Abstract:

This paper critically assesses existing accounts of the nature of difficulty, finds them wanting, and proposes a new account. The concept of difficulty is routinely invoked in debates regarding degrees of moral responsibility, and the value of achievement. Until recently, however, there has not been any sustained attempt to provide an account of the nature of difficulty itself. This has changed with Gwen Bradford's *Achievement,* which argues that difficulty is a matter of how much intense effort is expended. But while this account captures something important about the relationship between difficulty and achievement, it fails to account for the fact that part of what makes achievements great is that they are difficult in a moderately agent-neutral kind of way. Nor is this thought captured by any other extant account. I argue that to fill this gap we should think of (one kind of) difficulty in terms of low probability of success.

On Being Difficult

Towards an Account of the Nature of Difficulty

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Introduction

In virtue of what is one activity more difficult than another? This is an interesting question in its own right, but it is also a question that needs to be answered to make progress with at least two important debates in moral philosophy. First, difficulty may be a factor in determining degrees of moral responsibility.[1] Intuitively, an agent's responsibility for violating a moral obligation may be diminished, if it would have been difficult for them to avoid the violation. Second, it is often thought that something is more of a valuable achievement the more difficult it is.[2] Plainly, to evaluate these claims, an account of the nature of difficulty is needed.

Until recently, however, there has not been any sustained attempt to provide such an account. This has changed with the publication of Gwen Bradford's *Achievement*, which contains a detailed discussion of the nature of difficulty.[3] As hers is by far the most extensive account of difficulty in the literature, as well as the only one that has been applied to both of the debates mentioned above,[4] it makes for the most logical point of departure. Bradford argues that achievements are, by definition, difficult activities, and that an activity is difficult in virtue of

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[1] See, for example, Cohen 2000, Markovits 2010, Coates and Swenson 2013, Arpaly and Schroeder 2014, Nelkin 2016, McElwee 2015, Bradford 2017, Guerrero 2017.
[2] See, for example, Grey 2000, Keller 2004, Bradford 2013. For important discussions of the value of achievements see Nozick 1974, Griffin 1986 and 2008, Arneson 1999, Hurka 2001 and 2011, Keller 2009, Fletcher 2013, Rice 2013. For important work on achievements done in the context of virtue epistemology, see Sosa 2007, 2009, and 2010, Greco 2007 and 2010, Pritchard 2010a and 2010b, Carter and Pritchard forthcoming.
[3] Bradford 2015a.
[4] Bradford 2015a, 2017.

requiring intense effort. In this paper, I argue that Bradford's view cannot fully account for the connection between difficulty and achievement. The main reason for this is that her account of difficulty is entirely agent-relative, but part of what makes achievements great is that they are difficult in a moderately agent-neutral kind of way. Nor is this thought captured by any of the views proffered in passing by various other contributors to the debates about responsibility and achievement. Thus, the literature currently contains no satisfactory account of difficulty, at least as it relates to achievement. Making the case that this is so will occupy the first half of this article. However, my aim here is not just negative. While I cannot fully spell out a new account in the space of this article, my critical discussion will identify the kind of account that is needed as a complement to Bradford's account. In the second half of this paper, I will set out programmatic goals for such an account and sketch a proposal for how to meet them.

I will begin with a critical assessment of the two central features of Bradford's account: that difficulty is agent-relative (section 1) and that difficulty can be explicated in terms of effort (section 2). In section 3, I will highlight some problems with Bradford's account of difficulty, if used as measures of degrees of responsibility and achievement. This will lead to the constructive part of my treatment of difficulty in this piece, beginning with a brief discussion of the desiderata of a complementary account in the context of achievement (section 4). After considering the idea of construing difficulty as requiring skill (section 5), I argue that we should think of (one kind of) difficulty in terms of agent-neutral low probability of success (section 6).

1. Achievement and the Agent-Relativity of Difficulty

According to Bradford achievements are difficult activities that competently cause a product. They are valuable mainly in virtue of being organic unities combining the perfectionist values of exercising rationality and the will. Rationality is needed, on her view, to ensure competence; the will is needed to carry out activities that are difficult.[5]

Bradford prefaces her discussion of difficulty by stating that there is no such thing as absolute difficulty. No activity is difficult *simpliciter*.[6] Whenever some activity is difficult, this is because the activity is difficult *for* a particular agent, potential agent, or class of agents. It may be tempting to think that some activities, such as climbing Mount Everest, are difficult regardless of who is attempting them. But, as Bradford argues, this is just because we have an implicit reference class in mind for whom these things would be difficult. To leave the reference class implicit can be quite natural, particularly when it is a class like 'all human beings'. To see that no activity is difficult simpliciter, both Bradford and Alex Guerrero invite us to reflect that for every seemingly difficult activity we can imagine a member of an alien race for whom the activity would be easy.[7]

These claims regarding the essential relativity of difficulty are plausible and widely accepted. However, Bradford goes on to claim that (i) for something to be an achievement for an agent it has to be difficult for that agent and she suggests that (ii) this sense of difficulty is a partial measure of the magnitude of achievements.[8] It is tempting to think that these claims simply follow from the assumptions that (1) difficulty is always relative to an agent or class of agents, and (2) achievements are, by definition, difficult activities. But that is not so. Given (1), (2) is an elliptical form of: (2*) achievements are, by definition, activities that are difficult for X. According to

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[5] Bradford 2015a.
[6] Bradford 2015a, 27.
[7] Bradford 2015a, 27; Guerrero 2017, 201.
[8] Bradford 2015a, 62-3.

