities to a high degree. The upshot is that, once we relativize our judgments of achievement to distinct capacities, it turns out that many but not all great achievements are difficult, and not all difficult activities will be unqualified achievements.

## *6.*

Let's take stock. I've argued that, while the Simple Product View can't explain the value of achievements like running a marathon or climbing Mount Everest, the difficulty-based view faces different challenges. It is insensitive to the way in which adverse conditions can undermine or threaten the value of achievements, even as the will is being exercised to a high degree. Likewise, it cannot accommodate our intuitions about the value of achievements that, as a result of an agent's skill or ability being developed to a high degree, are nearly effortless. The underlying problem for the difficulty-based view is the appeal to a single, highly general capacity, the will, to explain the nature and value of all achievements. Exercising the will to a high degree always involves exerting a great deal of effort and does not depend in any way on a result or product. But this is not true of other capacities that, intuitively, are relevant to our judgments about the value of achievement.

In developing an alternative perfectionist account, two big questions arise at this point. First, if I'm right that we need to appeal to a greater range of distinct capacities, we need to determine which capacities are relevant for judging whether some activity counts as an achievement. I have been speaking loosely about Judith's achievement qua poet, the virtuoso's achievement qua musician, Jones' achievement qua will. We might worry that in place of a tidy account of achievement that appeals to only two capacities, the will and the rational capacity, we now have an account that relies on a hopelessly indeterminate set of capacities the exercise of which is intrinsically valuable. Second, one crucial way in which Bradford's account improves on the Simple Product View is by capturing the way in which achievements are relative to particular agents. Running ten miles is an achievement for me, but it is not for an ultra-marathoner. Tying my shoelaces is not an achievement for me, but it may be for someone with advanced Parkinson's disease. On Bradford's account, it is difficulty that captures the way in which

achievements are relative: difficulty is by its nature a relative notion. Is there an alternative way to capture the relativity of achievement without appealing to difficulty?

Let me say something about each of these in turn. First, which are the perfectionist capacities relevant for judgments about achievement? I've been appealing to a wide range of distinct capacities or abilities, but most contemporary perfectionist accounts appeal to a much narrower set of capacities. Rationality is almost always included in some form, often divided into theoretical and practical rationality; some include a few others such as physical capacities, rational agency, or, as on Bradford's view, the will.[26] It would be beyond the scope of this paper for me to defend a positive account of the characteristic human capacities relevant for perfectionist value. But if a perfectionist theory hopes to give an account of the nature and value of achievement, it needs to be sensitive to the differences in the ways in which various capacities are fully realized. One lesson of the discussion so far is that different capacities are fully realized or expressed in different ways. Some capacities are, plausibly, fully expressed or realized in certain kinds of products, while others are not. Likewise, some involve great effort, but others do not. It should be a constraint on a successful perfectionist account of the characteristic human capacities that it can accommodate the diverse range of activities we take to be achievements. And part of what this involves is capturing how some characteristic human capacities can only be fully developed and expressed when certain material conditions obtain; unlike the will, some perfectionist capacities are vulnerable to bad fortune such that their full expression is not wholly within an agent's own control.

Although I leave the details to other work, it seems to me plausible that the following capacities are intuitively worth developing and exercising: one's practical rationality, one's theoretical rationality, one's creativity, and one's physical abilities. The exercise of these capacities will constitute achievements ranging from an agent performing a good action with the right reasons and desires, to a philosopher developing a sophisticated argument, to William writing great poetry, to my running ten miles. Plausibly, as Bradford suggests, the will should also be included as a distinct capacity. Perhaps, there are more than these, or perhaps, these capacities can be further reduced into still fewer. Again, all I want to insist here is that, if a successful perfectionist theory aims to capture our intuitions about which capacities are worth developing and exercising, this will centrally involve capturing our intuitions about which sorts of activities count as achievements and which fail to count as unqualified achievements.

