

Achievement and Education: Reply to Commentaries

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Let me begin by saying what a delight it is to have my book taken up in this forum. Our discussion together has brought to light many new aspects of achievement and expanded my thinking. I see this as the beginning stages of what I hope will be a longer conversation.

As you have read above, *Achievement* is an answer to the question: *what is achievement and why is it valuable?*¹ Achievement, I argue, is characterized by a process that is difficult and competent. Having a valuable product, or outcome, is, it turns out, not essential to achievement, since many paradigmatic achievements, such as marathons and mountain climbing, result in nothing other than their own undertaking. Difficulty, I argue, is central both as a characteristic of achievement and in the explanation of its value. Difficulty may seem like an unusual source of value, but an Aristotelian *perfectionist* theory of value explains the way in which it is valuable.² According to perfectionism, human flourishing is a matter of the exercise and development of core features that are characteristic of human nature, such as *rationality* and, as I understand it, the *will*. The more excellently we exercise these features, the more we flourish. Challenging and difficult activities essentially involve effort—that is to say, the excellent exercise of the will. Achievement is therefore valuable as an aspect of human flourishing. There is more to the story, of course, but this is the account in a nutshell. Let me turn now to discuss the commentaries.

Vik Joshi, in his illuminating and engaging commentary, brings to light some insights about the role of effort in achievement and education, and his discussion takes us to another aspect of achievements and their value that I am eager to discuss: self-propagating goals.

Joshi wonders about the significance for education of the process-product structure of achievements, and particularly my emphasis on *process* as a primary source of value. The value is in the *effort*, after all, on my view. Yet “[g]raduations mark not an achievement of education but rather an achievement of

requirements set by the degree-granting institution,” Joshi notes. Indeed, benchmarks such as grades and graduation do not always map on to achievement, in my sense, in a one-to-one correspondence. It may be much more difficult for one student to earn a C and to graduate than for another student to easily earn straight As. Both students graduate, but it is a greater achievement for the first student. To what extent, one might wonder, can practices in education honor this difference?

One response is simply to acknowledge that there is a difference here that should remain: grades and graduation are a matter of objective benchmarks of output, whereas achievement of the sort that matters for a life well lived is primarily a matter of effort, and output is only secondarily important. But presumably educators wish to foster *genuine* achievement, not simply induce benchmarks. So educational initiatives that include a focus on process, challenge, and effort align more closely with achievement than those that focus on outputs alone.

Joshi’s discussion of *narratives of effort* strikes me as a wonderful way to draw focus to the significance of the process of achievement, and thereby draw focus to genuine achievement. Joshi endorses educational approaches that invite students to explore the kind of effort and the nature of the process that they undertake in order to attain learning objectives.

By reflecting on and experimenting with the process and different kinds of effort applied in different and innovative ways, students learn to appreciate that the process of achievement is valuable for its own sake, independently from the outcome it may produce. Educators, similarly, may come to appreciate and reward the overcoming of challenge, rather than only the output or grade. To be sure, an emphasis solely on rewarding effort and not rewarding outcomes at all would be going overboard, since it is essential that students master skills and gain knowledge. The idea here is not to reward *only* effort, but rather to cultivate the appreciation that what matters for achievement is not just the thing done, but the doing of it.

Moreover, as Joshi discusses, goals that are what I call *self-propagating*

are especially rich sources of value or meaning in achievements. Because the primary source of value in achievements is found in the challenge of the process, projects that have a structure in which the process naturally enriches itself are especially significant.³ The goals of these self-propagating achievements expand and develop as we approach them. As we make progress, new goals emerge that, at prior stages, were unimaginable. The pursuit of knowledge is a prime example. The more we learn and explore, the more new questions arise. When we conceive our goals in this way—as expansive and expanding—our endeavors can become wellsprings of achievement, continually renewing themselves with new challenges and therefore continuously renewing sources of meaning.

Encouraging students to view their learning and development as a self-propagating process, rather than one that ends with a grade or graduation, is, in my view, a wonderful idea that will foster not only an enduring curiosity but also an outlook on effort more generally that imbues life with greater meaning. It is hard to imagine a better role for teachers and educators than fostering greater meaning in the lives of students.

As to how exactly that is to be done, I will leave that to the experts, but Joshi's insight about the importance of narratives of effort strikes me as a wonderful way to draw students' attention to the process of inquiry and to draw educators' attention to ways of fostering it. This opens the door to encouraging more experimentation in learning, as Joshi also wishes to encourage, as well as developing habits for a life of curiosity and openness.

