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Review of Gwen Bradford: *Achievement*

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In 1968 Roderick Chisholm summed up western philosophical thinking about intrinsic values by providing the following list: “pleasure, happiness, love, knowledge, justice, beauty, proportion, good intention, and the exercise of virtue.” Conspicuously absent from this list is something many people assign great value to and are willing to make significant sacrifices for: achievement. In the almost 50 years that have passed, achievement has received some attention from philosophers thinking about well-being, the meaningfulness of life, or value more generally. That achievement is valuable is also a presupposition of some types of virtue epistemology that explain the value of knowledge by claiming that knowledge constitutes a type of cognitive achievement. However, achievement as a value remains woefully under-explored; especially when compared with the entries on Chisholm's list. This is the gap Gwen Bradford sets out to fill with her book *Achievement*.

At various places (1, 82, 187-92) she suggests that her project should be of particular interest to philosophers. A career in philosophy is valuable, she claims, largely because it involves (small- or large-scale) achievements. While this will surprise readers who take the primary value at stake in philosophy to be knowledge or wisdom, it may be welcome news to those harbouring doubts that either of these can be attained in their field. But, regardless of whether achievement is of particular significance to the philosophical life, Bradford's book is an original and impressive contribution to the literature on human values.

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The book is divided into a descriptive account of achievements, and a normative part developing an account of their value. On the former question Bradford contends that achievements involve *difficult activities that competently cause a product*. And, strictly speaking, each achievement is comprised of both the process (i.e. the difficult activity) and the product it competently causes (25). The rationale behind this basic account can be summed up thus: (a) achievements are events we ascribe to agents, hence the requirement that the process causing the product is an activity; (b) not every little thing we do is an achievement, hence the requirement that the activity is difficult; (c) windfalls are not achievements, hence the requirement that the activity competently causes the product – note that this formulation is meant to get around (the analogue of) Gettier-type worries which would arise if the condition was merely that the activity was carried out competently *and* caused the product (20).

One may worry that this account focuses too much on the process and its relationship to the product without sufficient consideration of the product itself. One idea along those lines that Bradford discusses is that there can be no achievement of products that are evil. She argues that, while it would sound odd to call the holocaust an achievement, the same is not true when we speak of lesser evils. An art heist, say, can clearly be an achievement. As she sees no way to could exclude very evil achievements without also excluding small-scale ones, she opts to bite the bullet on the latter (24). It is important to recall that this discussion takes place within the descriptive leg of Bradford's book. Thus her admission that the holocaust may have been an achievement does not commit her to the view that it was valuable. Bradford admits that we do not usually call activities with evil products achievements but suggests that this fact about usage of the term 'achievement' does not necessarily undermine their status as bona fide achievements. One may protest, however, that what linguistic usage points to is that *achievement* is a thick evaluative concept, rather than a purely descriptive one, and that something of manifestly negative value could never be an achievement on that account. Given that this is the line taken by James Griffin in one of the few explicit philosophical discussions of the value of achievement,

it would have been worth replying to. That said, whether or not we have a thick concept of achievement, it seems that we also have the purely descriptive concept that Bradford is interested in. The question whether all achievements are valuable does not seem conceptually confused; and it also does not seem all that strange to say that 9/11 was an achievement – though one that ought not have been pursued.

With the worry about evil achievements put to rest, Bradford turns to an in-depth analysis of the two key concepts in her descriptive account: difficulty and competent causation. Her view about competent causation is, roughly, that an agent causes a product competently, when she has a sufficient number of justified true beliefs (treated as a proxy for knowledge) about the way her actions cause the product. The view gets more complex as Bradford gives more weight to some beliefs than others (a belief is weightier the more of the causal chain it is about), and relativizes the threshold of sufficiency to the type of activity in question (tying shoes competently requires less knowledge than competently building robots) (73).

Bradford is somewhat non-committal about this proposal. She briefly considers whether various accounts of knowing-how, or understanding, might offer promising alternatives (80-1). And she ultimately admits that there might be other ways of spelling out the basic idea that “achievement involves having a proper grasp of one's activities and their relationship to the product in which they culminate.” (82) But while Bradford wants to remain neutral on debates in epistemology, her account seems to be in tension with the type of virtue epistemology (developed by Ernest Sosa, and John Greco) that tries to reduce knowledge to a type of achievement. If the concept of achievement is supposed to provide an anti-luck condition for the account of knowledge, the concept of knowledge cannot very well supply an anti-luck condition for the account of achievement.

