
THE VALUE OF ACHIEVEMENTS

BY

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Abstract: This article gives an account of what makes achievements valuable. Although the natural thought is that achievements are valuable because of the product, such as a cure for cancer or a work of art, I argue that the value of the product of an achievement is not sufficient to account for its overall value. Rather, I argue that achievements are valuable in virtue of their *difficulty*. I propose a new perfectionist theory of value that acknowledges the *will* as a characteristic human capacity, and thus holds that the exercise of the will, and therefore difficulty, is intrinsically valuable.

Achievements are, if any thing is, on the ‘objective list’ of the things that can make a life a good one. But while discussions of pleasure, knowledge, and beauty abound, achievements have yet to receive much philosophical attention. What is it about achievement that makes it worth the effort?

I argue that achievements are valuable in virtue of at least one of their essential features: *difficulty*. I don’t deny that there may be other features of achievements that also make them valuable beyond difficulty; rather, my claim is that difficulty accounts for at least some of the value of all achievements.

Difficulty is admittedly a peculiar source for value, and I argue that the explanation of the value of difficulty is to be found in *perfectionism*, the view that the exercise of our characteristic human capacities is of intrinsic value. However, current perfectionist accounts do not adequately capture just what it is about an achievement that makes it valuable, namely difficulty. This is the further ambition of this article: to introduce a new development for perfectionism that acknowledges a characteristic human capacity that is overlooked by previous accounts. This is the *will*. In the last section of this article I present some further motivation for this new account. To be clear, the discussion here concerns the *intrinsic value* of achievements, as opposed to, say, their contribution to wellbeing.

To proceed, we need an account of just what an achievement is. This question is worthy of a paper all to itself, but I will make use of this brief account.¹ First, achievements are characterized by a process-product structure: all achievements have a *process*, which culminates in a *product*. Second, the process of an achievement is *difficult*. Something must be difficult to some sufficient degree in order to be an achievement; after all, if running a marathon and writing a novel were easy, we wouldn't be inclined to call them achievements. I will say more about the nature of difficulty later, but for now we will suppose that an activity is difficult just in case it requires effort from the agent engaging in the activity.

Yet difficulty alone won't suffice for an achievement. The difficult process must be connected to the product in the right way in order for it to be an achievement. The product must come about in a sufficiently *non-lucky* way; to wit, the product must be properly creditable to the agent's efforts. In other words, there must be a condition to block against what we might call the practical analogue of Gettier cases. One plausible candidate for this condition is that the product must be caused sufficiently *competently*, and so I will refer to this condition as *competent causation*. There is much more to be said to elaborate competent causation than I can do here, so will have to leave this for another time.² The broad notion is that the agent has sufficient understanding about the nature of his activities. To put it very roughly, one might say that the agent knows what he's doing. The precise details of the condition, it turns out, do not play a large role in this article, and what I say in this article could be compatible with potential alternative views.

This, then, is the account of achievements I will use throughout this article: achievements are characterized by a difficult process which culminates competently in a product.

1.

Here's a very natural thought: if you're engaged in some activity that is aimed at some end, the activity is only as good as its end. If the end isn't valuable, it's just pointless, wasted effort. This thought leads people to believe that engaging in difficult activity is *worthless* by itself, and only of instrumental value, at best, insofar as it brings about some valuable product.

Wasted effort, in fact, seems to be not just of no intrinsic value, but worse. Difficulty that does not result in anything good may be of *negative value*. Difficult activities that come to nothing in the end are generally considered to be something *bad*. Just think of Sisyphus, rolling his rock up the mountain. This seems to be the very archetype of meaninglessness, according to virtually everyone except Camus. Difficulty appears to be of

negative value, then. It is only instrumentally valuable at best, in those cases where it does indeed result in something of positive value. When it fails to result in anything of value, it is worthless, and maybe even worse. If nothing comes at the end of all your hard work, it was a waste of time. So what's valuable about achievements is the *product* – the bottom line, the output, or what you get at the end of the day.

The Simple Product view (SP) captures these sentiments. According to SP, achievements are valuable *because of what they achieve*. The value of an achievement on SP is entirely a matter of the intrinsic value of the product. And, to be specific, SP holds that the intrinsic value of the product is entirely *independent from its being difficultly produced and competently caused*.

According to SP, the difficulty and competent causation of the process of the achievement is irrelevant to determining the value of the achievement. Of course, difficulty and competent causation are necessary to guarantee the status of an activity as an achievement at all. But according to SP, the degree of difficulty and the degree of competence of causation *are irrelevant* for determining value – they guarantee achievement status, but do not contribute value.³ Rather, on SP, the value of the achievement is determined by the value of the product.⁴

SP captures a plausible view about the value of achievement and, I believe, is close to the folk conception. Finding the cure for cancer, most people would say, isn't made more valuable by being so difficult to do – it's valuable because it is the cure for cancer. According to SP, what makes curing cancer a valuable achievement is that *it results in a cure for cancer*. A cure for cancer saves millions of lives, and this is valuable. The value of saving millions of lives *just is* the value of the achievement of curing cancer, whether or not it was difficult to achieve or competently caused.

Similarly, Picasso's *Guernica* is a valuable achievement because it is an extraordinary painting. The value of the painting includes its aesthetic value, cultural and historical significance, and so on. Its having been difficult and competently caused is irrelevant. According to SP, this value is what *constitutes* its value as an achievement: the value of the painting as such is what makes *Guernica* an artistic achievement. This seems entirely plausible as an account of the value of this achievement.

But as plausible as SP may seem initially, it is subject to serious objections. Most strikingly, on SP there appears to be no good account of the value of achievements with *zero-value* products.

