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Well-Being and Achievement

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Introduction

Has your life gone well? In seeking to answer this question, you will look back on the good times you have had: good movies you have seen and nice dinners you have shared with friends. But you will also ask what you have done with your life. Have you helped others? What have you done that was worth doing? Have you made the most of your talents and opportunities? Perhaps you have enjoyed a successful marriage, got a degree, or got the best out of yourself in your chosen profession. Perhaps you have written a book or raised happy children. Whether you judge your life to have gone well depends partly on what you think you have achieved. One component of well-being, it appears, is achievement.

The topic of well-being and achievement raises several questions. What is an achievement? How does the value of achievement contribute to the value of well-being, if it does? What might the nature of achievement tell us about the nature of well-being more generally? And is it even possible to understand the value of achievement by thinking about its connection with well-being?

What is an achievement?

Paradigm cases

Begin with some paradigm cases of achievement: things that almost everyone would count as achievements of one kind or another. You might find a cure for cancer, bring up a happy family, or publish a great novel. Paradigmatic achievements like these, as ordinarily imagined, appear to share three characteristics.

First, they all appear to be valuable in their own rights. Writing a great novel is a valuable partly because great novels are good to have around. It would be a very good thing to have a cure for cancer, no matter who finds it or how it is found. Happy families are better than unhappy families. In paradigmatic cases, achievement involves doing something that is worth doing, independently of the fact that it is part of an achievement.

Second, in paradigmatic cases, achievement involves effort. Finding cures for diseases is difficult. If it were easy, then it would not be so clear that curing a disease counts as an achievement. When you imagine someone writing a great novel or bringing up a happy family, you imagine her facing challenges and working hard to meet them. You imagine her attaining her goal through hard work.

Third, in paradigmatic cases, achievement involves purposive activity. Curing cancer is not something you can do just by accident – not as we usually imagine it, anyway. To cure cancer, you need to make plans, cooperate with others, patiently engage in rigorous medical studies, and so on. You need to know what you are doing. You need to set yourself a goal and apply yourself to the task. The same goes for raising a happy family and writing a great novel.

So achievements appear to be characterized by these three features: independent value, effort, and purposiveness. The three features can come apart, and

when they do, it can be less clear whether we have cases of genuine achievements. For example, you might set yourself to a task, approach it with purpose, and complete it through a good deal of hard work, yet your accomplishment might fail to be independently valuable; perhaps it is pointless or self-destructive. Or it might take a great deal of effort for you to do something that is easy for most people and does not look very valuable in its own right. Or you might do something that is very valuable, but do it easily or without noticing; perhaps you blunder into the solution to a difficult mathematical problem. Whether we count you as securing an achievement, in the various cases, depends on how we take the three features of paradigmatic achievements, singly or in combination, to deliver a definition of achievement. What precisely do these three features amount to, and what precisely are their respective relationships to achievement? Let us explore each in turn.

Independent value

There is some intuitive plausibility to the thought that for something to be an achievement, it must be in some sense good, or valuable, or worthwhile, independently of the fact that it is an achievement. If you look back at your life and ask what were your greatest achievements, you are likely to choose things that you think were worth doing. If you look back on something you did that involved great effort and purposive activity, but that you now think to have been a waste of time and energy, then you may be reluctant to classify it as one of your achievements.

What could it mean for an achievement to be independently valuable? It could be that it has a valuable product; an achievement could produce happiness, or it could produce something useful or beautiful – something that is good, whether it is the product of an achievement or not. Developing the cure for cancer would be a prime

example of an achievement with an independently valuable outcome, likewise producing a great work of art.

Nevertheless some paradigmatic achievements do not result in an independently valuable product. Running a world record for the marathon is an achievement, but it is not clear that the product has value independently of the activity that produces it. Running a world record in the marathon, though, does involve excelling in a difficult endeavour, and to that extent, perhaps, it involves a kind of value that can be specified and recognized independently of the role it plays in an achievement. An achievement like running a marathon might have independent value not due to what it produces, but just because it involves a display of human excellence.