Bradford, X simply stands in for whoever the agent is whose activity we are evaluating. But this is not the only option. We could substitute some other agent, e.g. Jeremy Corbyn. This would result in the view that achievements are, by definition, activities that are difficult for Jeremy Corbyn. More plausibly, we might substitute some broad class of agents such as 'adult human beings'. We would then have the view that achievements are activities that are difficult for adult human beings. Here I will not comment on the plausibility of any such account. I simply want to note that we are not forced to treat X as standing in for the would-be achiever. This is important to keep in mind, because doing so results in serious problems for Bradford's account of difficulty as a partial measure of achievements.

Consider the following plausible set of claims:

(A) Week after week, Lionel Messi does more difficult things on the soccer pitch than I do.

(B) What Messi does on the soccer pitch is more of an achievement than what I do.

(C) (B) is true in virtue of (A)[9]

Claim (A) is true only if we construe it in terms of difficulty as relativized to some class like adult humans, average soccer players, or some such. But as these notions of difficulty are, according to Bradford's view, not relevant for measuring Messi's achievements or mine, they cannot explain (B) (as required by (C)). In order for (B) to be explained by (A), what Messi does would have to be more difficult *for him*, than what I do is difficult *for me*. But I see no reason to believe this.[10] As (A) is the cornerstone of the above triad, it is a serious problem for Bradford's view that it

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[9] As Bradford recognizes, there are, of course, likely to be other factors involved here as well (Bradford 2015a, 63). It might be, for example, that Messi's achievements are more aesthetically pleasing than mine. Or that Messi is more competent than me in bringing about his achievements (though I suspect that I am as competent in scoring three rec-league goals a year as Messi is in scoring 40 in the Primera Division). In any case, it seems plausible that at least part of what makes Messi's exploits greater achievements is that he does more difficult things.
[10] We can stipulate that I exert as much effort playing soccer as Messi does. This stipulation strikes me as plausible given that it would be near physically impossible for me to play three full games within the span of a week as Messi routinely does.

cannot secure it. Ultimately this means that Bradford's view does not allow us to account for the fact that Messi's soccer achievements are greater than mine because what he does is more difficult.

Of course, it is important to acknowledge that even though what Messi does on the soccer pitch now is no more difficult for him than what I am doing is for me, this is partly the result of many years of dedicated training on Messi's part. And we may surely assume that this was difficult for him. So, perhaps this explains the difference between Messi's soccer achievements and mine. Consider this slightly modified version of claim (A).

(A*) Over the course of his soccer career, Lionel Messi has overcome more difficulties than I have over the course of mine.

Claim (A*) is plausibly true in the agent-relative sense that Bradford is working with. Scoring goals against elite teams might be comparatively easy for Messi now, but getting to the point where this is so, was still very hard for him. His achievement is that he has become so good that now scoring is easy.

However, this move will carry only so far. While I have no doubt that Messi has worked very hard to become the player he is, it seems unreasonable to assume that he has worked harder, or overcome more difficulty, than just about any other professional soccer player. Thus there will be some players for whom becoming the player they are was just as difficult for them as becoming Messi was for Messi. But substitute just about any soccer player for me in claims (A) and (B), and the original three claims still hold true. Somewhere in the nether regions of semi-professional soccer, there is bound to be a player who worked just as hard as Messi to become the mediocre player they are now. This player achieves less than Messi on the soccer pitch and this is still true at least partly in virtue of them doing less difficult things. And thus, the move to claim (A*) does not rescue Bradford's account.

The fundamental problem with her view is that it ignores the role of talent. Generally, it seems that for exceptionally talented people more difficult things, and thus greater achievements, are within reach than for the rest of us. But Bradford's view does not allow for this. Her view of difficult achievements is oddly egalitarian: no matter how little talent or skill you have, as long as you try hard, your achievements are as great as anyone's (as far as their difficulty is concerned)! Messi's soccer talents do not help him achieve more difficult things on the pitch than me; and John Nash's mathematical intuitions do not help him achieve more difficult things in mathematics than others. These people may do things that are more difficult *for nearly all other humans* (or some other reference class) because of their talents, but this is not a measure of achievement according to Bradford.[11]

This shows that agent-relative difficulty cannot by itself capture the thought that achievements are amplified by increased difficulty. This is, of course, not to deny that it captures part of that thought. It certainly seems right that something can be an achievement for me but not for you, if it was difficult for me but not for you. Maybe I recently lost my strong hand in an accident – now tying my shoelaces is difficult for me and, if I do it, it may be an achievement in virtue of that fact.[12] Moreover, it could be true that agent-relative difficulty is a necessary condition for an activity to count as an achievement in the first place. This would partly vindicate Bradford's exclusive focus on this type of difficulty. This comes out in her discussion of the following example.

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[11] There is, however, one exception to this egalitarianism. Bradford thinks that people differ in the maximum amount of effort they are capable of exerting. She says that 'some people can try harder than others' Bradford 2015a, 52. Since how hard someone tries measures partially how great their achievement is, people who can try harder have a leg up. So, this is where Bradford's egalitarianism gives out. This picture raises two questions. First, is it plausible to think about exerting effort in this way, i.e. as something that we have more or less of an ability to do? (for discussion of this point see von Kriegstein 2017) Second, if that is the right way of thinking about effort, why does this particular ability allow people to achieve more difficult things than others, while all other abilities are denied that role?

[12] Cf Bradford 2015a, 2; Pritchard 2010b, 68.