There are many particularly valuable and impressive achievements with products that have *no* value on their own. Climbing Mt. Everest is a perfect example: being on top of a mountain, just by itself, is intrinsically valueless. Of course, if the view from the top is particularly pleasant, there may be some value in being on a mountaintop, extrinsically. But the most impressive mountains that are climbed aren't particularly pleasant at the summit.

If being on top of a mountain had any significant intrinsic value, then taking a helicopter to get to the top would be just as valuable as climbing by your own efforts.⁵ This seems false. The value of climbing a mountain is in the *climbing*, not in *being* at the top.⁶ SP seems to tell us that the value of summiting Mt. Everest is zero, which is quite clearly wrong.

But SP can offer this reply: the goal of climbing Mt. Everest isn't simply to *be* on the top of the mountain. It's to *get* to the top of the mountain in a particular way – by climbing. The climbing *is* the product – the process by which the product is attained is itself *part* of the product. So SP can account for the value of climbing Mt. Everest by appealing to the value of the process of climbing, which is itself also part of the product. Presumably, the proponent of SP could tell a plausible story accounting for the value of climbing. Since the climbing is the product, or is an element of the product, the achievement of climbing the mountain appears to have a value greater than zero.

I certainly agree that there are achievements whose product is part of the process. Typical examples of process-as-product achievements are performances, such as musical or dance performances, where the very product of the performance is that the performing be carried out. What I called 'zero-value product achievements' are (in most cases) process-as-product achievements. The product of climbing a mountain isn't *only* being at the top of the mountain, but *climbing* the mountain and subsequently arriving at the top. The climbing is a sort of performance, and, let's grant, is valuable. Thus, it seems that SP *can* account for the value of these achievements. So-called zero-value product achievements, then, don't really have zero-value products. Their product *includes* their process, and so they have value insofar as the process has value. Admittedly, it's not clear that *all* zero-value product achievements will have valuable processes, and whether or not they do will depend on what it is that *grounds* the value of the process (product in this case). But in those cases where the process-performance does have value, SP *can* account for the value of these achievements.

And yet this response is not enough to save SP from the objection, for we need to ask, *why* would the climbing of the mountain have greater than zero value? SP, after all, can only account for the value of mountain climbing if the value of climbing is *independent* of its being difficult or competently caused. Presumably the most plausible account of why climbing a mountain has a value greater than zero is that it is a great display of courage, tenacity, skill and endurance, and so on. But to say this is just to give an account of *why engaging in difficult activity is valuable*. So in claiming that climbing has value, SP *is* appealing to the difficulty after all. And this is precisely what the SP view wants to *deny*. The SP view holds that difficulty is *irrelevant* for the value of achievements. So the SP fan cannot account for the value of zero-product achievements by appealing to the value of skills displayed in difficult activity.

Moreover, SP suffers from a further flaw. There is a very strong intuition that hard work, perseverance, and effort matter for the value of an achievement. Even if it is not obvious at first how much effort matters, it seems clear that it does indeed play a role in determining the value of an achievement. Yet SP isn't able to distinguish between the apparent difference in value between achievements with a product of similar value caused in the usual way, on the one hand, and as a result of overcoming exceptional obstacles and adversity on the other.

In the following example, Smith and Jones, over the course of a year, each write a very good novel, each novel as good as the other.

A Tale of Two Novels.

- I. *Smith.* Smith's experience working on his novel was typical for a novelist (if there is such a thing as a typical novel-writing experience). There were ups and downs, periods of writer's block, months of carefully finessed work that ended up not being useful for the book, pressure from the editor, but also enjoyable and productive days, and so on.
- II. *Jones.* Jones endured hardships similar to Smith's, and, in addition, suffered major obstacles. His house burned down, along with everything he owned (not to mention several months worth of work on the novel), his dog died, and his wife left him. In addition, Jones suffers greatly from depression, which can make an ordinary day – let alone a productive one – utterly agonizing. Yet Jones has struggled and fought, and, in spite of these obstacles, he has produced his novel, equally as good as Smith's.

Assuming that both Smith and Jones exert sufficient effort and competently cause their novels, writing both their novels are achievements for Smith and Jones respectively. While both novels are equally good (assuming it's possible for two different novels to be equally good), I think it seems quite clear that there is a significant way in which Jones' achievement is a *better achievement*. Thus it seems that effort matters for the value of achievements.

This element, however, is simply not captured by SP. According to SP, the only source of value in Smith's and Jones' achievements is in the value of their novels – that is, the intrinsic value of the products of their achievements. The difficulty and competent causation are irrelevant in causing the difference in the value of their achievements. This does not capture the relevance of Jones' remarkable struggle. It's clear that Jones' triumphs over these obstacles matter, so we should reject SP.

The value of the products of the achievements in *A Tale of Two Novels* is the *same*. But it seems clear that there is more value in Jones' achievement in II than there is in Smith's achievement in I. Yet, according to SP,

the value of an achievement is equal to the value of its product. So SP must be wrong.

In order to save itself, SP needs to deny one of these:

1. The value in Jones' achievement is greater than the value of Smith's achievement ($V_{\text{achII}} > V_{\text{achI}}$).
2. The value of the product of Smith's achievement and the value of the product of Jones' achievement is the same ($V_{\text{prodI}} = V_{\text{prodII}}$).

To deny 1 is to say that there is just *no value* in Jones' overcoming adversity. My reply to this is that this is in tension with a strong intuition commonly held by many people, that triumphing over extraordinary obstacles is valuable. It seems clear that succeeding in the face of incredible difficulty is appropriately met with respect, awe, admiration, and approval, all of which are pro-attitudes that we think are appropriate responses to things that have intrinsic value. Of course, some may not be moved by such intuitions, in which case I give them SP as the proper account of the value of achievements. But my sense is that most will be inclined to agree that there is more value to Jones' achievement than there is to Smith's. Fans of SP who agree will have to move on to try to deny claim 2.