I would imagine too that encouraging students to focus on the nature of their efforts and processes will engage students in a way that creates a sense of proprietorship over learning. Developing new ways to engage effort and to learn makes the material a more fully integrated part of one's own understanding, in a Kierkegaardian spirit. Speaking simply from the armchair, this strikes me as the sort of process that leads to finding learning and inquiry intrinsically motivating. When we become more invested in what we are learning for its own sake, we become more interested in the material itself, rather than outcomes such as grades.

One of the things that seems to come to light from reflecting on self-propagating goals is that what our achievements are worth is, or can be, determined in large part by how *we understand* our goals. Insofar as we set our own aims, our own understanding of our goals makes them the goals that they are. We can turn a seemingly discrete goal into one that is more expansive and self-propagating. We might, say, set a discrete aim to learn the number of stars in our galaxy and go about attaining this goal by googling it. But instead, if we aim to understand the galaxy in the way made possible by physics, our goal is self-propagating—the more we learn, the more we will see that there is more to know.⁴ Reflecting on the nature of our goals and our efforts in relation to them is therefore a key to having more meaningful achievements.

Now, there is an important objection to consider. I have argued that achievements are valuable in virtue of difficulty and that we can enrich meaning in our lives by focusing on the challenge, rather than the outcome. But one might object: Does this give reason to make things gratuitously difficult, since effort is to be rewarded? Should, as a result, educators make assignments unnecessarily difficult, as a way to actualize genuine achievement? Surely having students undertake gratuitously difficult assignments is not a step in the right direction for education. And indeed, it would be a misreading of the value of achievement to think that this follows. While effort is the primary source of the value of achievement, it is not the *only* one, nor is it the most significant or important value in life more generally. Moreover, effort is in limited supply. There are only so many hours in a day, and there is little that is more precious than the currency of our own agency. The value of effort should be part of a balanced diet of meaningful achievement, not to mention the other goods in life.

This brings me to Joshi's connection to Jennifer Morton's discussion of the dilemma faced by students she calls "strivers"—students in higher education who may be socio-economically constrained first-generation students and find themselves on a path of "upward mobility" through education, a path that seems to require some sacrifice of close ties to the "ethical goods" of family and community. As Joshi points out, traditional educational methods that prioritize *conformity* to reliable methods in order to earn high grades has a

negative impact on “the epistemic horizons” of strivers, as he so nicely puts it.

In contrast, a shift in focus to process, perhaps by way of exploring narratives of effort, seems to be a path that illuminates a way to honor the growth of stivers in light of the fact that it enriches their genuine achievements as part of a well-rounded life. Rather than putting the educational focus on benchmarks such as grades, focus can be given to the nature of the process, which is unique to each student and their story. Moreover, a recognition that achievement is only one among other goods in life is a key insight that educators and mentors can bring to light. This insight is also supported by the same perfectionist theory of value that I use to illustrate the value of achievement. Flourishing is a matter of the exercise and development of the capacities at the core of human nature. The best life to lead will involve flourishing in all capacities, not only one at great expense to the others.

Of course, attaining learning objectives is essential—effort alone is not enough for an education. But the process of education, in light of achievement, can be about more than grades. Even if grades cannot be given for effort alone, the effort of the process can nevertheless be fostered and rewarded in other ways, opening avenues to deeper meaning in achievements in education and in all aspects of life.

Kirsten Welch, in her very perceptive commentary, also wonders about how a focus on effortful process might influence educational practices. But first she asks this important and more general question: “how ought we to understand ‘excellence’ when thinking about what it means to exercise the will and rationality in an excellent manner?” This is a great question. Exactly how does perfectionist theory characterize excellence? Specifically, what is it to exercise a capacity in greater or lesser amounts? Indeed, it is a relatively underdeveloped aspect of perfectionist theory, and there are many options to explore, including the one that Welch suggests—namely, a *directional* dimension, in addition to a *degree* dimension. I too am curious about how we might develop this aspect of perfectionism, and so I am grateful for the opportunity to explore it, which I will do here.

First, let us consider the dimension of degree.⁵ One can exercise a capacity to greater and lesser degrees—one can exert more or less effort or exercise one’s capacity for theoretical rationality more or less. For the will, the dimension of degree is fairly straightforward. The will, as I understand and describe it in *Achievement*, is simply the capacity to exert effort. One can simply exert a greater or lesser amount of effort. In *Achievement*, I suggest that we can understand *amount* as a matter of the unit of effort, the “eff.” One exerts the will more excellently when one exerts a greater number of effs per minute. (Of course, I am not suggesting here that the will, or any other feature of perfectionism, can truly be accurately quantified and measured—this is simply a helpful way to understand, theoretically, as it were, degree of excellence of exercise.)