Turn now to the second question: is there an alternative way to capture the relativity of achievement without appealing to difficulty? At various points, I have appealed to a distinction between merely exercising a capacity and fully expressing or realizing it. The distinction is meant to be fairly intuitive. A

professional athlete exercises her physical capacity when she walks across a room. But she exercises it to a greater degree, or more fully, when she runs a record-breaking marathon. I exercise my rational capacity when I read (or reread) the Harry Potter series. But I exercise it more fully, or to a greater degree, when I write an excellent piece of philosophy. An artist exercises her creative ability when she absentmindedly doodles during class, but she exercises it more fully, or to a greater degree, when she creates an elaborate work of art. In each case, what counts as the full expression or realization of the capacity is relative to the ability an agent has; the distinction is between merely employing a capacity and what we might think of as testing the limits of a capacity.[27]

Here then, is the positive account: an achievement is a process culminating in a product that is competently caused and that *tests the limit of an agent's perfectionist capacity*. I take on board the first and third features of Bradford's account, but replace the difficulty condition. In some cases, 'testing the limits' of a capacity will require that the activity result in a product with certain features. Often, 'testing the limits' of a capacity will involve the exertion of great effort, and so it is no surprise that many achievements turn out to be difficult. But in some cases, approximating the limits of a capacity will involve acting effortlessly. Where the limit of a capacity is located will be relative to the agent in question.

To get clearer on the proposal, consider again A Tale of Two Songwriters from Section 2. Taylor and Katy are both songwriters, but Taylor is significantly more talented than Katy. They exert an equal amount of effort, but Taylor produces songs of exceptional quality whereas Katy writes mediocre and uninspired music. Bradford's view says that their achievements have equal value because the two songwriters exert an equal amount of effort. My view generates a similar verdict but for different reasons. Both Taylor and Katy fully express their creative abilities in their songs, and both exercise their will to an equal degree, notwithstanding that Taylor's songs are of a significantly higher quality. My account gives us different results from that of Bradford's when we toy with the details of the case. Suppose Taylor suffers a concussion, and while recovering, she is only able to write songs of the same mediocre quality as those Katy writes. Suppose that, in writing these mediocre songs, Taylor exerts even more effort than Katy does; she struggles with the process of writing but, in addition, she suffers from headaches, loss of memory, and difficulty focusing. Bradford's view again says that the essential value of Taylor's achievement is greater than that of Katy's. My view says that, *qua creative achievement*, Taylor's achievement has less essential value; it does not fully express what she is capable of as a songwriter. This is true even though her achievement *qua force of will* is greater than Katy's.

It is, admittedly, vague what counts as 'testing the limits' of some capacity. But it is similarly vague what counts as a *sufficient* degree of effort for something to count as an achievement on the difficulty-based view.[28] Moreover,

this indeterminacy doesn't strike me as a problematic feature of the view: our intuitions about what activities count as achievements are themselves indeterminate. Again, the suggestion here is not that achievements are only those activities that *fully* express our capacities. Rather, they are the activities that *approximate* the full expression of our capacities. A professional athlete achieves something remarkable when she runs a record-breaking marathon, but she still achieves something impressive when she runs merely a near record-breaking marathon. A violinist achieves something remarkable when he performs a complex piece flawlessly, but he still achieves something impressive when he performs the same piece nearly flawlessly. A philosopher achieves something remarkable when she writes a ground-breaking paper on an important topic, but she still achieves something impressive when she effectively responses to questions after a talk. Other things being equal, the greater the degree to which an activity approximates the limit of an agent's capacity, the more valuable an achievement will be.

To sum up, my hope has been to build on the work of Bradford and others in developing a perfectionist account of the nature and value of achievement. Like Bradford, I think that a successful account of achievement should be agent-relative and should not reduce the value of achievements to the value of their results or products. But, I have argued, the difficulty-based view cannot capture certain central cases of achievement and that this is because it is too narrowly focused on one capacity, the will. The will, if it is a perfectionist capacity, is a peculiar one: it does not depend in any way on some result or product beyond the exertion of effort and so is not vulnerable to adverse material conditions in the way other capacities are. Indeed, adverse conditions merely provide opportunities for its exercise. To capture our intuitions about the nature and value of achievement, a successful perfectionist account needs to appeal to capacities that depend for their realization on resources, conditions, and opportunities well outside of our control. If the perfectionist account we are left with is less egalitarian than we might have hoped, it is also better placed to explain the badness of certain forms of injustice and misfortune than the difficulty-based view. Certain forms of injustice and misfortune are bad, in part, because they prevent agents from developing and exercising the capacities that are central to who they are; they prevent agents from fully being all they can be in their achievements.