Alternatively, a proponent of SP could try to maintain that II has more value than I by denying that the total value in I and in II is sourced entirely in the value of the achievements. This approach claims that Jones' triumph over adversity is indeed additionally valuable, but that this value is not part of the value of Jones' achievement. The novel is the achievement, and it has its value as such. Jones' triumphs over adversity are independently valuable. (Such an objection could then continue to offer an account of why overcoming adversity is valuable.) The total value in II *is* greater than I, but the difference in value isn't a difference in the value of achievements, rather it is accounted for by the additional value of Jones' overcoming adversity, which is valuable.

But this is no objection to my view. Surely overcoming adversity is itself an achievement! What the objection is alternatively proposing is that there is not just one achievement in II, but *two* achievements: the novel, and the overcoming of adversity. Overcoming adversity is indeed difficult, and, accordingly, an achievement. Thus this objection nonetheless acknowledges that difficulty is valuable.

Now, one might think that acknowledging that doing something difficult is valuable isn't quite the same as holding the position that it is the difficulty *that makes the achievement valuable*. One could coherently have a view according to which difficulty is valuable (due to the exercise of virtue, or perhaps something else), but it contributes nothing to the value of achievements. But why would anyone want to have such a position? Difficulty, after all, is an *essential* feature of all achievements. To say that

difficulty is (either itself or derivatively) valuable, and that it always is present when an achievement is present, and yet deny that its value has no role to play in the value of achievements would be a strange position to have. It's true that it's a coherent position, but unless there is some strong theoretical pressure to accept it that we haven't uncovered yet, it's not a very appealing position at all. An SP fan might cling to it, but only out of sheer dogmatism.

Denying 1, then, is clearly implausible for SP. But what about 2? Claim 2 is that the value of the product of Smith's achievement is the same as the value of the product of Jones' achievement. *Ex hypothesi* the value of the two novels is the same. But the *products* of the achievements might not in fact be the same. If the *process can be included in the product* of achievements, and the *processes* of the achievements in I and II are different, then the *products* in I and II are different from what we originally thought they were. If the products are different, then it might be the case that the values of these products are different.

However, this move is unsuccessful. Although, as we saw earlier, there are many achievements where the process is part of the achievement, writing a novel just doesn't seem to be such an achievement. The *novel*, it seems, is the product of the achievement, and the writing process is not properly speaking part of the product in the same way that the climbing is part of the product of climbing a mountain. The novel is quite distinctly the product of the achievement, and the writing process is the process. Claiming that the writing process is actually part of the product of writing a novel, then, is a bit of a stretch.

Thus SP cannot account for the difference in the values of the achievements on its own terms, so we should reject SP, which fails by ignoring the relevance of difficulty for the value of achievements.

2.

Difficulty may at first seem like an unlikely candidate for a source of value, yet we have already seen very good evidence that difficulty does indeed matter for the value of achievements. Most clearly, achievements that have inherently valueless products gain value in virtue of their difficulty. In mountain climbing, the state of affairs that one aims at – being on top of a mountain – is valuable *only* in the instance when it is attained in a difficult manner, keeping the other features the same. If we get to the top of the mountain by taking a helicopter or an escalator, it's not especially valuable. So it seems that at least in these cases – achievements with zero-value products – difficulty is responsible for the value of the achievement. Further, we also saw in *A Tale of Two Novels* that difficulty matters for the value of achievements that also have products of value greater than zero.

Moreover, the value of achievements increases as difficulty increases. The *more* difficult getting to the top of the mountain is, the more valuable it seems to be. Holding the other features of the achievement constant, it seems to be the case that the *more* hardships that are overcome, and struggles that are endured, the greater the value of summiting a mountain. The value of the achievement of reaching the top of the mountain increases with difficulty, other things being equal. Similarly, it was difficult for Smith to write his novel, but it was more difficult for Jones to write his, and accordingly, Jones' achievement is more valuable.

But surely there is an air of absurdity to my position. It can't be right that making all our accomplishments *more difficult* makes them better. If it were, then it would seem to follow that we should make every task that we undertake as difficult for ourselves as we can! If difficulty is valuable, we ought to want to have as much of it in our lives as possible. My position about the value of difficulty seems to advocate an absurd lifestyle, replete with needless difficulty.

Although there may be a grain of truth to this objection, it misses the mark insofar as the objection concerns how we should act – and I have made no claims about that here. I have only been talking about what is *good*, and not about what we ought to do.

Of course, it is perfectly reasonable to hold, as many people do, that we ought to pursue what's good. Supposing that is true, this objection points out that because I have said that difficulty is good, it follows that we should pursue difficulty at every opportunity, and so I advocate an absurd life of needlessly difficult tasks.

But I haven't claimed that achievements are the *only* valuable thing, so of course, when we are deciding how to spend our time, achievements will need to be weighed against the other valuable elements in life. It need not follow that we ought to take every opportunity to engage in difficulty that presents itself to us. It seems perfectly plausible that there are *other* things that are also worth pursuing, such as knowledge, or pleasure.

Moreover, even if the value of achievements were the *only* thing that is valuable, it does not follow that we should take every opportunity to make absolutely every activity we engage in as difficult for ourselves as possible. We are mortal, after all, and our time is limited. It is plausible that it is good to achieve as much as we can in the time that we have, and it seems that we might be able to achieve *more* if we ration our time and efforts in certain ways. Further, we have seen some indication that some achievements are *more valuable* than others. If we make every mundane task absurdly difficult for ourselves, then it is likely we would not have time and energy left to pursue the best achievements that we can pursue. All this, of course, assumes that we should go for quality over quantity when it comes to achievements. This may turn out to be false, but it seems plausible to assume for now. So my position that difficulty is a

source of value does not, in the end, entail a life of pointlessly absurd difficult tasks.