Virtuoso. Heifetz, the great violin virtuoso, effortlessly tosses off a flawless performance of the complex Paganini caprices.[13]

Bradford claims that, because Heifetz is so skilled that he can play the famously complex caprices effortlessly, what he does is not an achievement for him.[14] As she recognizes, however, this is not the intuitive verdict in *Virtuoso*. As Duncan Pritchard observes:

… where a significant level of skill is being exercised we are perfectly happy to treat any successful outcome that is thereby attained as an achievement, even if it was not a difficult feat for the agent to perform. For example, Tiger Woods may well sink a tricky put[t] with ease, but this would still count as an achievement.[15]

Thus, Bradford attempts to explain away the appearance that *Virtuoso* is an achievement for Heifetz, despite the fact that what he does is not difficult for him. Her suggestion is that there is a looser sense in in which Heifetz's performance does come out as an achievement:

[N]othing prevents us from saying that [Heifetz's performance] is an *achievement* (*sans* "for") insofar as the difficulty condition *is* satisfied: relative to the comparison class of talented violinists, the performance is difficult, even though it is not difficult for Heifetz. Similarly, then, the performance is an achievement, even though it is not an achievement *for* Heifetz.[16]

This will not do. For there *is* something that prevents us from saying what Bradford wants to say here. In *Virtuoso* it was Heifetz who performed the caprices – not any of the other talented violinists. Thus, Heifetz's performance has to be an achievement *for him*, if it is to be an achievement at all. After all, as Bradford admits in another context, if there is nobody who achieved something, there is no achievement.[17] The best we could say, along the lines of Bradford's suggested solution, is that the performance *would have been* an achievement for some other

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[13] Bradford 2015a, 31.
[14] As discussed in the case of Messi above, it is likely that acquiring his extraordinary skills was itself a considerable achievement for Heifetz. But this is irrelevant for the point of contention here.
[15] Pritchard 2010b, 68.
[16] Bradford 2015a, 62.
[17] See Bradford 2015a, 18.

talented violinist, had they done it. In actuality, however, the performance is either an achievement for Heifetz or no achievement at all.[18]

Cases like *Virtuoso* show that not all achievements are difficult *for the achiever*, and the comparison between Messi and lesser players shows that some differences in difficulty important for achievements cannot be accounted for by agent-relative difficulty. This is not to deny that agent-relative difficulty affects the magnitude of achievements. It most likely does. The problem with Bradford's view is that she thinks agent-relative difficulty is the only kind of difficulty important for the magnitude of achievements. This view commits her to implausible claims such as that Heifetz's performance in *Virtuoso* is no achievement; and that my soccer achievements equal Messi's in terms of difficulty.

2. Difficulty as Requiring Effort

The most contentious part of Bradford's account of difficulty is that, according to it, activities are difficult if and only if they require intense effort; and they are difficult to the degree that they do so.[19] This is a surprising account of difficulty and one that has not gone unchallenged.[20] As, for example, Guerrero has pointed out, some activities seem to be difficult in virtue of requiring skill, rather than effort.[21] If so, requiring effort would not be necessary for difficulty. Guerrero's suggestion is that there are (at least) two different kinds of difficulty that he calls 'skill-related

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[18] To say otherwise is a bit like saying that if Jimmy, who hates chocolate, is forced to eat a snickers bar, there is pleasure "sans for" (it is not pleasure *for* Jimmy), because relative to the relevant comparison class (most children Jimmy's age) eating chocolate is pleasant.

[19] Bradford 2015a, ch. 2; Bradford 2017, 184-6.

[20] For discussion of Bradford's account of effort see von Kriegstein (2017).

[21] Guerrero 2017, 203-4. This may also be Pritchard's view, when he says that a highly skilled person may do something with ease and yet this be an achievement because it is not an "easy success". (Pritchard 2010b, 68-9) The more plausible interpretation, however, is that Pritchard thinks that such cases show that skill can be sufficient for achievement even in the absence of difficulty.

difficulty in performing' and 'effort-related difficulty in performing'.[22] Bradford worries that, once

we allow for two kinds of difficulty, there is no principled way of stopping a population explosion

of kinds of difficulty. For every feature X making an activity difficult, we could say that there is

'X-related difficulty in performing', but how illuminating would that be? Bradford contends that

her effort-based account can subsume all these potential kinds of difficulty and is thus preferable

in terms of parsimony.[23]

> Something is difficult in virtue of requiring some sufficient degree of *effort*. Things require effort
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> in virtue of having certain *features*. Different activities require effort in virtue of various features
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> that they have. Some activities require effort because they are very physically demanding, others
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> require effort because they make use of multiple skills, or a lot of diverse knowledge. There is
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> no class of features, however, such that everything that requires effort requires effort in virtue of
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> these same features, nor is it the case that there are some features such that they always require
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> such a degree of effort that they are always difficult. So the one common feature of all difficult
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> things is requiring effort.[24]

Bradford calls this a "buck-passing account of difficulty: being difficult is having features which

are such that they make the activity require effort."[25] She demonstrates this by considering cases

of *complex* activities. Many complex activities are difficult and so one may be tempted to think

that there is 'complexity-related difficulty in performing'.[26] But Bradford argues that this is just

because complex activities typically require effort. And whenever they do not, they are in fact not

difficult. Here she gives the example of the complex, yet effortless and not difficult, activity of

conversing in one's native language. Thus, complexity is not itself sufficient for difficulty, it is

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[22] See also Dana Nelkin's suggestion that "difficulty can be understood in at least two ways... [1] as requiring a great deal of effort... and [2] as requiring a great sacrifice of one's interests." Nelkin 2016, 357.
[23] Bradford 2015a, 37-8
[24] Bradford 2015a, 28
[25] Bradford 2015a, 37
[26] See, for example, the discussion of complexity as a measure of achievement in Hurka 1993.

