On the Value of Achievement in Education

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The language of "achievement" is ubiquitous in educational contexts. In a 2006 article, Gloria Ladson-Billings claimed that the "achievement gap" is one of the "most talked-about issues in U.S. education," and not much seems to have changed in the past sixteen years.[1] Within the context of this ongoing conversation, however, what exactly "achievement" is and what its value might be have received remarkably little attention beyond repeated emphasis on the importance of helping disadvantaged students achieve higher scores on standardized tests.

Gwen Bradford's philosophically rigorous, thorough, and insightful account of the nature and value of achievement makes ample room for the importance of educational goals such as closing the "achievement gap."[2] But her account also provides resources for a much broader conception of what counts as an achievement and why achievements matter for the lives of human beings. In what follows I will address some aspects of the bearing that Bradford's account of the *value* of achievement has on education.

Bradford argues for what she calls a "direct essentialist" account of the value of achievement. Put simply, this sort of account grounds the value of achievements *directly* in the *essential* features of achievements. This means that the value of an achievement cannot be reduced solely to the value of its product, regardless of the effort or causal process involved in getting to that product—a mistaken position that Bradford calls the "Simple Product" view and rejects because of its failure to account for our sense that even achievements with zero-value products can be valuable. Bradford's counterexample to the Simple Product view is climbing a mountain: the product of the endeavor is being at the top of the mountain, but such a product could be attained simply by taking a helicopter to the top, which does not seem to have much value at all (*Achievement*, 87). The value of the product might contribute (or detract)

from the overall value of the achievement (*Achievement*, 160), but, according to Bradford, starting with the value of the product misses the intrinsic significance that achievements have in the lives of human beings. Put differently, the value of achievements goes beyond their instrumentality in actualizing results.

Bradford grounds her direct essentialist account of the value of achievements in a *perfectionist* framework. Bradford cashes out her understanding of perfectionism as follows:

> Perfectionism is the view that explains the value of the traditional "objective list" of values by appealing to their relationship with certain special human features. . . . Having these special features, and manifesting them, according to perfectionism, is having a good life. According to most perfectionist views, these features are certain *capacities* that are special to human beings. Developing these capacities to the most excellent degree possible is what perfectionism values. To be precise, on the version of perfectionism that I will be taking up here, the *excellent exercise* of these special perfectionist capacities is intrinsically valuable. (*Achievement*, 114)

On Bradford's view, the two capacities relevant for the intrinsic value of achievements are *rationality* and the *will*. Bradford argues that all achievements are essentially characterized by *difficulty*—which requires effort to overcome—and *competent causation*. The latter feature captures the idea that, in order for something to be a genuine achievement, the agent engaged in the pursuit of that achievement must accomplish his goal not accidentally but competently, which Bradford glosses as "knowing what you're doing" (*Achievement*, 80). Identifying the location of a buried treasure through the use of a ouija board does not constitute competent causation and therefore cannot be an achievement, whereas finding that same treasure through a process of careful examination of historical clues and maps could be a genuine achievement.

Effort requires the exercise of the will—"engaging in difficult activity

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just is the excellent exercise of the will"—and competent causation requires the exercise of the rational capacity (*Achievement*, 121). So, every achievement will necessarily involve the exercise of these two special human capacities. In addition, a genuine achievement exercises the will and rationality not in isolation but in a *unified* manner—the will and rationality must be working together, oriented toward the same goal—thereby achieving what Bradford calls "unity in diversity" (*Achievement*, 132). On the perfectionist view, exercising the will is good, and exercising rationality is good, but exercising both, aligned together, carries even more value than either on its own. Therefore, achievements are "intrinsically valuable in virtue of the very things that they are" (*Achievement*, 121)—a unified exercise of the human capacities of will and rationality.

With respect to education, Bradford's account of the value of achievements helps reveal why a narrow understanding of what achievements are and where their value lies is problematic. In educational contexts, achievement is often narrowed to consist only of measurable, quantifiable outcomes (such as test scores, or job placement, or salary amount). The value of education and its achievements becomes purely instrumental. Bradford's account helps educators see how and why achievements are valuable beyond the way their outcomes can result in success, or career, or even goals like achieving greater economic and social equity. It provides resources for educators who are uncomfortable with a narrow view of achievement to articulate why exactly that narrow view is incomplete. I will consider just two specific ways in which Bradford's account helps make better sense of achievement in education.