Yet I hinted that there is something that this objection gets right. My view *does* imply that difficulty is of positive value. But is this really so absurd? As we have just considered, there are often other values that compete for our time and energy. We work to make money to pay for food and shelter to take care of ourselves and our families, so that, ultimately, we can do those things that we think are of intrinsic value, whatever they might be. There are only so many hours in a day, and it takes a lot of work to get all these things that we need, just so that we can live a reasonable life. The value of difficulty is often eclipsed by other, more pressing necessities of daily life. But we can see the value of difficulty for what it is if we dim the brightness of the competing values for a moment. If we truly want to consider the intrinsic value of difficulty, we need to imagine ourselves unhampered by the necessities of daily life.

Let us imagine, then, what it would be like if we didn't *have to do anything*. Consider a Utopia where everything we could possibly need is at arms' reach, or at the touch of a button. This is the Utopia we find in *The Grasshopper*:⁷ there is no poverty to alleviate, there is world peace, not only does fruit grow on trees, but so do sandwiches and five-course meals. All the problems of science and philosophy are available in a Universal Book of Answers, and we can instantly attain any mental state we want, just by popping a pill – tranquility, pleasure, freedom from neuroses, instantly. In this Utopia, all the necessities of life and everything we could possibly want are available at the touch of a button, and, as Schopenhauer says, 'everything grows of itself, and pigeons fly around roasted' (Schopenhauer, 1974, sect. 152).

Schopenhauer thinks that we would be overwhelmed with boredom, but the less pessimistic among us think just the opposite. If we didn't *have to do anything*, wouldn't it seem that we could enrich any daily task by increasing its difficulty – by making it a game? Indeed, just picking off a cheese soufflé from the soufflé tree might lose its appeal after a while, and an exciting alternative would be attempting to make this difficult dish by one's own efforts. Your dream house can appear with the wave of a wand, but building your dream house with your own two hands would be far more satisfying and exciting.

Since all these activities are entirely unnecessary in Utopia, that is, unnecessary for acquiring the products in which they culminate, there must be something about the processes that is choiceworthy for its own sake. We do not, it turns out, value the activities of cake-baking and house-building and mountain climbing only because they result in cakes, houses, and being on top of mountains. We value these activities *themselves*. And it seems that we are right in valuing these activities. All instrumentally necessary activity is eliminated in Utopia, all activity is

non-necessary. Insofar as any activity is worth doing, it is worth doing at least in part for its own sake, and so plausibly intrinsically valuable. Thus, once we peel away the instrumentally necessary activities, we see the value of difficulty for what it is, shining, perhaps even jewel-like.

Yet some people might be inclined to think that what we are responding to in this thought experiment is that we would do anything in order to stave off the incredible boredom that might set in while in Utopia. So difficult activity is of necessary instrumental value in this respect – it's necessary for our sanity.

But in this Utopia, there is no worry that we would ever become bored. There are pills that we can take give us whatever mental state we want – feelings of boredom can be eliminated instantly. So there are no activities that we would *have* to engage in to alleviate boredom.

Fair enough, then, difficult activities are indeed intrinsically valuable – in Utopia. But skeptics can object that it is not yet clear that difficulty is valuable *in the real world*. After all, this Utopia is highly contrived and entirely unlike the real world.

On the dominant view, if something has intrinsic value, *then it has intrinsic value* – meaning that if something ever has intrinsic value, then it always has intrinsic value. Our reflections on Utopia indicate that difficulty has intrinsic value – if it's valuable over here in Utopia, then it's valuable anywhere, and that's just what it means to have intrinsic value. So it doesn't really make sense to object that something could have intrinsic value over here, in Utopia, but fail to have intrinsic value over there, in the real world.⁸

A better objection grants that difficulty is intrinsically valuable, but it takes issue with the *comparative* value of difficulty. In the real world, says this objection, there are *always* more important (and perhaps also necessary) things for us to attend to. The world is filled with incomprehensible amounts of horrible suffering that most of us just ignore or pretend to forget about, and surely attending to the relief of suffering is much more important than baking a cake, or anything else.

I am, of course, willing to acknowledge the urgency of attending to the relief of suffering. It would be ridiculous to insist that baking a cake is of greater importance than saving human lives. Such a position would be the philosophical equivalent of fiddling while Rome burns, to be clichéd about it. In the real world, there are often more pressing things to engage in than difficulty.

But to be clear, this objection is one about the *urgency* of certain claims on us to act. It is not ultimately an objection that concerns *intrinsic value*. There are indeed claims on us to act in ways that relieve suffering, benefit others, or, more mundanely, feed and clothe ourselves and those dependent on us. But these claims do not concern the intrinsic value of any particular activity or end. Rather, they are claims on how we ought to act.

I have made no claims about how we ought to act, and my arguments here are, to be clear, about the intrinsic value of certain kinds of activities. Indeed, our lives are spent largely engaging in activities that are primarily of instrumental value.

Moreover, even though it may be true that there are often more urgent things than difficulty, this is a contingent matter. It just so happens that the world that we live in is riddled with things that need our urgent attention. It doesn't take away from my position, which is simply that difficulty has intrinsic value. I haven't yet said anything about *how* valuable it is.

So how valuable is it? It's grossly implausible that difficulty is of such small intrinsic value that there is or would be *never* anything that's less significant than it. Surely alleviating the pain equivalent to a hangnail couldn't be *more* valuable than the difficulty of winning a game of chess. Indeed, it can seem very worthwhile to endure a great deal of pain and other bad things in order to engage in difficult activity – just think of the grueling exertion involved in running a marathon!

Difficulty only *appears* less valuable when in contrast to urgent claims that are made on us. When there are urgent claims competing for our time and energy, difficulty can be a burden. But when our time and resources are limitless, the very best activities are the difficult ones. When we have nothing else getting in the way, we can see the true value of difficult activity for what it is; namely, intrinsic.