just that complex activities usually require effort which, in turn, grounds difficulty. And so the buck is passed.[27]

In the passage cited above, Bradford lists the exercise of skills among effort-requiring features.[28] However, she does not demonstrate how the buck is passed in cases requiring high-level skills. This is unfortunate, for it is not obvious how this would go. Consider Olympic diving. Dives are ranked in terms of difficulty and this is readily explained in terms of the level of skill required to carry them out. How do we translate this into requiring effort? One might say that a dive is more difficult, if it requires more physical effort but this would distort the rankings. In diving (unlike in, say, weightlifting) there is no simple correlation between difficulty and physical effort required. Perhaps the more difficult dives require higher concentration (mental effort)? This is not promising, because there are differences in difficulty even between those dives that require full concentration. Alternatively, we may say that more effort goes into learning the more difficult dives. But this is unlikely to cover all cases (compare the discussion of Messi's years of training above). It might be that some features that make a certain dive difficult can only be learned through a kind of aha-moment that cannot be forced through effort. Moreover, focussing on learning a skill rather than on the performance in which it is displayed seems to distort the phenomenon. It is the dive itself that is difficult – not (just) acquiring the necessary skill (though this is difficult also).[29]

Note also that, for most spectators at an Olympic diving event, the majority of the dives would be too difficult. That is to say they could not carry them out regardless of how much effort they were to put in. Yet even among those dives that are completely out of a person's reach it

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[27] Bradford, 2015a, 29-39
[28] Cf. Bradford 2017, 184.
[29] It is conceivable that there is a successful reduction to effort that employs a number of different forms of effort simultaneously. While this possibility is difficult to rule out, I take it that my discussion suffices to place the burden of proof with anyone willing to attempt such a reduction.

seems that some are more difficult for them than others. The natural explanation is, again, in terms of skill. Their skillset falls short of what is required for many dives, but for different dives it does so to different degrees. Any explanation of this phenomenon in terms of effort would be forced.

It seems then that Bradford's view is committed to a revisionary account of the difficulty rankings of dives. Perhaps she would say that, for the purpose of awarding points in competitive diving, it is okay to rank the dives in terms of skill required as long as we do not confuse this with a ranking in terms of difficulty. But it would be hard to see this as anything but digging in her heels. What reason, other than a prior commitment to the view that degree of difficulty tracks degree of intense effort, could we have to deny that these rankings track difficulty?

To drive this point home, consider, once more, *Virtuoso* and, specifically, Bradford's claim that, because of Heifetz's skill, playing the caprices, though difficult for almost everyone else, is not difficult for him.[30] If we accept that verdict, it seems plausible that the caprices are somewhat difficult for most elite violinists, very difficult for most professional violinists, extremely difficult for talented amateurs, and impossible for the rest of us. According to Bradford's view this would mean that the more skilled a violinist one is, the less effort one has to exert in playing the caprices. But while this may be true in many cases, it cannot be true by definition. As many musicians will attest, increasing effort will not necessarily help with playing a difficult piece. There is, after all, such a thing as trying too hard. The difference between Heifetz, for whom the caprices are easy, and the group of next best violinists may not be that the latter exert more effort when they play the caprices. Rather, being less skilled, they are simply more likely to make a mistake. The case is even clearer when we compare these violinists playing a slightly less complex piece that is, correspondingly, slightly easier for them. Assuming that the piece is still quite difficult for them,

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[30] Bradford 2015a, 38.

they will not decrease their effort level compared to their attempt at the Paganini caprices. They are still giving it their all. They simply are less likely to fail, because the slightly less complex piece is more comfortably within their skillset.[31]

These cases illustrate that, for Bradford's view to capture the intuition that activities that require the exercise of high-level skills are difficult in virtue of that fact, it would have to be true that skill can always in principle be substituted with effort. But that is not the case. Sometimes my skills fall short to the point where no amount of effort will make me succeed. Sometimes more effort does not make a difference to whether I will succeed. And sometimes putting in more effort would actually hurt my chances. There are, of course, cases where applying a skill is effortful and in such cases Bradford's buck-passing account may deliver the intuitive results. However, if we accept that requiring high-level skills is sufficient for difficulty, then requiring intense effort cannot be necessary.

There also appear to be cases that show that requiring effort is not sufficient for difficulty. Some activities are not difficult, although they require lots of effort. As Doug Portmore puts it

> Although goals that require more effort to achieve are typically also more difficult to achieve,
> this is not always the case … for some tasks require a lot of easy, mindless, and repetitive effort…
> [S]uppose that my goal is to solve a set of extremely simple arithmetic problems … and that I
> can do so either by using paper, pencil, and the methods I learned in elementary school or by
> going out and purchasing a calculator and using it instead. The first method will certainly involve
> more effort, but it will not be more difficult, just more tedious.[32]

Bradford would reply that cases like Portmore's are not difficult, because only effort above a certain threshold of intensity counts.[33] But this response will not do. Suppose I am debating

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[31] Note also that if Bradford were serious about Heifetz playing the caprices without *any* effort, she would also have to say, implausibly, that for him the caprices are no more difficult than playing, say, the alphabet song.
[32] Portmore 2007, 10-1.
[33] Bradford 2015a, 47-51.

whether to hire movers or to lug all my boxes and furniture down the stairs myself. The latter option would require a lot of intense effort. Nevertheless, it would not be a difficult thing to do. It would just be *hard*. Now being hard in the sense of requiring intense effort is, I agree, one sense in which we think about difficulty. But, as this case shows, it is not the only one.