It is difficulty, however, that Bradford pays most attention to in her descriptive account. Her fundamental idea is that difficulty is purely a matter of how much effort an agent expends. This allows

her to capture the thought that difficulty is agent-relative. To tie my shoes is not difficult for me but it is difficult for a recent amputee; because for them it requires significant effort (27). Bradford briefly considers the (alternative or complementary) suggestion that activities may be difficult in virtue of being complex. She thinks that there are clear counterexamples: having a conversation in one's native language is a complex affair but not at all difficult (35). By contrast holding a heavy rock over one's head for a couple of minutes is difficult but not complex. The reason why complexity may appear to be constitutive of difficulty, Bradford argues, is that complexity is a feature of activities that typically (though not necessarily) ensures that they require effort (37). She concludes that difficulty is constituted by the need for effort which can arise in virtue of different features of which complexity is one (38).

Next, Bradford discusses how to get from a measure of effort to a measure of difficulty. The most natural suggestion, of course, is that the more effort something requires the more difficult it is. But Bradford worries about an analogue to the *repugnant conclusion* in population ethics. It cannot be, she says, that an activity that requires very intense effort for, say, an hour is less difficult than an activity that requires minimal effort but for a very long time (47-8). Her solution (reminiscent of *critical level utilitarianism* as defended by Charles Blackorby, and John Broome): in calculating the level of an activity only effort above a certain threshold of intensity counts (50). Thus, activity A is more difficult for an agent than activity B, iff A requires more intense effort from the agent than B. An activity that competently causes a product counts as difficult tout court (and hence as an achievement), iff it is above a certain threshold of difficulty.

This threshold varies in accordance to what kind of activity is being considered. Marathons require more intense effort than boardgames and so for boardgames the threshold for difficulty is lower than for marathons. This introduces a second kind of relativity. As any activity can be classified as belonging to a vast number of kinds or types, whether it is difficult depends on the classificatory choice

of the person making the assessment (62). This is curious especially in light of Bradford's earlier insistence that she does not seek an account of the usage of 'achievement' but of what achievements actually are. It seems strange that whether an activity *is* an achievement should depend on the context in which the question is considered.

Bradford's account may also be missing an important feature of achievements by focusing on a fully agent-relative notion of difficulty. While it seems true that swimming a mile is both more difficult and more of an achievement for a third-grader than for Michael Phelps, it seems equally true that, when it comes to swimming, Michael Phelps can do more difficult things and has achieved more than any third-grader – regardless of how hard the latter has been trying. Bradford's reply to such worries is that, while there is no absolute sense of difficulty, we can speak of difficulty relative to a particular class of agents and thus might say that *relative to the class of human swimmers* Phelps has done more difficult things than any third-grader (27-8). But this does not carry over to the account of achievements. The best she can say here is that when Phelps won Olympic gold this *would have been* a remarkable achievement for most human swimmers. But for him it was no more of an achievement than swimming a mile within an hour was for a third-grader (38-9). One may have thought that a person with greater skills is more likely to achieve more difficult things. Bradford's view, by focusing solely on effort, negates this.

One last critical comment about Bradford's discussion of effort is in order. While her discussion of how we get from effort to difficulty is admirably thorough and illuminating, she has little to say about what she takes effort to be. Indeed she thinks nothing much need or even could be said and proceeds “on the assumption that effort is primitive, and with the hope that nothing I go on to say would be undermined by further analysis.”(39) This may be overly optimistic. In her discussion of what counts as sufficient effort to make an activity difficult tout court, for example, she presents the case of a fairy granting a runner additional capacity to exert effort. The runner, not perceiving the

change, “continues to exert [effort] at the same rate” (54). This is a strange scenario; what exactly does the capacity to exert additional effort consist in? It sounds odd to say that, if the runner had *tried harder to try harder*, she would have succeeded; but that seems to be how the scenario is described (54). Moreover, Bradford sometimes talks as if effort necessarily involves overcoming some inner resistance (39, 120); and this may be required by the close connection she sees between exerting effort and exercising the will. But what are we to say, then, about flow-states, i.e. activities that so absorb an agent that they exert enormous efforts without having to force themselves at all? This is not to suggest that these questions could not be answered. But given the central role that effort plays in Bradford's account, one would have hoped for some clarification of the concept of effort she is using.