Yet there are some reasons to doubt that it is strictly necessary for something to be independently valuable in order to count as an achievement. We might find some evil deeds very impressive: the perfect murder, perhaps, or an elaborate art heist. Although not good things to do, these are nonetheless formidable accomplishments. If we think that these are genuine achievements, as some philosophers do (Bradford 2013A, 2015), then we should say that achievements need not have positive goals. Still, there may be some respects in which achievements like these involve human excellences – great skill and good planning – even if put to bad ends, and so perhaps they could still be considered to manifest independent values, even if they are not valuable overall.

There are other cases in which it is still harder to identify anything independently valuable about an achievement. It makes some sense to talk of pointless achievements. If you successfully count all the blades of grass on your lawn, then that is arguably an achievement, even if nobody thinks the activity worthwhile.

Put it this way: if someone else tries but fails to count the number of blades of grass on the lawn, then you have something that she lacks, even if neither of you does anything that matters for its own sake (Keller 2004).

Further still, a deed that does not look valuable in its own right may come to be recognized as an achievement in light of information about whose deed it is and the circumstances in which it is carried out. Riding a bike might not be an especially impressive activity in its own right, but for someone who needs to overcome great physical and mental obstacles in order to do it, riding a bike might count as a significant achievement. Explaining why these sorts of deeds count as achievements does not seem to be a matter of pointing to the independently valuable things that they produce or otherwise involve.

However that matter stands, there is good reason to think that the nature of achievement is not just a matter of the value of outcomes or activities. It is also a matter of the subjective commitments of the agent. However valuable a deed may be, it is difficult to describe it as an achievement if it does not involve some measure of investment from the person who performs it. If you have absolutely no interest in or knowledge of palaeontology, and you happen to stumble upon dinosaur bones for which scientists have been arduously searching, this discovery is not one of your achievements. It may be important and valuable, but it is not an achievement.

That an activity is valuable may conceivably be a necessary condition for its counting as an achievement, but it is not enough to constitute achievement. What needs to be added, at a minimum, is that the agent attains something while in pursuit of a *goal*. Achievement involves achieving a goal, or at least accomplishing something that is a part of or in some other way intimately connected with a goal.

Writing a great novel is an achievement if you do it while pursuing the goal of writing a novel, but not if you do it by mistake while intending to make a shopping list.

Effort

There is a good case for thinking that effort is always an integral component of achievements. If you attain something by accident or through no exertion of effort at all, it would sound odd to congratulate you on your achievement. Winning a lottery is not an achievement, and neither is curing cancer, if you do it without having to try. Moreover, appealing to effort can help to order achievements from lesser to greater significance. The greater the effort it takes, we could say, the more significant the achievement.

Since some tasks are more difficult than others, and what is very difficult for one person may not be at all difficult for another, making effort a defining element of achievement can explain why achievement is relative to individuals. Walking a few steps is not very difficult in the ordinary case, but it could take a lot of effort for someone recovering from devastating injury, and so be an achievement for them.

We might offer the link with effort as a complete definition of achievement, saying that you enjoy an achievement just in case you attain one of your goals through your own efforts. A first possible problem with such a definition, as already indicated, is that it does not discriminate between activities of different values; counting blades of grass or getting away with murder could be as great an achievement as curing cancer.

A further problem is that the condition of effort does not incorporate any constraint on *how* your efforts lead to the attainment of your goal. Suppose that you have the goal of becoming a millionaire by your twenty-fifth birthday, and you set out

to achieve your goal by pouring enormous amounts of effort into all sorts of misguided schemes for getting rich. Your exertion of effort causes great irritation to your secretly rich grandmother, and finally she can no longer bear to see you working so hard for nothing, so she gives you a million dollars, right before your twenty-fifth birthday, just to put your pathetic striving to an end. This looks like a case in which you attain your goal because of your own efforts, but in which you do not *achieve* anything; becoming a millionaire through such a deviant chain of events is not a way of being a high achiever. The case shows that it is not enough that your efforts cause you to attain your goal: they must so do in the right way. Perhaps the way to put it is to say that there is a difference between achieving a goal *through* your own efforts and achieving a goal merely *because* of your own efforts. Then the question is what it takes to get there “through” your own efforts.