3. Assessing Bradford's View

As the discussion so far shows, Bradford's claim that her account can explain difficulty wherever it occurs is not sustainable. On the other hand, it does seem that many things are difficult in virtue of requiring effort. Thus, I would tentatively suggest that there is more than one type of difficulty. In keeping with the terminology introduced at the end of the last section, I will say that activities that require lots of intense effort are *hard* and that *hardness* is one type of difficulty. If that is so, we need to ask whether hardness can play the role difficulty is supposed to play in the value of achievements and degrees of responsibility.

A positive answer has some, but limited, plausibility in both cases. Suppose you are inclined to think that someone is not responsible for a transgression to the degree that it would have been difficult for them not to transgress. Would you stand by this judgement if difficulty was spelled out in terms of effort? I think in many cases the judgement will stand and we will be satisfied that hardness can play the role of difficulty here. But not in all cases. Consider

> *Difficult Wishes*: Little Peter is terminally ill. He has very little time left and his parents have promised him that they would fulfill any wish he may have. Peter has one wish for each of them. He wants Dad to chop down the tree that is blocking Peter's window, make it into firewood, and built a great bonfire in the yard. Dad knows how to do this, but it is going to require a lot of intense effort. It is difficult in the sense that it is hard. For Mom, Peter has a different task: he wants her to hit two homeruns in her weekend softball game that Peter is going to attend. This is

not going to require any more effort than Mom would exert anyway, but it is still difficult. Hitting homeruns is not easy. Sadly, neither Mom nor Dad comes through for little Peter.

In *Difficult Wishes*, Mom's responsibility for breaking her promise may be diminished because it would have been difficult to fulfill. The same cannot be plausibly said for Dad. Thus, it seems that being hard is not the kind of difficulty that plausibly affects moral responsibility. It may, of course, turn out that difficulty is not a factor in degrees of moral responsibility after all, no matter how initially plausible the thought. This is indeed Bradford's view.[34] But we still need to account for the intuitive appeal of the thought that Peter's Mom faced a kind of difficulty that may diminish her moral responsibility. And that kind of difficulty cannot be explicated in terms of effort.

When it comes to the measure of achievements, hardness is quite likely to be a factor. It seems right to say that the more effort someone has to expend in the pursuit of a goal, the greater the achievement when they succeed. It also seems that this captures part of the thought that difficulty is a measure of achievement; part but not all of it. Publishing a paper in a highly-selective philosophy journal is a greater achievement than publishing a paper in a less selective one, because it is more difficult to do. And this is true, even if the latter journal requires just as much in terms of effort going into revisions etc. One may be tempted to reply that, to meet the higher standards of the more selective journal, one will have to put in more effort. But, in philosophy as in soccer, some people are simply exceptionally gifted, and can do more difficult things (such as writing strong papers) with less effort than others. Thus, Bradford's account in terms of effort captures only part of the story when it comes to difficulty as a measure of achievements. Her account needs to be accompanied by something else.

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[34] Bradford 2017. Cf. Cohen 2000, 172.

4. Towards a New Account

The magnitude of an achievement depends partially on how much difficulty is involved. For Bradford this means how difficult it was *for the agent* to succeed. She conceives of difficulty, in turn, as a function of effort expended. Taken together, these steps result in what I earlier called an oddly egalitarian picture of the measurement of difficult achievements: the only thing that matters for how difficult your achievements are, is how hard you (have to) try. While this is indeed one important measure of achievement, we need something else to capture the fact that some people are capable of achieving more difficult things than others. This could, in principle, be achieved by replacing either of the elements in Bradford's account: the agent-relativity of the relevant difficulty, or the explication of difficulty in terms of effort. However, these two elements make a natural fit. More importantly, together they do capture an important measure of achievements, what I have called hardness: the harder something is for you, the more of an achievement if you do it. Thus, I do not suggest to replace Bradford's account of difficulty, but to complement it with an account that captures the non-egalitarian part of difficulty as a measure of achievement.

Such a complementary account should retain neither of the two elements of Bradford's view. Bradford is right that difficulty is always relative to some reference class. But, as I pointed out in section 1, the measure of my achievement does not have to be difficulty relative *to me*. So, one task for developing a new account is to settle on an appropriate reference class. Second, we need to find something other than effort as the underlying dimension of difficulty. In order to stand as a useful complement, the new account will need to make sense of the cases that make trouble for Bradford's account. That is to say, it needs to allow us to say that the exploits of Heifetz and Messi are impressive achievements in virtue of being difficult; and that moving boxes and furniture, or doing simple arithmetic problems with pen and paper are not. It also needs to capture

that hitting two homeruns in a softball game may be more difficult than making a lot of firewood, even when the latter requires more effort.

I should note that, while I will continue to draw on accounts of difficulty from both the achievement and the degrees of responsibility literature, my main interest here lies with difficulty as it relates to achievement. I take no position on whether the kind of account needed for that purpose is going to be of use with regards to degrees of responsibility. As *Difficult Wishes* shows, Bradford's account seems unable to account for the phenomena in that area, but it may well be that the account of difficulty needed there is different from the account needed for measuring achievement.