First, one significant strength of Bradford's perfectionist framework for cashing out the value of achievements is that it focuses explicitly on the *humanity* of the people pursuing those achievements. The value of an achievement is grounded in uniquely *human* capacities—rationality and will—and so achievements, properly understood, can serve to support a humanizing education rather than to dehumanize students by treating them as mere "human capital" or "products" of the education system, ready to be fed into the ever-churning economy or social order. This aspect of Bradford's account of achievement

resonates with the concerns of an extensive list of educational practitioners and scholars—from John Dewey to Paolo Freire to Michael Oakeshott to Martha Nussbaum—who see education as an ongoing project in cultivating one's own humanity.[3] Every achievement is intrinsically valuable because it allows for the development of one's humanity. Put in an even more striking fashion, achievements allow one to become more fully human. Bradford has contributed significantly to this ongoing educational conversation by providing a robust understanding of exactly how and why achievements can be one source for the cultivation of humanity.

Second, and relatedly, Bradford's account of achievement helps us understand why failure is valuable in educational contexts. We often tell students—and ourselves—that failure is valuable because we can "learn from our mistakes." Perhaps this "learning from our mistakes" is an indirect product of a process of failure, but Bradford's account reveals why this approach to failure still misses part of the picture. The value of an achievement is not reducible to the value of its product; the process of the achievement is also a source of value because the process involves the exercise of human rationality and will. But this goes for achievements that do *not* succeed in obtaining their aimed-for products—failures—as much as it does for successful achievements (*Achievement*, 172). The value of failure is not purely reducible to the product of learning from mistakes because the process that culminates in failure can *also* involve the exercise of rationality and will. Now, often failure occurs because of a less-than-excellent exercise of rationality and/or the will, but, since it seems that excellence is something that comes in degrees rather than being an all-or-nothing phenomenon, a failure could still involve a *somewhat* excellent exercise of human capacities, even if that exercise is not quite excellent enough to manifest its stated goal. When supporting students through failure, then, educators have more resources to draw upon than simply telling students to learn from their mistakes. In addition, educators can encourage students to identify and reflect upon the ways in which they already have succeeded in exercising their will and rationality, perhaps even excellently.

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This discussion of "excellent exercise" leads to a lingering question I have regarding Bradford's perfectionist framework that has implications for education. Throughout the text, it is somewhat unclear what exactly Bradford means by the "excellent" exercise of the human capacities. This notion of excellence might be understood in at least two ways. On the one hand, excellence could simply refer to a *high degree* of exercise of a capacity. So, for example, the will is exercised to a very high—perhaps excellent—degree when a person is engaged in an extremely difficult activity that requires an exceptional level of perseverance. On the other hand, though, excellence could take on a *directional* dimension. This position involves the idea that it is not only the *degree* but also the *direction* or orientation of the will that matters for determining whether its exercise is excellent. This latter view is an addition, not an alternative, to the former view. A will that is oriented correctly but is not being exercised to a high degree is still deficient in a way that precludes excellence.

Because Bradford never clearly defines her use of the term "excellent," this distinction between a high degree view and a directional view of excellence is obscured, although throughout the text it seems that Bradford is operating with a notion of excellence closer to the former than the latter; consider, for example, her claim quoted above that "engaging in difficult activity *just is* the excellent exercise of the will" (*Achievement*, 121). Bradford's account would benefit from an explicit acknowledgement of the possible equivocation surrounding the term "excellence" and a clear statement regarding her own position on its meaning.