Yet for all this, we still wonder about the slight air of absurdity that my position about the value of difficulty seems to have. What sort of a theory of value is going to endorse and explain the value of difficulty? Difficulty doesn't jump to mind as a prime candidate for intrinsic value. Difficulty, after all, is typically painful and unpleasant – characteristics of things that are bad, not good. So it's surprising to think of it as something that is valuable. And if it is valuable, is it valued directly, intrinsically, or because it is a sign of something else, and that further thing is the source of value? But I will leave these questions aside for now and turn to particular theories of value that can explain the value of difficulty later. For now, it suffices to say that it seems clear that difficulty is either intrinsically valuable itself, or that difficulty is a constant companion to some further source of value. Either way, it is clear that difficulty is a source or sign of value of achievements.

But does difficulty account for *all* the value of achievements? I have already acknowledged that the simple value of the product can indeed contribute to the value of achievements. To deny this would be absurd. If we consider two equally difficult achievements, one that results in a product of significant value, and one that does not, it seems quite clear that the first achievement is better than the second. It is indeed plausible that other elements, such as the value of the product, can contribute to the

value of achievements. My claim is rather that difficulty accounts for at least some of the value of all achievements.

3.

Perfectionism is the view that explains the value of the items on the traditional 'objective list' by appealing to their relationship with certain special human features. Knowledge, pleasure, achievement, loving relationships, and so on are valuable according to perfectionism because they are manifestations of 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. Just what the perfectionist capacities are, and what it takes to *be* a perfectionist capacity, will vary according to the details of a perfectionist account. But on most views, to put it roughly, the capacities that are significant for perfectionism are those that *characterize* us as human beings. That is to say, they are the features that make us who we are.

Delineating exactly what these characteristics are and what makes them perfectionist capacities, and doing so successfully without being circular, are the most difficult tasks for any perfectionist. The question of what constitutes being a perfectionist capacity – we could call this the *metaphysical question* – could be answered by holding that the perfectionist capacities are those that are *unique* to us as human beings, or those that are *essential* to human nature. Another approach is to say that the special capacities are those that are *fundamental*, meaning that their exercise is 'near-inevitable' for almost all human beings. None of these approaches is without its flaws.

Here, however, I will refrain from tackling the metaphysical question. Instead, I will give a rough guide as to how the perfectionist capacities are to be identified. We might say that what I am trying to answer is the *epistemic question* – how do we identify which capacities we have reason to believe might be the perfectionist capacities? Whether or not this guide accurately identifies all and only perfectionist capacities can be answered only once the complete metaphysical account of perfectionism has been determined. To be clear, then, the epistemic identifying criteria are thus defeasible. Once the full metaphysical account is determined, it may turn out to be the case that there are *surprises* – that is, it might turn out that some capacity that we hadn't identified by the epistemic criteria is indeed relevant for perfectionism. So satisfying the epistemic criteria is sufficient

for inclusion in the presumptive account of perfectionist capacities, but it is neither necessary nor sufficient for *being* a perfectionist capacity.

The epistemic guide I propose is this: the relevant capacities are those capacities that are (I) *characteristic* of human beings and (II) *plausibly worth developing*. If a capacity meets both criteria, this is sufficient for its inclusion in the presumptive account of perfectionist capacities.

First, the relevant capacities are those that are *characteristic* of human activity. By this I mean that they are special and important to humans and central in human activity. To be precise, they are special to human activity (although not necessarily unique to humans), and they are typical to human activity (although they may not be necessary). They are *essential*, we might say, in an evaluative sense, even if not in a metaphysical sense. One way of elaborating on characteristic features is to identify them as *fundamental*.

According to George Sher's perfectionist account, fundamental capacities are characterized by being oriented toward goals the pursuit of which is *near-universal* and *near-inevitable*. On Sher's view 'to be fundamental, a capacity must be one that virtually all humans possess, and, second, that it must be one whose exercise its possessors either cannot avoid at all, or else can avoid only intermittently.'⁹

Drawing from this account, let us say that capacities of human beings are characteristic when they are fundamental in Sher's sense; namely, their exercise is near-universal and near-inevitable. To elaborate, near-universal capacities are those that virtually all human beings have. There can be exceptions, but these would be rare. Near-inevitable capacities are prevalent insofar as they are central to the life of any particular human being; their exercise permeates human activity. I will incorporate this notion of fundamentality in the epistemological guide, holding that near-universal and near-inevitable traits are fundamental to humans, or, in my terminology, *characteristic*. Hence the first identifying criterion of putative perfectionist capacities: their exercise is characteristic of human beings.

In addition to being characteristic, there is a second identifying criterion for the perfectionist capacities: they are intuitively *worth developing*. Because we are trying to identify the features that make us good as human beings, we should expect them to be intuitively good to have and develop (cf. Hurka, 1993, p. 9). In other words, the *prima facie* case for something's being a perfectionist capacity is generated by its being intuitively good to develop. I will refer to this as the *value criterion*.

It is important to recognize that the value criterion is *only* a criterion for the epistemic guide. It cannot, of course, be an element of a metaphysical account of the perfections; that is, it cannot be part of the account of what *constitutes* being a perfectionist capacity. The reason for this, of course, is that such a criterion would be circular. Perfectionism is the view of what

capacities it is intrinsically valuable to develop, so it would beg the question to define them as those that are good to develop.

As I acknowledged, the metaphysical account may generate surprises. It may turn out that there are capacities that are intrinsically valuable that do not pass the epistemic criteria. There may even be capacities that are intuitively *not* good to develop. However, as long as we are indeed committed to the truth of perfectionism, and this fully-developed theory is the correct account and all around theoretically very attractive, we should then be good philosophers and hold that the exercise of these capacities is indeed valuable, even though we may lack the intuition, pre-reflectively, that they are.¹⁰

With the epistemic guide in place, we can identify some capacities as belonging on our presumptive list of perfectionist capacities. Let's begin with the classic accounts of perfectionism. Traditionally, the most basic and general capacities in perfectionism include our *rationality*, both theoretical and practical. Some perfectionist views also include our *physical* capacities.