5. Against Skill

In section 2, we saw that Bradford's idea of passing the buck from every difficult-making feature to effort ran into trouble in the case of activities that appear to be difficult in virtue of skill. This may seem to support the view, put forward by Guerrero, that, in addition to effort-related difficulty, there is also skill-related difficulty.[35] In light of the desiderata outlined in section 4, such a view would also be promising in that skill-related difficulty, unlike effort-related difficulty, is most naturally understood as agent-neutral. In the case of effort-related difficulty, it is quite intuitive that the same activity is harder for me than for you, because I need to put in more effort. I am weaker than you, so carrying those boxes is harder for me than for you. There are also cases like that when it comes to skill-related difficulty. For example, it may be more difficult for a shorter player to make a layup in basketball than for a taller player, and this can be explained by saying that the shorter player needs to apply more skill. But such cases are the exception. Usually it will

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[35] Guerrero 2017.

be natural to say that, if you have better skills, you can do more difficult things than me – and here difficulty is understood relative to a measure that applies to both of us. Agent-neutral skill-related difficulty also seems like a promising candidate to account for the cases that Bradford's view has trouble with. Heifetz and Messi are extraordinarily skilled and otherwise they could not do what they are doing. Hitting homeruns, unlike doing simple arithmetic and carrying boxes, requires skill that cannot be substituted for by effort.

Nevertheless, there are good reasons against turning to skill-related difficulty in search of a complement to Bradford's effort-based view. First, consider cases in which effort and skill can be substituted for each other. I charged above that Bradford's buck-passing account requires that this is always the case, which it is not. But, of course, there are many instances in which they can be substituted for each other. For example, it is difficult for my first-year students, but not for me, to discern whether a simple conditional argument is valid. This is because they lack the more highly-developed skill I have, and so they need to put in more effort. Are my students facing skill-related or effort-related difficulty? Either choice seems arbitrary. The same will be true in all of the many cases where skill and effort can be substituted for each other. Thus, while Bradford's view relies on the false assumption that skill and effort can always be substituted for each other, complementing effort-related difficulty with skill-related difficulty, like Guerrero proposes, forces an arbitrary choice in the many cases in which they can.

Even more problematic is that complementing hardness with skill-related difficulty does still not allow us to account for some natural claims about what is, and is not, difficult. Consider the moving case again. According to Bradford's view lugging boxes into a building is difficult, because it requires a lot of intense effort. But, as I argued above, moving boxes, though hard, is in an important sense not difficult. This may seem to be captured by Guerrero's suggestion, because

moving does not require a great deal of skill. But that is not essential to the case. Suppose a skilled artisan quotes me an expensive price for a project that I could not do myself, because I lack the necessary high-level skills. They may justify this by saying: 'look, even though what you are asking for is not difficult for me, it will require a lot of hard work'. Again, there are two senses of difficulty at work here. One is Bradford's notion of requiring effort. But the other one is not Guerrero's skill-related difficulty. For neither of these can make sense of the artisan's statement that what he is doing is not difficult. Instead, I submit, when we say that something is difficult we often simply mean that the chances of success are low (which is not true in case of the artisan).

6. In Defense of Low Probability of Success

While recognizing that difficulty and unlikelihood of success are regular companions, most authors thinking about difficulty treat the latter as something that often accompanies difficulty but is not essentially related to it. Dana Nelkin, for example, writes:

> [S]uppose that Drew is the kind of person for whom it would take a great effort [to refuse a drink], but who also has a great deal of willpower, and fairly often expends great effort resisting temptation. In this case, the odds are 99–1 that she will walk away from the bar without taking the extra drink. This is perfectly consistent with her making a great effort—and needing to—in order to walk away. Similarly, we can imagine that the odds are 99–1 that [a] soldier will dive onto the grenade just before it explodes to save her fellow soldiers. This is consistent with its requiring a great sacrifice for her to do it. Thus, it seems that mere probabilities can't begin to capture difficulty in either a sense of effort required or sacrifice needed.[36]

Nelkin is right that unlikelihood of success can come apart from either effort or sacrifice. However, as I have argued, not all kinds of difficulty can be captured by effort (and sacrifice is a poor

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[36] Nelkin 2016, 359.

candidate to capture the rest).[37] Thus, the fact that probabilities cannot capture these kinds of difficulty is not a strike against the view that there is another kind of difficulty that does have conceptual ties with low probability of success.

Bradford considers the idea but writes it off as an imprecise use of language.

> It might appear that there are some things that are difficult even though they don't take effort at all, such as winning the lottery, seeing a shooting star, or catching malaria in Connecticut. But what we really mean when we describe something like winning the lottery as "difficult" is that it is *unlikely* or very improbable.[38]

The suggestion is that we say 'difficult' in cases of low probability of success, but we do not really mean it. But imagine another author, mirroring Bradford, writing:

> It might appear that there are some things that are difficult even though success is not unlikely at all, such as bringing home a heavy bag of groceries, moving furniture, or writing a philosophy paper. But what we really mean when we describe something like bringing home a heavy bag of groceries as "difficult" is that it *requires effort.*

This seems just as plausible as Bradford's passage. Why must we think that it is less legitimate to use 'difficult' to signify low probability of success than to signify high effort? The passage from Bradford continues, however, to suggest that what she has in mind is not that using 'difficult' to signify unlikelihood of success is a mistake or merely metaphorical, but rather that unlikelihood of success is a feature in virtue of which an activity can require effort.

> To be sure, if you *tried* to win the lottery or to catch malaria in Connecticut, it would indeed probably take a lot of effort. One can imagine buying up all the lottery tickets one could afford.

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[37] I think that sacrifice is conceptually unrelated to difficulty. Cf. Cohen 2000, 218 endnote 39. Appearances to the contrary are due to the fact that it will often be difficult to make a sacrifice, to motivate someone to make a sacrifice, to deal with the loss of what was sacrificed, etc. Cf. McElwee 2015.
[38] Bradford 2015a, 29.