The matter of degree is slightly less straightforward for a capacity such as theoretical rationality. But we might understand it something like this. Let us suppose that we exercise theoretical rationality when we have an epistemic state such as knowledge. We might then say that each justified and true belief that counts as knowledge amounts to one unit. So, the more of these units one accrues, the more excellently one is exercising theoretical rationality. Now, it is fairly easy to amass a large quantity of very trivial knowledge, and presumably the knowledge that is more valuable is sophisticated knowledge of complex and important issues, such as in the disciplines of philosophy, physics, or literature.

We might therefore turn to a distinct dimension of measure—something like a *directional* dimension, as Welch suggests. For rationality, then, we might say that knowledge *of* certain subject matter, or *about* certain topics, is more valuable than knowledge about certain other topics. The more valuable the topic, the more excellent the exercise of rationality. Knowledge of valuable topics such as philosophy and physics is more valuable than the same quantity of knowledge of topics such as ice cream flavors or rare stamps. There is a great deal more to be said, but perhaps one might begin to develop an account of the directional dimension of the value of theoretical rationality in such a way.⁶

Similarly, as Welch suggests, we could develop a directional account of the excellence of exercise of the will: the more valuable the goal toward which one’s efforts are directed, the more excellent the exercise of will. Pursuing a

goal such as writing a novel or curing cancer is a more excellent exercise than collecting bottlecaps or birdwatching. Now, we of course have the challenging question of what makes for good goals, but we can put the details aside for another time and assume that an auxiliary account could be developed, according to which some goals are more valuable than other goals.

What about the pursuit of goals that are of zero value? One might at first be tempted to say that pursuing worthless goals ought to *detract* from the value of the excellence of exercise of will. However, as I discuss in *Achievement*, many paradigmatic achievements involve goals of no independent value whatsoever, such as running a marathon or climbing a mountain. One might pursue these goals for further reasons, such as physical fitness, but considered in themselves, there is nothing that is plausibly significant about being at a location 26.2 miles away from where one started (or not, since most races are loops) or being on top of a mountain. So, it seems to me that we should not “punish” the excellence of exercise of will for pursuing “worthless” goals. Nevertheless, the idea here is that excellence of will increases as the value of the goal increases. So, perhaps the thing to say is that goals of zero value simply do not contribute additional value to the excellence of exercise.⁷ Certainly, as Welch’s proposal goes, the directional dimension is *supplemental* to the degree dimension. Running a marathon or climbing a mountain involve a very high degree of effort and therefore require a high degree of excellence of exercise of the will. The exercise of will gains no additional value from the pursuit of a worthless goal, since these goals are intrinsically neutral, but it does not lose any either. So, these pursuits are nevertheless valuable achievements.

What, then, of intrinsically bad goals? Now, I would like to explore this question thoroughly, so I should warn you this will become somewhat pedantic. Given the tantalizing puzzle of evil achievements, I hope you will consider the circuitous explanation worthy of your indulgence. I will be departing from the discussion of achievement in education to explore these theoretical questions and then return once again to implications for education.

In my discussion of evil achievements in *Achievement*, I appeal to the principle of the *amare bonum bonus* (ABB)—the good of loving the good.⁸ But

here the aim is to eliminate the need for an auxiliary principle to see if we can do all the explanatory work entirely with perfectionist resources, as Welch suggests, by appealing to the directional dimension of excellence.

Since the directional dimension *adds* value proportionally to the positive value of the goal, let us suppose that it *subtracts* value proportionally to the *negative* value of the goal. As a result, an achievement with a merely modestly bad goal, such as a practical joke, can have overall positive value. If the goal is a very serious evil, then the directional dimension would, presumably, subtract such a large amount of value from the achievement that it would result in a *negative* value.

Now, I say “presumably” here, but there is a serious objection to consider: the extremely excellent pursuit of very serious evils. No matter how evil a goal, one can nevertheless suppose that the positive value of the degree of excellence of the pursuit could be *greater* than the intrinsic disvalue of the goal and the dimensional excellence.

Can this result be avoided with the resources of the directional dimension? I believe that it can, but it will involve adopting a complex aggregative method and accepting an asymmetry. Here is how. As the value of the goal decreases (in other words, as the value of the goal becomes more evil), the amount that is subtracted from the overall achievement increases non-linearly, perhaps exponentially. That is, we subtract *increasingly large* amounts as the goal becomes more negatively valuable. As a result, the value of the achievement, even when the exercise of will and rationality is extremely excellent, will still be less than zero—that is to say, it will have negative value, and so the entire achievement is, on the whole, evil. We might further stipulate that the positive value of degree of excellence increases linearly, and so it is *easily* outweighed by increasingly negatively valuable goals, because the directional dimension increases exponentially. And since degree of excellence is capped simply by human ability, the intrinsic disvalue will outweigh the positive value in a way that aligns with intuition. There is, of course, far more to be said to develop this idea, and since I am stretching both patience for pedantry and the word