Virginia Tech

## NOTES

[1] Bradford (2015). Bradford herself does not herself describe her view as a 'difficulty-based' account and, as will be clear, Bradford believes there are other elements that contribute to the essential value of an achievement: for an activity to be an achievement, it must also be competently caused and an organic unity. However, difficulty plays the most important role on her

account insofar as difficulty is what determines the relative value of achievements, once the activities in question meet the threshold of being competently caused and organic unities. As such, I think it is true to the spirit of her account to describe it as 'difficulty-based'.

[2] I take perfectionism to be, roughly, the view that the development and exercise of certain characteristically human capacities is intrinsically valuable. In this paper, like Bradford in *Achievement*, I am interested in perfectionism as an account of value rather than an account of well-being; I leave open how perfectionist value might be accommodated in a theory of well-being. Likewise, I set aside perfectionism as a moral theory. See, for example, Brink (2003). Finally, I do not engage here with general objections against perfectionism. For more on this, see Dorsey (2010) and responses from Bradford (2016).

[3] For some recent accounts of achievement, see Arneson (1999), Bradford (2013, 2015, 2016), Hurka (1993, 2011), Keller (2004, 2009), Portmore (2007), and von Kriegstein and (2017a,b). Like Bradford, Keller appeals to effort in explaining the value of achievement: 'the greater the effort required for an individual to achieve her goal, the more her welfare is enhanced by its achievement' (Keller, 2009, p. 34). Von Kriegstein (2017a) develops two accounts of effort, 'percentage-effort' and 'absolute-effort' and argues that they are both achievement-enhancing. Moreover, von Kriegstein (2017b) argues that Bradford's account of difficulty in terms of effort must be supplemented with an additional, agent-neutral dimension of difficulty understood as low probability of success for a human being with average capabilities. I discuss his view in more detail in Section 3.

[4] Difficulty, for Bradford, is a matter of expending effort: something is difficult in virtue of requiring a sufficient degree of effort. Different activities require effort in virtue of different features but there is no class of features 'such that they always require such a degree of effort that they are always difficult'. The upshot is that the one common feature of all difficult things is the effort expended. (Bradford, 2015, pp. 28–29). Bradford leaves the concept of effort unanalyzed; she takes it to be familiar enough that, for her purposes, it can be treated as primitive.

[5] Bradford (2015, pp. 12–25). Simon Keller offers a similar account of achievement as what comes about by one's own efforts (2004, p. 33). Likewise, Hurka takes achievements to be difficult and carried out 'in a knowledgeable way' (Hurka, 1993); see also Portmore (2007).

[6] Bradford (2015, pp. 84–88).

[7] Bradford (2015, pp. 88–90).

[8] Bradford (2015, pp. 114–121).

[9] Bradford (2015, p. 126).

[10] I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this case.

[11] Von Kriegstein (2017b) describes Bradford's view as 'oddly egalitarian' (p. 6). He thinks it is a problem for Bradford's account of achievement that it cannot capture the way in which natural talents make possible greater achievements. An extremely gifted athlete, he suggests, is surely able to achieve something much greater than a recreational athlete exerting the same amount of effort. I share with von Kriegstein the idea that Bradford's view is 'too' egalitarian in one sense; as I will argue, we should not think it is entirely within an agent's own control to determine how valuable her achievement is. But I locate the problem with Bradford's view in a different place. I argue that what is missing is not the sort of agent-neutral dimension to achievement that von Kriegstein proposes but rather a way of relativizing achievements to particular capacities.

[12] Woolf (1929).

[13] Indeed, on Woolf's own imagining of the case, Judith feels so deeply the pain of her stifled creativity and limited possibilities that she eventually takes her own life.

[14] This is the response offered to me by Bradford in conversation.

[15] Hassan presses the relevance of this distinction for Bradford's view in his review of her book. See Hassan (2015, pp. 762–763).