> Or researching lottery numbers or bribing the lottery officials. This would indeed take
> considerable effort.[39]

The idea here is that winning the lottery *is* difficult. But the buck is passed to requiring effort, if you actually tried to do it.[40] But note that it is at least as plausible to pass the buck in the other direction. Continuing to mirror Bradford, we may say:

> To be sure, if you did not exert any effort in bringing the bag of groceries home, it would indeed
> be very unlikely that you would succeed. One can imagine simply leaving the bag at the cashier
> hoping that it would somehow show up at one's apartment. This would indeed result in a
> remarkably low chance of success.

The point is that Bradford, just like Nelkin, begs the question against the view that (one kind of) difficulty is fundamentally a matter of probabilities. Bradford shows a way of accommodating parts of that view within her framework. But she provides no reason for someone actually holding that view to give it up.

Guerrero takes the idea that difficulty is closely related to low probability of success more seriously. In describing his two kinds of difficulty he says the following:

> It is difficult for me to come to [know] which chess move to make next is best, because of the
> hundreds of possibilities that lie ahead and my inexpert ability to recognize all the subtle but
> important facts about the current board position. I could get it right … but *I am far from assured*
> of doing so. … Some actions are such that they are difficult to perform because they require
> relatively more effort or attention, even if it is true that, if we exert that effort or attention, it
> becomes *quite likely* that we will succeed.[41]

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[39] Bradford 2015a, 29.
[40] Cf. Bradford 2017, 184-5.
[41] Guerrero 2016, 7 emphases added.

This suggests that low probability of success is the underlying notion in virtue of which both skill-related and effort-related difficulty in performing are species of the same genus: something is difficult, if success is unlikely, unless the person attempting it employs great skill or great effort.

Guerrero thinks, however, that low probability of success is a necessary but not sufficient condition for (some forms of) difficulty. What he adds is that the low probability of success must be grounded in features of the agent for whom the activity is difficult.[42] The motivation for this claim appears to be to avoid the implication that cases of pure unlikelihood, such as winning the lottery, come out as difficult. Guerrero contrasts playing the Powerball lottery with an attempt, by a somewhat skillful hacker, to rig it. Both have low chances of success, but only the latter, Guerrero claims, is difficult. The former is not "given that this unlikelihood has nothing to do with [a contestant's] skills."[43] I find this suggestion puzzling. What Guerrero seems to have in mind is that rigging the lottery is difficult for the hacker partly in virtue of the fact that he is not skilled enough at hacking to make success likely. But one might similarly say that the reason why a contestant is unlikely to win the lottery is that they are not skilled enough at predicting the future. Granted, the latter is a rather exotic skill and perhaps nobody has it. But why should that matter for whether or not an activity counts as difficult?

Underlying Guerrero's discussion here may be his exclusive focus on activities that, while difficult, are nevertheless possible for the agent to carry out.[44] This focus makes some sense in Guerrero's context of discussing degrees of moral responsibility. For cases in which it is impossible for an agent to do what would otherwise be required are arguably simply cases in which the agent is not responsible at all. However, in discussing the nature of difficulty more generally,

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[42] Guerrero 2017, 205.
[43] Guerrero 2017, 205.
[44] Guerrero 2017, 201.

assuming that difficulty implies non-zero probability of success would be a mistake. Some activities are impossible for a given agent precisely because they are too difficult for them.[45] This point is relevant to Guerrero's reluctance to call winning the lottery difficult. For, while it is clearly not impossible to win the lottery, it is impossible to do it competently, i.e. in a way that one can take credit for it. Thus, winning the lottery is simply too difficult for ordinary people (who lack clairvoyance). And Guerrero has no category of 'too difficult'. He treats such cases as outside the realm of difficulty.

This may explain why Guerrero denies that winning the lottery is genuinely difficult. What about Bradford? Here too it helps to look at the context in which she discusses difficulty to see why she wants to rule out cases of pure low probability. Bradford is after an account of difficulty that fits into her account of achievements. I.e. she needs an account of difficulty that makes it true that, other things equal, completing a very difficult activity is a considerable achievement. Since winning the lottery is surely not that, we might expect her to conclude that winning the lottery cannot be difficult.[46] But this is too quick. After all, being difficult is not the only necessary condition for an activity to be an achievement. The activity must also have been carried out competently in the sense that success is properly attributed to the agent.[47] This condition is sufficient to rule out lottery winners as achievers; we need not deny that winning the lottery is difficult.

I conclude that there are no decisive arguments in the literature against a form of difficulty centred around low probability of success. And I think that such a notion can provide just what is needed to capture the idea that great achievements are difficult. Hitting home runs is more difficult

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[45] Cf. McElwee 2015, 31.
[46] Bradford comes close to explicitly making this argument in her PhD thesis. Bradford 2010, 42-3.
[47] Lackey 2007; Sosa 2007 and 2010; Greco 2010; Pritchard 2010a, 20. Cf. Bradford 2015a, ch. 3; Bradford 2015b.

than making firewood, because most of us are going to have a much lower success rate at it. Moving boxes and furniture, though hard because it requires effort, is not difficult because for most of us the success rate is high.[48] And playing the Paganini caprices is difficult, because most of the time people fail when they try to do it. This is promising, but note that saying all these things requires a common reference class of agents for whom success at a given task is likely or unlikely. In other words, thinking about difficulty in terms of low probability of success will only help with accounting for the way in which difficulty is a measure of achievements, if the account is not agent-relative. After all, when Heifetz attempts the Paganini caprices, he is very likely to succeed. And thus, according to an agent-relative conception of difficulty as low probability of success, the caprices are not difficult for him. And thus, such an account could not account for the fact that Heifetz's performance of the caprices is an achievement.