limit, I will leave it here.⁹

Welch astutely points out that it would be a theoretical advantage to incorporate the directional dimension directly into the perfectionist account, rather than appealing to a distinct, separate principle (namely, the ABB) as I do in order to explain and account for evil achievements. I quite like this idea. The account would be stronger in virtue of being more theoretically unified if all the aspects of the value of achievement were explained entirely in perfectionist terms. So, I agree that incorporating a directional dimension of excellence would improve the theory by making it more unified. Nevertheless, both the ABB and a directional dimension require an auxiliary theory of the good to account for which goals are more or less worthy of pursuit. So, a certain amount of value theoretic pluralism is necessary either way.

A further question Welch raises is this: “how might educational initiatives look different if undergirded by a directional view of excellence rather than a high degree view, and which alternative seems preferable in practice?” Readers of this journal are undoubtedly in a better position than I am to answer this question, but it seems to me that there are some points to consider. Educational practices that favor degree of excellence and de-emphasize direction would be *neutral* about which goals are more or less worthy of pursuit and instead would focus on the ability to pursue perhaps a *wider range* of goals or a wider range of knowledge. In a way, a focus on degree over direction would result in a more liberal (in the classical sense) approach to education insofar as it is committed to neutrality.

Educational approaches that include a directional view of excellence would need to take a stand, as it were, on what sorts of goals are worthy of pursuit. In some cases, this would be straightforward and noncontroversial (avoid obvious evils, for instance); in finer detail, one might be concerned that taking a position on the worthiness of goals would be oppressively paternalistic or illiberal, foisting the values of educators upon students. But it is possible to avoid this. Rather than taking a stand on precisely what kinds of goals are good, a focus on directional excellence would support guiding students to develop the ability to discern for themselves which goals are worthy of pursuit.

Undoubtedly there is more to say about all these points, and, more generally, about the relationship between achievement and education. Thank you very much to Vik Joshi and Kirsten Welch for their perceptive and generous commentaries. I have greatly enjoyed this, and I look forward to future discussion.

1 Gwen Bradford, *Achievement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

2 “Perfectionism” here is the technical term for the theory described in this paragraph, not to be confused with “perfectionism” in the colloquial sense—that is, the perpetual dissatisfaction with anything less than perfect.

3 See Gwen Bradford, “Achievement and Meaning in Life,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Meaning in Life*, ed. Iddo Landau (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 58-73.

4 See Bradford, “Achievement and Meaning in Life.”

5 In this section, I draw from some ideas that I develop in Gwen Bradford, “Perfectionism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Normative Ethics*, ed. David Copp, Connie Rosati, and Tina Rulli (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

6 See Thomas Hurka, *Perfectionism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) for a different account of the relative value of knowledge, as well as my discussion in Bradford, “Perfectionism.”

7 In many cases, however, the apparently valueless goal is not so valueless. When we choose a goal such as running a marathon or climbing a mountain, we do so in large part in order to do something *difficult* for its own sake. Since difficulty is valuable, insofar as it is the excellent exercise of the will, we *are* pursuing a valuable goal, namely, doing something difficult (see Bradford, *Achievement*, 182-184, and Bradford, “Achievement and Meaning in Life”). So, the directional dimension will indeed add a bonus of value in cases such as these.

8 According to this principle, intrinsic goods and intrinsic bads call for certain attitudes in response, and those attitudes, when directed correctly, are

intrinsically good, and when directed incorrectly, are intrinsically bad. Attitudes here are construed very broadly to include loving, desiring, and so on, and also include activities such as pursuing. So, according to the ABB, it is intrinsically good to love the good and hate the bad, and intrinsically bad to love the bad and hate the good. Pursuit of the bad, therefore, is intrinsically bad. Hence, evil achievements—achievements with goals that are intrinsically bad—are intrinsically bad. The ABB has a long philosophical tradition in various guises, and something similar is endorsed by Franz Brentano, G. E. Moore, and Robert Nozick, among others. I also discuss evil achievements at greater length in Gwen Bradford, “Evil Achievements and the Principle of Recursion,” in *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics*, vol. 3, ed. Mark Timmons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 79-88.

9 In spite of my claim that the value of degree of exercise is capped by the limits of human abilities, one might very well wonder about *enhancements*. In previous generations, we might have been able to say that enhancing human ability would be *superhuman* and therefore outside the bounds of discussion for perfectionism, which is concerned with *human* excellence, but as science advances, it becomes less clear just what *human* excellence is. So, I am not entirely confident that what I have said here about the directional dimension would fully cover concerns about evil achievements. A thorough investigation will have to wait for another time.