It's clear that our rational capacity is characteristic in the way that I have just outlined. Rationality has long been considered as a near-universal – if not universal – feature of human beings. We are, after all, by some accounts, essentially rational animals. Although, of course, we often fail to use our rationality as best as we can or should, it seems clear that our rational capacity is exercised virtually inevitably in virtually everything that we do so long as we are conscious. Being near-universal and near-inevitable, then, is clearly true of rationality, and so it passes my first identifying test as being characteristic of human beings. As for the second criterion, the value criterion, it's relatively uncontroversial that it is good to develop the rational capacity as best we can, and so it passes my second identifying criterion. Naturally, then, I agree with all other perfectionists that the rational capacity belongs on the presumptive list of perfectionist capacities.

Turning to consider our physical capacities, although it's unclear that we *essentially* have bodies, it certainly seems to be the case that all humans as we know them have physical bodies, meaning that our physical capacities, at least some minimal capacities, are at least near-universal to all humans. Further, it seems that we make use of our body in a wide range of things that we do, if not everything that we do. So it's quite clear that our physical capacities, then, are characteristic of human beings.

Whether or not the value criterion is met by our physical capacities is less obvious. Although it seems that there is a philosophical tradition going back to Plato of pooh-pooing our physical aspect as not only less valuable than our rational capacities, but also as bad and distracting, I think these views are mistaken and fly in the face of widespread general valuing of physical excellence. Excellence of physical appearance may be

neither here nor there, but it seems quite clear that excellent exercise of various athletic capacities is something that is indeed intuitively worth developing. So I agree with those perfectionists who include physical capacities as relevant for perfection.

Previous perfectionist accounts, such as Thomas Hurka's, have sought to account for the value of achievements in terms of our practical rationality. Hurka gives an account of difficulty in terms of *complexity* – the more complex the structure of an activity is, the more difficult and the more valuable (Hurka, 1993, pp. 114–128). Complex activities are more valuable because they involve a higher degree of our exercise of practical rationality.

Indeed, complex activities are typically difficult, and activities can be difficult in virtue of their complexity, and complex activities can involve a higher degree of exercise of practical rationality. However, we can see that difficulty and complexity are not coextensive and thus that complexity does not constitute difficulty. There are activities that are extremely difficult but are *not* extremely complex. Running a marathon, for example, is simply a matter of putting one foot in front of the other, yet it is an archetype of difficulty.

Yet we might be inclined to say that running a marathon is *seemingly* simple, but running a marathon is actually quite complex. It is not simply a matter of putting one foot in front of the other. It requires months of training, preparation, and planning, all of which are complex, and during the race there is a very complicated mental activity of staying focused and motivated. So the difficulty of running a marathon – and hence its value as an achievement – would indeed be captured by Hurka's complexity approach.

But this doesn't seem right. We can grant that running a marathon is indeed complex, but there is *more* to the difficulty of running a marathon than just its complexity. Complexity, it seems, does not explain fully the difficulty of running a marathon. Rather, it is better to say that running a marathon is difficult in virtue of *sheer effort*. Complexity isn't the full story about difficulty.

Moreover, there are further examples of difficult non-complex activities, and it is clear that their difficulty cannot be captured adequately by this view because of *comparative* considerations. Consider the difficult, non-complex task of lifting an extremely heavy object. Lifting an extremely heavy object is difficult – *more* difficult than other activities that are *more complex*. If difficulty were a matter of complexity, we would expect that variations in degree in complexity match variations in degree of difficulty. But this does not seem to be the case. Complexity is not necessary for difficulty.

Equally, there are many very complex activities that can be carried out absolutely effortlessly. Cases of non-difficult, complex activities indicate

that complexity is not sufficient for an account of difficulty. Driving a car, navigating a crowded sidewalk, or communicating in one's native language are all incredibly complex. Yet we can do these things very easily. At the very least, they are certainly not more difficult than lifting an extremely heavy object, but they are clearly much more complex than this. Complexity is thus not sufficient for difficulty.

As a result, given that achievements are valuable in virtue of their *difficulty*, Hurka's perfectionism won't capture all there is to say about their value.¹¹ It will only value *complex* achievements, and fail to capture the value of very difficult achievements that are less complex, such as running a marathon.

At this point we can now conclude the following: if perfectionism is going to be able to account for the value of achievement, it is going to need *more* than just rational and physical capacities. This is what I ultimately propose.

To see this, we first need a better account of the nature of difficulty. I propose that difficulty is understood best as straightforwardly a matter of requiring *effort*. I take effort here as something quite familiar – exertion of will. We experience exerting our will when we struggle to get out of our cozy bed in the morning, when we try to lift heavy grocery bags out of the trunk of the car, resist temptation to lose focus listening to a boring lecture, or push ourselves to try to understand a difficult text. These are all experiences of effort, which is to say, exerting our will.

Difficulty as effort is a compelling view because it captures the observation that there appear to be many different features in virtue of which an activity can be difficult. We have just discussed one, namely, complexity. Activities can also be difficult in virtue of requiring physical exertion, or in virtue of requiring a great deal of knowledge or a high level of skill, or cooperation from others. Thus, there are a variety of features that activities can have that are effort-requiring. *Effort-requiring features* make the activity such that it requires effort, and, hence, difficult. So this is my view of difficulty: *an activity is difficult when it requires effort*.¹²

But here is an objection. This view entails that something is an achievement only in the case when it is difficult *for* the person who does it. But a violin virtuoso can toss off a flawless performance of a Paganini caprice, and we might be inclined to think this is a valuable achievement, but this account says that it is not.