This raises the question what the relative reference class ought to be. Above I used the locution 'most of us' and this is perhaps not a bad starting point. Being a bit more precise, we might want to say that an activity is difficult, if and to the degree that an adult human being with average capabilities is likely to fail when they try to do it. An achievement, then, would be the successful (and competent) performance of an activity that an adult human being with average capabilities would be likely to fail at. I submit that this is fairly close to one of the things that we mean when we say that achievements are difficult. I hasten to add that an account like this can do the job only in conjunction with an account of agent-relative difficulty – something like Bradford's account. Some activities are achievements because they are hard for the agent – they require effort for this particular agent – even though most people would succeed at them. I suspect that the

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[48] It's worth noting that I would not regard it as a mistake to use the language of 'difficulty' for what I call 'hardness', and to say that moving boxes and furniture is difficult. I am simply avoiding this use of the term here in order to keep the two kinds of difficulty separate.

greatest achievements are those that are difficult in both senses: they are the kind of thing most people would fail at, and doing them required substantial effort from the achiever. Thus, Heifetz's effortless performance of the Paganini caprices will still be an achievement, but a lesser achievement than the equally extraordinary things that Messi does on the soccer pitch while also expending enormous effort.

Another word of caution is in order. I have only been able to provide the merest sketch of an account of one form of difficulty as agent-neutral low probability of success. I think that an account of this type is the complement to Bradford's account needed to capture the role that difficulty plays in the nature and measurement of achievements. But the account needs to be developed in much more detail. There is the question of how to precisify the notion of 'adult human being with average capabilities', as well as the question whether this is the right reference class. In addition, there is the question of how to treat differing endowments, such as wealth, that fall outside the category of talents. Presumably, we do not want to say that a rich kid paying for an expensive car does something difficult, just because the average person could not do it. The intuitive answer here would be to ask instead whether the average person *if given as much money as the rich kid* could do it. But we need to be careful to preserve agent-neutrality. In other words, we must not rule out the case of the rich kid in such a way that we end up saying what Heifetz does is not difficult, because an average person *with Heifetz's skill* would be likely to succeed. Thus, we will need a distinction between internal endowments, such as talents, of which we say that they help an agent to achieve more difficult things, and external endowments, such as wealth, of which we say that having them reduces the difficulty of doing a particular thing.[49] There remains a lot of work to be done, then, before we have a satisfying account of difficulty in terms of low probability

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[49] Compare Ronald Dworkin's discussion of parameters and limitations – though Dworkin appears to be saying the opposite of what I am proposing here. Dworkin 1995, 253-60.

of success. But if we are interested in advancing the debate about the measurement of achievements, this work seems well worth doing.

Finally, one may wonder whether the type of difficulty I am trying to account for with low probability of success, would not be better captured by a modal model, i.e. one according to which an activity is difficult, if some reference class of agents failed in most nearby possible worlds in which they tried to complete it. The plausibility of this proposal depends on difficult questions regarding the right way to think about probability, possible worlds, and the relation between those concepts. While I cannot go into any detail about these questions here, I think there are three main possibilities of conceiving of modal distance to consider.

First, we may think that possible worlds are nearby, iff they are not difficult to access. This is a non-starter in the current context, since it would make the analysis of difficulty in terms of modal distance circular. Alternatively, modal distance can be thought of in terms of similarity. In this case, low probability of success and modal remoteness can come apart. In a lottery with a million tickets, for example, there is a very low probability that my ticket wins, yet the world in which it wins is not very different from the actual world – very little has to change to access it instead – and thus we may think that my winning the lottery is modally quite close. If this is how we think about modal distance, however, it does not provide a plausible way to model difficulty. Just because a possible world is comparatively similar to the actual world, does not mean it is easy to access – winning the lottery is not an easy thing to do.

According to my preferred way of thinking, talk of objective probability and talk of quantity of nomically possible worlds is equivalent.[50] I do not mean to suggest that probability can be reductively analyzed in terms of nomically possible worlds.[51] I am following John Pollock who,

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[50] See, e.g., Pfeifer 2006.
[51] The main problem with such a project would be a Bertrand style paradox. Given that there are uncountably many

while thinking that such an analysis would be circular, nevertheless considers it a helpful 'characterization' of probability.[52] If that is right, the suggestion that an activity is difficult, if some reference class of agents failed in most nearby possible worlds is equivalent to my suggestion that (one kind of) difficulty is a matter of low probability of success.

Conclusion

The concept of difficulty gets invoked in some important discussions in moral philosophy. But, as of now, we lack a good account of, or even a robust discussion about, the nature of difficulty itself. Gwen Bradford's recent in-depth account is an important contribution. But, as the first three sections of this article show, the account cannot by itself do the work that the concept of difficulty is supposed to do either with regard to the measurement of achievements, or with regard to the concept of degrees of responsibility. Focussing on the concept of achievement, the second half of this article has sketched out the kind of account that is needed to complement Bradford's. Such an account needs to be agent-neutral, and conceive of low probability of success as the underlying dimension of what makes an activity difficult.[53]

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possible worlds, there are infinitely many possible ways of measuring a set of possible worlds. It is not easy to see how one could pick 'the right' one without resorting to probability – thus making the proposed analysis circular. See Hájek, A. 2012, section 3.1.

[52] Cf. Pollock 1990, 72-3.

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