With her descriptive account in hand, Bradford turns to the question what, if anything, makes them valuable. In short, her account is that achievements are valuable in virtue of being organic unities combining two kinds of perfectionist values (126). Perfectionism, in this context, is the view that it is intrinsically valuable for humans to exercise or develop central human capacities. Bradford does not argue for this general view but simply assumes its plausibility. She provides an epistemic guide for identifying the relevant capacities as those the exercise of which is (a) near universal and near inevitable in human life and (b) intuitively worthwhile (116-7). Putting this guide to use she identifies rationality and the will as relevant capacities. This, in turn, puts her in a position to ascribe value to both of the central elements of her descriptive account of achievements. Causing something competently requires the exercise of rationality; and engaging in difficult activity requires the exercise of the will (121). In an achievement, exercising these two capacities occurs in one and the same process which thus exhibits unity in diversity accounting for some additional value (124).

While rationality has been endorsed as a central human capacity by virtually every perfectionist since Aristotle, Bradford aptly notes that including the will is an innovation (119). Bradford asserts that “the will passes the value criterion [on her epistemic guide]. Indeed, it seems worth having and

developing.” (119). I am not sure that this is quite as uncontroversial as Bradford makes it sound. But even of those nodding along with the suggestion some will be surprised at Bradford's subsequent idea what it is to excellently exercise the will. She writes: “First, engaging in difficult activity *just is* the excellent exercise of the will. ... Engaging in difficult activity requires the exercise of the will which, as we have just seen, is among the perfectionist capacities.” (121) We can easily imagine some (though not all) readers complaining that in signing on to the will as a perfectionist capacity they had something like a Kantian good will in mind the excellent exercise of which would consist in choice in accordance with the moral law. Instead they are being served something Bradford likens to the Nietzschean will to power (119-21).

As sketched so far, Bradford's account gives no role to the value of the product of the achievement. That is because this sketch is just of what Bradford calls “the essential value of achievements” (122). Achievements involve the unified exercise of the will and rationality essentially, and insofar as this has value every achievement has it. By contrast, that the product has positive or negative value is not an essential feature of achievements. Of course, it is essential to achievements that they *have* a product and so one may be tempted to think that the value of an achievement is simply the value of its product; but Bradford argues convincingly that this “simple product view” misses what is important about something being the product of an achievement (84-91).

Bradford does not deny, however, that the value of the product is important for the value of achievements. Having given her perfectionist account of the essential value of achievements she moves on to a discussion of the overall value of achievements. The most interesting part of that discussion concerns the question of the value of evil achievements. Together with her claim, defended in the first part, that evil achievements are bona fide achievements, Bradford's account of the essential value of achievements seems to commit her to the view that evil achievements too are valuable. She anticipates that many readers will find that unpalatable. One solution to this problem would be to make the value

of achievements conditional on the product not being evil (similar to the popular view that the value of pleasure is conditional on its object not being evil). However, on such a conditional view even impressive achievements with mildly bad products (such as elaborate practical jokes) would be devoid of value qua achievement – an implication Bradford deems “schoolmarmish” (167).

An alternative approach says that the negative value of the product is to be weighed against the positive value of the process qua achievement. This leaves open the possibility, however, that even very evil achievements could have positive value overall if the process was difficult and competent enough. Bradford thinks that this is too hard a bullet to bite (162-3). But achievements necessarily involve the pursuit of an aim, and if this aim is evil, the pursuit is vicious. Plausibly, such vice has negative intrinsic value, and thus there is an additional counterweight to the positive value of evil achievements. While the process may have value qua achievement it also has negative value qua vice. Thus, instances of significantly evil achievements coming out as positive overall are going to be extremely rare (166). But they are still not being ruled out on principle. The essential value of an achievement simply has to be even more impressive to outweigh the negative value of the vicious pursuit in addition to the significantly evil product. For Bradford this is still too hard a bullet to bite (166).

Her proposed solution is that the negative value of the vice does not accrue to the process but to the combination of the product and the process. The process retains its positive and the product its negative value. In addition there is negative value in the combination of the two (167-8). This is a surprising move. It is not clear how it solves the problem motivating it. Bradford is still forced to admit the possibility that an evil achievement is good overall. She writes: “The world is better for the good parts of the achievement and worse for its bad parts. There is the one funny bullet to bite, that overall the value of the achievement on the whole is positive, but it's really not so bad because we know that its components retain their various values nonetheless.” (169) Readers are going to be divided on whether

to buy this way of thinking. But if Bradford wants us to accept it, why did she previously work so hard to avoid biting bullets of a very similar kind?

Writing on a topic that has received little attention is a both blessing and a curse. One has to make do without the benefit of a substantive number of careful interlocutors. On the other hand, one can explore new ideas and develop a bold comprehensive view unencumbered by nit-picky debates about every last detail of the concepts one is engaging. Because of the former not all of Bradford's claims may withstand increased scrutiny; because of the latter it is a rewarding read and a terrific starting point for long overdue philosophical discussions of this important value.