[16] This is consistent with thinking that, for an activity to be an achievement, the agent has to act intentionally, deliberately engaging in a particular process that culminates in a product. It might be a necessary condition of an activity's being an achievement that the agent aims to

engage in a particular activity; this is, plausibly, part of what is required for the activity to have been competently caused. But to say that an agent must intentionally engage in a certain activity is different from saying that the agent's goal determines whether her activity counts as an achievement. For William's poems to count as an achievement, he must have produced them deliberately, rather than by accident: he must have intended to write poetry. But if his goal is to write the single greatest poem ever created by a human being, this goal does not, I am suggesting, set the standard for whether his activity counts as an achievement.

[17] For a rich discussion of the relationship between goals and achievement, see Hurka (1993), especially pp. 99–113. Hurka suggests we understand practical perfection in terms of the successful achievement of one's goals, given justified beliefs that one's actions will be successful. He explores ways in which both the quality and number of one's practical achievements can enhance an individual's perfection. See also Keller (2004, 2009); Keller (2004) focuses on the relationship between the achievement of one's goals and one's welfare, arguing that an agent's achievement of her goals enhances her welfare in one respect, even when her goals are irrational, immoral, or self-destructive.

[18] Von Kriegstein (2017a, p. 23).

[19] Von Kriegstein (2017a, p. 24).

[20] As von Kriegstein himself acknowledges, the view he presents is meant to be a sketch, and many of the details of his alternative account remain to be worked out. It isn't clear to me how the two dimensions of difficulty von Kriegstein proposes determine the value of an achievement in cases where these two dimensions are in tension with each other. On von Kriegstein's view, a recent amputee who runs a mile has performed something difficult where difficulty is understood as exerting substantial effort but has not performed something difficult where difficulty is understood as having a low probability of success for 'an adult human being with average capabilities'. Perhaps von Kriegstein will say that the amputee has performed something good but not great, because her achievement is only difficult along one dimension. But the reason her activity is difficult for her, and counts as an achievement at all, is precisely because she is not endowed with 'average capabilities'. It seems to me strange that her disability should, at the same time, count both for and against the value of her achievement. More generally, I don't have the intuition that an able-bodied person's running a half marathon is a greater achievement than a recent amputee running a mile, keeping their effort levels equal. But it isn't clear to me what is different between this comparison, and the comparison between a gifted elite runner who runs a record-breaking race and a casual athlete who barely manages to finish the race, keeping their effort levels equal. It isn't clear to me why we should treat the case of being naturally gifted relative to an average human being any different from the case of being able-bodied relative of being disabled. But I would not want to say that an able-bodied person achieves something more impressive than a disabled person in some athletic activity, keeping their effort levels fixed. Of course, as Bradford would say, there are ways in which the elite runner's record-breaking race is more impressive and more valuable than the casual athlete's performance. But the ways in which it is more valuable – that it demonstrates the limits of human potential, that it inspires other athletes, that it generates revenue for sponsorship companies – do not seem to be parts of the essential value of the achievement itself.

[21] One way to put this worry is that von Kriegstein's view gives up too much of the agent-relativity that we find on Bradford's account. I do not have the intuition that the amputee running a mile is obviously less of an achievement than an elite athlete running a record-breaking race. It might be that Bradford and I are interested in something somewhat different than von Kriegstein in giving an account of achievement. As von Kriegstein suggests, his own view is that achievement is determined by both agent-relative and agent-neutral factors. But, as von Kriegstein recognizes, one might think instead there are simply two different concepts of achievement, one agent-relative and one agent-neutral, which generate conflicting intuitions about certain cases. Understood in this way, Bradford and I are interested in the agent-relative concept.

[22] Bradford (2015, pp. 31, 38–39).

[23] As von Kriegstein points out, the best Bradford's account can say about this case is that the virtuoso's performance would have been an achievement for some other talented violinist, had they performed it; but insofar as it is performed by the virtuoso, it is no achievement at all (2017b, pp. 7–8).

