

Book Review

Achievement.

By Gwen Bradford.

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**A Review By
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In this book Gwen Bradford offers a philosophical examination of what achievement is, and why it is valuable. It could be considered that this book of hers might be the first one to take up a careful philosophical analysis of a value theory of achievement after a few articles with just only some slight mention of critique (*p.7*).

The notion of achievement can be used in any situation when one finds herself able to reach to her desired goal in doing something. However, the main point here is about the exceptional kind of achievement that Bradford calls ‘capital A-achievement’ which is more valuable than any ordinary success (*p.4*). The use of concept of ‘difficulty’ will later play an important role in her theory of the achievement. In the first chapter, Bradford explores into the question of what is the necessary and sufficient conditions for something to be called achievement. It truly needs some level of difficulty for something to be done with the proper efforts of one’s own without bringing into a desired effect by chance. It can be considered that ‘difficulty’ brings about a process and its outcome into an achievement (*p.13*). Moreover, the agent’s own competency of reaching the desired success is indispensable. It cannot be a perfect achievement at all if it turns out that the success of which she is proud in reality is done by a helping hand of her secret benefactor (*pp.18-19*). Surprisingly, Bradford explains that even though we may think that achievement is good for us, it may sometimes not be the case that every achievement is involved with good deeds.

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Some disvaluable things may be done with a great effort and it can truly strike us with astonishment (p.23). In sum, Bradford explicates that the conditions of achievement are ‘the difficulty and the causal competency’ for her *inclusive* approach of achievements. The moralistic condition of value of achievements is another approach that is called the *exclusive* approach of achievements that is not her alternative here (p.24). Her chosen approach is similar to one taken before by Simon Keller who showed that to enhance an individual’s welfare the goal of achievement should not be restricted by rationality or moral conditions (Keller, 2004).

From my point of view, the notion of ‘achievement’ can be considered in at least two different ways according to its connotation from its related verbal noun ‘achieving to an end’ and its notion as a common noun that refers to ‘the status of the successful end’. When a detailed consideration of the notion is raised like that, we may have to look for an explanation of the difference in ontological aspects between the action of achieving something and its status as an abstract object. However, Bradford has an argument to show us that she is well aware of the two different connotations of the word, *i.e.* achievement *as process* and *as product*. She does not want to get into any metaphysical views to prove that achievement is solely one of them. Achievement is constructed from both features (p.25). Nevertheless, I think that there is still some difference between the two if we explain from the view of intentionality. When an agent is in the process of achieving to an end, it is done with her intention. According to some other analysis, it is good for the person who is in the process which is comprised of ‘pro-attitudes’ toward achievement (Fletcher, 2013: 216). But the status of achievement as product from that very intention is an intended object. From this view it can be seen that we may have to look for different explanations of those two if we believe that the ontology of action and the ontology of abstract objects are different from each other in details.

The two conditions for Bradford’s inclusive approach of achievements are fully explored in Chapter 2 & 3, respectively. Bradford explains that difficulty is ‘*a property of process*’ of doing things (p.27). When we say that things are difficult to accomplish, we mean that they take a lot of our effort (pp.28-29). Some might say that when thing is more complex, it is more difficult. Bradford argues that even though difficulty is involved with complexity, it is not always true that complex task is difficult for everyone because there are some cases of some gifted ones who can do their complex thing so easily and effortlessly (p.32). Bradford points out that difficulty is a relative matter and should be explained by expending effort. She shows us with a schema-based style of calculation for effort, for example ‘*a is difficult just in case $E(a) \geq d$* ’ means if an activity *a* needs an amount of effort *E*, *a* is difficult when the effort that *a* needs exceeds or meets some threshold *d* (pp. 39-40). Her

theoretical model can explain further why difficulty is the most important condition for achievement. It is because difficulty is a matter of degree varying from one person to another person (pp. 60-62). It can be explicated further that it is like when we consider that an easy thing for us may turn out to be a very difficult thing for a handicapped boy. This is because it takes a lot of effort from him. For him to be finally able to do as same as we did may be sufficient for him to receive our greatest compliment.

To explain the second condition of achievement in Chapter 3, *i.e.* competent causation, Bradford take up an analysis in the style of epistemological problem. If a person reaches her desired goal with a false belief that it is achieved by her own effort she has paid, can it really be considered an achievement? Bradford points that it is important for the agent to have justified and true beliefs (*JTBs*) for weighing her competency of knowing that she is the agent who is bringing about the success (pp. 65-69), *knowing what* she is doing, and also *knowing how* to do it with her *understanding* what she is doing (pp. 80-81).

Why achievement is so valuable? If we explain that the final product after a long-term effort is valuable, Bradford argues that the view can be call '*Simple Product View*' and can be rejected because some achievement, for example getting on the top of Mt Everest, is without any valuable products in the end (p.86). What is more important to determine the value of achievement is difficulty (p.91) but it is also considered unpleasant. However, Bradford later argues that to explain the value of achievement we have to put all the things she has said together, they are parts of the whole achievement. But the value of achievement is *different from the sum of its parts*, it is called '*organic unities*' (p.104) taking all of those parts into unification (p.129). What is the most plausible approach to explain the value of achievement in Bradford's view is 'perfectionism'. This view is a traditional view in value theory explaining that 'objective list' of values, such as knowledge, is intrinsically good for human life. Bradford includes achievements in the list because they characterize what human beings are in their true nature, and they are worthy for extending our effort (pp. 114-116).

From Bradford's argument on organic unities, there is some point that I think it is still unclear. Bradford says that human capacities such as the will and rationality are necessary for achievements (p.123). To be more valuable, they must be exercised together (pp.126-127). I still have a question on the ontological status of this unification. She says that they are to be together, and the unity is more than the sum of its parts. It sounds like Bradford is offering an explanation from some theory of supervenience explaining that A's supervenes from B's but it is a new entity not reducible to B's. If the unity is different in the aspect of its value from its parts, then it means that the value of achievement is irreducible, and Bradford must offer us at least two different sorts of value. If my

analysis here is correct, then Bradford owes us some further characterization of value of the whole apart from its parts in the theory of supervenience.

What we can learn from this book is that we are enhanced with a new perspective for considering achievements. From a philosophical point of view, achievement can be analyzed in many ways we may have never seen before. Bradford is very good at developing her book from the basic topic of definition of achievement to the explication of its value, and also very clear in defending her own positions. Moreover, it is good for philosophers from different disciplines of philosophy, such as value theory, virtue ethics, or even philosophy of sport.

References

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