Yet, if the virtuoso's performance is truly effortless for him, it could hardly count as an achievement *for him*. If he were to play a piece that *was* difficult *for him*, this would be an achievement for him. Running a four-minute mile can be an achievement. But for Hicham El Guerrouj, the world-record holder, a mile in four minutes wouldn't be that difficult, and accordingly it wouldn't be an achievement for him. For an amateur, it would be difficult, and, accordingly, would be an achievement.¹³

It might be thought that we should now conclude that difficulty is not necessary for achievements. Difficulty is sufficient for achievements in other cases, but perhaps the virtuoso case is an indication that it is not necessary. One might think that complexity plays a role in achievements after all; it can be sufficient for an achievement in the absence of difficulty. Thus we might consider an alternative approach to achievements that is disjunctive. For an achievement, the process must be *either* difficult or complex, and competently cause the product.

But this disjunctive approach won't work. On such an account, either of the disjuncts must suffice, meaning that if either of the disjuncts is satisfied, then there is an achievement. This is true so far of difficulty. However, complexity, as we have already seen, is not sufficient for achievements. Navigating a crowded sidewalk, driving a car, and communicating in one's native language are all highly complex activities, but none of them is an achievement (other things being equal). If complexity can be sufficient for achievement in some cases, why is it not sufficient for achievement in these cases? A disjunctive account is not a good alternative.

Rather, it is more plausible that the virtuoso's performance and El Guerrouj's four-minute mile aren't *truly* effortless. Surely they involve *some* degree of effort. It's reasonable to suppose that the amount of effort involved is indeed enough to suffice for achievements. Although the virtuoso exerts significantly less effort than an average violinist, he exerts effort nonetheless; and El Guerrouj exerts less effort to run a four-minute mile than it takes to break a world record, but he still exerts some considerable effort. So assuming the effort is sufficient, the performance and El-Guerrouj's mile are indeed both achievements.

However, another worry appears to arise now. If difficulty is indeed what makes achievements valuable, it would appear to follow that achievements that are more difficult are more valuable than less difficult achievements. This would mean that the virtuoso's performance is in fact *less* valuable than, say, an amateur's extremely effortful performance, and this seems incorrect. People pay hundreds of dollars to see James Ehnes perform the Paganini Caprices, but we would be less willing to pay quite so much for a mediocre amateur.

However, the view that I have proposed for the value of achievements is that achievements are all valuable in virtue of their difficulty, which does not preclude that some achievements may also be valuable in virtue of additional features i.e. features that are not shared in common with all achievements. Indeed, as I have already acknowledged, the value of the product of an achievement can contribute to its overall value.

So what might be the additional source of value in the virtuoso's performance? Skill, it seems, particularly when displayed so dazzlingly, is a plausible source of value. Could an achievement that involves a manifestation of great skill be more valuable than an equally difficult achievement

with a lesser display of skill? It seems quite plausible that this is so. To be sure, the virtuoso case may be an instance of exactly this. It seems that at least sometimes, achievements can have value in virtue of skill.

Skill, however, isn't always a source of value in all achievements – after all, the amateur's performance is not very skillful, and yet it is still a valuable achievement, albeit less valuable than the virtuoso's performance. Yet, if we suppose that impressive displays of skills can be a source of value, then that the virtuoso's performance might be additionally valuable in virtue of the manifestation of skill.

However, we have now involved ourselves in the question of what makes one achievement more valuable than another. This article is just about what makes achievements valuable *at all*, and the comparative question is worthy of a paper all to itself. But suffice it to say for now that the view I have proposed for the value of achievements acknowledges that achievements may have value from sources *other* than their difficulty.

The view, then, is this: all achievements are characterized by difficulty, and this is a ground of their value. Difficulty, I have claimed, is a matter of exerting the will. But what's so good about that?

I have already begun to give the answer. Perfectionism needs to acknowledge an additional capacity. So far I have appealed to my epistemic guide to produce a list of at least the following: our rational capacity, and our physical capacity. But the epistemic guide also identifies a third capacity that belongs on our presumptive perfectionist account. This capacity has yet to be acknowledged by perfectionism as widely as it deserves. This is the capacity to exercise our *will*.

The will has been unacknowledged by typical accounts of human capacities relevant for the perfections. Yet the will is paradigmatically characteristic. It seems quite clear that every human being has a will. Moreover, its exercise is entirely inevitable in every activity in which we engage. Indeed, it seems that we can't even engage in activity of any kind without exerting the will. It's so fundamental that it underwrites our abilities to deploy all our other capacities. Thus the will clearly fulfills the criterion of fundamentality on the epistemic guide.

Further, the will passes the value criterion. It clearly seems that it is worth having and developing. Thus it is my contention that the will should be included in an account of the relevant capacities for perfectionism. It clearly passes my epistemic guide of being a characteristic human capacity, and it is intuitively good to develop.

For these reasons, the will belongs on our list of perfectionist capacities. This, then, is the innovation that I propose for perfectionism: to acknowledge the will as a special human capacity, the excellent exercise of which is intrinsically valuable.¹⁴

Moreover, by adding the will, we can complete our explanation of what makes achievements valuable. Achievements are difficult, and engaging in

difficult activity is intrinsically valuable. The explanation for this value lies in perfectionism, according to which the will is among our fundamental human capacities. Since engaging in difficult activity *just is* the excellent exercise of the will, and the excellent exercise of the will has intrinsic value, this is precisely what makes all achievements intrinsically valuable.¹⁵

There is still a great deal left to explore about achievements, and no doubt many questions remain. There is far more to be said about the nature of achievements, apart from their value, as well as the nature of difficulty. Moreover, at this point I have merely sketched a presumptive account of perfectionism. Developing and defending the new perfectionism is of course an extensive project that will have to wait for another day. At the very least, perhaps we can say this: although Hurka might not be correct that achievements are characterized by their complexity, the question of the value of achievements and their nature is certainly complex.