[24] Guerrero (2017), in the context of discussing the conditions of moral responsibility, proposes a distinction between effort-related difficulty and skill-related difficulty. The latter kind of difficulty is due to circumstances or factors that are somewhat outside an agent's control or only under her control imperfectly. This is different from von Kriegstein's proposed difficulty as low probability of success: skill-related difficulty is a function of both the nature of the task and an individual's skill at performing that task. Guerrero's proposal is perhaps consistent with what I argue for here. The degree to which an agent realizes the limits of a capacity in some result or product might be thought in terms of skill-related difficulty. See also McElwee (2015) who discusses difficulty in the context of demandingness objections to moral theories. He suggests that it should be sufficient to avoid blameworthiness that one makes significant sacrifices for the sake of promoting the good of others, even if these sacrifices fall short of the best one could do.

[25] We might worry that the case of moral virtue is quite different from the kinds of skills and abilities we have been considering so far. But there is good reason to think that, at least for Aristotle, they are deeply similar.

[26] Nearly all perfectionists, beginning with Aristotle, include rationality, typically divided into theoretical and practical. David O. Brink and T.H. Green also include something like a capacity for moral action. Many perfectionists treat autonomy as a central human capacity. Others include certain kinds of affective, non-rational capacities as well (e.g., Kraut, 2009).

[27] It is also worth distinguishing between two ways we can talk about what an agent is capable of doing. We can talk about what she is, now, currently able to do, and we can talk about what she would be able to do were she to further develop the capacity in question. On classic perfectionist theories, the acquisition of virtue or skill is a stage along the development of a capacity: many capacities that we have by nature need to be developed or perfected before they can be fully expressed. Even the most gifted mathematician must be educated and train a great deal before she can prove complex theorems. Likewise, a talented poet must work at her craft, honing her skill, before her poems reflect her innate talent. Sometimes when we judge the value of an achievement, we do so relative to what an agent is currently capable of doing: an aspiring violinist achieves something impressive when, for the first time, he plays a simple piece flawlessly. In other contexts, when we judge the value of an achievement, we do so relative to what the agent would be capable of doing once her capacity is fully developed: Judith fails to write the sort of poetry that she would write were her talents fully developed. The most valuable achievements will be those that reflect what the agent is capable of doing once her capacity is fully developed.

[28] This is not to say that the concept of difficulty is itself vague on Bradford's view. Indeed, much of her book is devoted to fleshing out the nature of difficulty.

## REFERENCES

Arneson, R. (1999). 'Human Flourishing Versus Desire Satisfaction,' *Social Philosophy and Policy* 16, pp. 113–142.

Bradford, G. (2013). 'The Value of Achievements,' *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 94(2), pp. 204–224 Chicago.

Bradford, G. (2015). *Achievement*. USA: Oxford University Press.

Bradford, G. (2016). 'Achievement, Wellbeing, and Value,' *Philosophy Compass* 11(12), pp. 795–803.

Brink, D. O. (2003). *Perfectionism and the Common Good: Themes in T.H. Green*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Dorsey, D. (2010). 'Three Arguments for Perfectionism,' *Noûs* 44, pp. 59–79.

Guerrero, A. (2017). 'Intellectual Difficulty and Moral Responsibility,' in J. W. Wieland and P. Robichaud (eds) *Responsibility: The Epistemic Condition*. Oxford: OUP.
Hassan, P. (2015). 'Review: Gwen Bradford, *Achievement*,' *Social Theory and Practice* 41(4), pp. 759–764.
Hurka, T. (1993). *Perfectionism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Hurka, T. (2011). *The Best Things in Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Keller, S. (2004). 'Welfare and the Achievement of Goals,' *Philosophical Studies* 121, pp. 27–41.
Keller, S. (2009). 'Welfare as Success,' *Noûs* 43.
Kraut, R. (2009). *What is Good and Why: The Ethics of Well-being*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
McElwee, B. (2015). 'What Is Demandingness?' in M. van Ackeren and M. Kühler (eds) *The Limits of Moral Obligation*. New York: Routledge.
von Kriegstein, H. (2017a). 'Effort and Achievement,' *Utilitas* 29(1), pp. 27–51 Chicago.
von Kriegstein, H. (2017b). 'On Being Difficult: Towards an Account of the Nature of Difficulty,' *Philosophical Studies*, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-017-1005-3
Portmore, D. (2007). 'Welfare, Achievement, and Self-sacrifice,' *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 2, pp. 1–28.
Woolf, V. (1929). *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*. OUP Oxford reprint 2015.