The issue of the direction/orientation of the human capacities is not entirely absent from Bradford's account of achievements, however. In her discussion of the possibility of evil achievements, Bradford gestures toward the way in which the orientation of the will and rationality might matter for the overall value of an achievement. To help make the case that evil achievements—even when they exercise the rationality and will to the same high and unified degree as good achievements—can have an overall negative value, Bradford appeals to what she calls the *amare bonum bonus* principle—"to love the good is good" (*Achievement*, 164). This principle relates to evaluating the worth of an

achievement as follows:

> The relevance of the *amare bonum bonus* to achievements is evident. Because of their process-product structure, achievements all involve a pursuit of a product. Pursuit is a pro-activity and as a result whenever it is oriented toward some object of positive or negative value, the *amare bonum bonus* is at play. Thus the *amare bonum bonus* tells us something about the value of the process of an achievement when it is in pursuit of a product of non-zero value. If the value of the product is positive, *amare bonum bonus* tells us the process has a positive value. If the value of the product is negative, *amare bonum bonus* tells us the process has a negative value (*Achievement*, 165).

With respect to theoretical simplicity, I wonder why Bradford introduces the additional principle of *amare bonum bonus* into her account of achievements rather than simply including a directional criterion in her account of the unified exercise of the rationality and the will. Following the latter path would simplify her account as well as allow her to avoid biting the "evil achievement" bullet—no longer would she have to reject any value condition for achievements and concede that, say, genocide is an achievement. But it would allow her to maintain the crucial distinction between value and greatness, or between value and magnitude (*Achievement*, 25), and would also provide room for understanding why what she calls "petty" evil achievements—such as an *Ocean's 8*-style art heist—can have an overall positive value. When we watch *Ocean's 8* and leave the film with the sense that what the characters accomplished was, overall, a good thing, it is not necessarily because we would call the heist *itself* a positive achievement but because the implicit aims of the characters' escapades—perhaps things like fostering friendships—are the very sort of ever-expanding goals (in Bradford's terms, self-propagating goals) that Bradford sees as one of the most significant sources of meaning in human life.[4] In other words, a petty evil achievement might have *directional* dimensions that *are* positive, thereby allowing for the possibility of genuinely excellent exercise of rationality and will in a way

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that a more significantly evil achievement would be excluded from.

Bradford might shy away from a directional notion of excellence simply because it is difficult to say what exactly the direction ought to be. But, if this is the reason for the avoidance, then appealing to the *amare bonum bonus* principle embroils Bradford in the same difficulty insofar as she is then saddled with providing some account of what exactly the *bonum* is.

With respect to educational ramifications, I think the distinction between a high degree view and a directional view of excellence can matter tremendously. If excellence is simply about exercising capacities to a high degree, then education ought to be oriented toward helping students acquire the tools to exercise their capacities to a high degree, say, through learning critical thinking or persevering in a long-term, challenging assignment. But if excellence is additionally about achieving the proper direction for the exercise of one's rationality and will, then, plausibly, education also ought to be engaged in orienting students' rationality and will in the right direction. This means that education is not simply about helping students achieve *per se* but about helping them achieve good things, things worthy of desire, approval, or love.

In closing, then, I pose a few specific questions for Bradford arising from this commentary. First, how ought we to understand "excellence" when thinking about what it means to exercise the will and rationality in an excellent manner? Second, what are the theoretical strengths and weaknesses of endorsing a high degree view of excellence rather than one that contains a directional component? And, finally, what bearing might this distinction have on education? More specifically, 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?

Bradford's account of achievement is itself a valuable achievement not only intrinsically—because Bradford clearly has exercised her will and rationality excellently (whether on a high degree or directional view!)—but also extrinsically insofar as the product of Bradford's process carries worth for educators. The

questions I have posed here are merely examples of the way in which Bradford's philosophical engagement with the idea of achievement manifests itself as a meaningful and valuable self-propagating goal, which will continue to expand as, I hope, she continues to pursue it.

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1 Gloria Ladson-Billings, "From the Achievement Gap to the Education Debt: Understanding Achievement in U.S. Schools," *Educational Researcher* 35, no. 7 (2006): 3-12.

2 Gwen Bradford, *Achievement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). This work will be cited in the text as *Achievement* for all subsequent references.

3 John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (1916), in *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1899-1924*, vol. 9, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IN: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008); Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (1968, repr. New York: Continuum, 2000); Michael Oakeshott, *The Voice of Liberal Learning* (Carmel, IN: Liberty Fund, 2001); Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

4 See Gwen Bradford, "Achievement and Meaning in Life," in *The Oxford Handbook of Meaning in Life*, ed. Iddo Landau (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 58-91.

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