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NOTES

¹ These basic elements are corroborated by other extant treatments of the nature of achievements. Simon Keller glosses achievements as 'coming about by one's own efforts' and he also acknowledges a need for an anti-luck condition (2004, p. 33). Douglas Portmore agrees with this account as well (Portmore, 2007). Thomas Hurka holds that achievements are typically difficult, and done in a 'knowledgeable' way (Hurka, 1993).

² To be brief, an agent causes a product competently to the extent that he has justified and true beliefs about his activities. I develop this more extensively in work currently in progress. To be sure, there are other candidates for this condition, and since the details do not have much bearing on what I say in this article, I will leave this aside for now.

³ To be precise, the intrinsic value of the product at stake here is what some call *final* value, which is to say the value that the product has as an end, as opposed to intrinsic value in what is sometimes called the Moorean sense, which is the value that something has strictly in virtue of its intrinsic properties (Korsgaard, 1983; Kagan, 1998). Thus the intrinsic value of the product can be in virtue of some extrinsic properties; for example, one might be inclined to say that a vaccine is intrinsically valuable and its intrinsic value is in virtue of its preventative properties, which are extrinsic properties. But to be clear, certain extrinsic properties will be excluded on SP as being relevant for the value; namely, certain properties of the causal history, specifically that the product was competently caused by a difficult process. SP is the view that denies this causal history is relevant for the final value of the product and hence for the final value of the achievement.

⁴ In what follows, I focus on the issue of *difficulty*, which SP holds as irrelevant for the value of achievements. But SP also holds that the degree of competent causation is irrelevant for value. Presumably, there could be a version of SP that excludes difficulty as relevant for value, but includes degree of competent causation. Call this SP_{CC}. But SP_{CC} would be subject to the same objections as SP, since its flaws result from its exclusion of difficulty. I take it as essential to any version of SP that difficulty be excluded.

⁵ Contrary to my own example, however, taking a helicopter to the top of Mt. Everest is, as a matter of fact, incredibly difficult and no doubt an achievement in its own right. It was finally done for the first time in 2005. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount_Everest#2005:_Helicopter_landing; retrieved 6 July 2011).

⁶ A similar example plays a prominent role in possibly the most under-appreciated philosophy book of all time, Bernard Suits' *The Grasshopper*.

⁷ (Suits 2005, pp. 149 ff.) To be clear, I am not making the claim that this utopia is a utopia in the sense that it is the ideal society. Rather, it is simply meant for our consideration as a thought experiment to elucidate some intuitions.

⁸ Several important philosophers today hold that intrinsic value can be *conditional* (cf. Kagan, 1998, and Korsgaard, 1983). Something is of conditional intrinsic value when it only has intrinsic value providing that certain conditions obtain. So one can object to my conclusions about difficulty by pointing out that the conditions in Utopia are the conditions for difficulty being of intrinsic value, and since these conditions fail to obtain in the real world, difficulty does not have value outside Utopia. However, there are no good candidates for the *conditions* in Utopia. The only possible candidate is this: there is nothing of necessary instrumental value. But this is a theoretically implausible candidate for a condition for something's having intrinsic value, and to defend this as the condition of the value of difficulty would be ad hoc. So there is no reason to think that the value of difficulty is conditional.

⁹ Sher, 1997, pp. 202 ff. To be precise, on Sher's account, the fundamental capacities are characterized by an inherent teleology: many of the capacities have built-in goals, the pursuit of which is inevitable. What is of intrinsic value according to Sher is success in the goals that are integral to our characteristic capacities.

¹⁰ Dale Dorsey (2010) argues that if perfectionism were to yield some surprising features, we would feel *no* theoretical pull to include them in our account of what is intrinsically valuable. But I think no perfectionist would accept this. If the perfectionist account of what constitutes the relevant capacities is sufficiently theoretically compelling, then a good perfectionist *would* incorporate the surprising feature.

¹¹ I agree that greater complexity can involve greater exercise of practical rationality, and therefore be valuable on perfectionist grounds, but my point here is that if it is difficulty that is a source of value in achievements, as my earlier examples suggest it is, then this view won't suffice.

¹² The nature of difficulty is surprisingly complicated, and there are more intricacies than I can address here, but I do so in work currently in progress.

¹³ There is a great deal more to be said about virtuoso cases. To elaborate briefly, it is my view that difficulty is class-relative; that is, there is some relevant comparison class for whom the concerto would typically be difficult, i.e. would typically require effort. So something need not be difficult *for* the person who is doing it in order for it to be difficult more generally. But in all cases where something is difficult generally, there is some relevant type for whom the activity would be difficult (i.e. members of the relevant type would need to exert effort). Thus we can say that the virtuoso's performance was difficult (relative to the class of typical violinists), but not difficult *for* him.

¹⁴ Incompatibilist determinists might complain that we have no will. But the compatibilism-incompatibilism debate is not about whether we *have* a will; rather, it is about whether or not what we have is free.

¹⁵ This perfectionism is thus a sort of Nietzschean perfectionism, we might say. Although it is contentious to pin any particular view to Nietzsche, there is a plausible interpretation of Nietzsche that casts him in a perfectionist light, holding that our preeminently characteristic feature is the will to power (Hurka, 2007). In numerous passages, Nietzsche identifies our

'essence' with the will to power, calling it 'the innermost essence of being' (Nietzsche, 1968, sect. 693). What exactly the will to power is, of course, is a matter of some discussion. Bernard Reginster's very interesting account characterizes the will to power as 'the will to the overcoming of resistance' (Reginster, 2006, pp. 133–132). What is distinctive about Reginster's account is that the will to power is the drive to be engaged in difficult activity.

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