Purposiveness

To get the right connection between putting effort towards a goal and attaining it, we can bring in the condition of purposiveness. For something to count as an achievement of yours, we might say, you need to bring it about in the way you intend, or according to a plan, or while knowing what you are doing. Your problem in the case of the accidental millionaire, perhaps, is that in exerting your efforts, you have no idea how they bring you closer to your goal.

Purposiveness could be understood as a matter of achieving your goal through your own efforts and according to your own plan. So construed, imposing a condition of purposiveness would appear to let us cope with cases like the accidental millionaire, in which your efforts are linked with your attainment of your goal, but not in the way you plan. It may be too strong a condition, however. In some cases, you

can attain your goal through your own efforts, but not in the way you plan, yet still count as having accrued an achievement. Perhaps you set out to write a novel of one kind, but during the process of writing you divert from your original plan and the novel ends up as something very different, produced according to a very different method, from what you planned. Nevertheless the novel could stand as one of your achievements.

Alternatively, we could understand purposiveness as a matter of knowledge (Bradford 2015). What matters, we might say, is that as you put effort towards achieving your goal, you know what you are doing, and in particular, you know how your effort and the attainment of your goal are connected. The problem in the case of the accidental millionaire, on this diagnosis, is that as you attempt to become a millionaire, you do not know that you are irritating your grandmother in such a way as to make her likely to pay you off. When you count as accruing an achievement though not in the way you planned – as in the case in which you produce a very different novel from the one you set out to produce – that is because, we can say, you know how your efforts lead to the final product, even if your plans are overturned during the process.

Defining achievement?

Independent value, effort, and purposiveness all appear to have something important to do with achievement, but it is not easy to combine them in such a way as to produce a fully satisfactory analysis of achievement. There are at least two major outstanding questions. First, must something be independently valuable or worthwhile in order to count as an achievement? Second, how must the attainment of your goal be connected with your efforts, in order for it to count as an achievement?

There may be no single ultimate analysis of the ordinary notion of achievement. Regardless of the details, achievement appears to play an important role in our lives, quite plausibly as part of our wellbeing. How might achievement be incorporated within a life that goes well?

Achievement as an aspect of well-being

Constitutive or contingent?

It is plausible to think that achievement is one of the constitutive elements of well-being. Your achievement *itself* makes your life go well for you, apart from or in addition to any further good it does for you or others. Your life goes better for you if you successfully pursue a project such as publishing a novel, finally making par at golf, or pitching a no-hitter. It is reasonable, in addition, to hold that such achievements improve well-being independently from any other contribution they might make to well-being. No doubt achievement often is accompanied by feelings of satisfaction or pleasure, but we might be inclined to think that the success *itself* matters for well-being, beyond any feelings it brings. This point is supported by the observation that we often think that achievements are valuable and worth pursuing even if they come at the expense of pleasure. Many paradigmatic achievements involve painful and difficult struggle, yet their successful accomplishment, we often think, makes a life go better.

Some prevailing theories of well-being seek to incorporate this thought, making achievement something that makes an intrinsic contribution to well-being. Others, as we shall see, take the connection between achievement and well-being to be merely contingent.

The Objective List Theory

The most straightforward way to treat achievement as a constitutive element of well-being is within an **Objective List Theory** of well-being. According to Objective List Theories, there is a list of one or more mutually irreducible constituents of well-being. An Objective List Theory may include achievement among possibly other goods, such as friendship and knowledge. One might even say that the plausible relevance of achievement to well-being is one of the primary motivating features of an Objective List Theory. The Objective List Theory offers the simplest and most straightforward way to include goods such as achievement within a theory.

While the Objective List Theory can honor the intuition that achievement is a self-standing element of well-being, simply placing achievement on a list of objective goods can be theoretically unsatisfying. One might wonder what *explains* the relevance of achievement to well-being. One might also hope that an explanation of why achievement gets onto the list could give some direction towards saying how achievement can be compared in importance with other objective goods. Is there an answer, even in principle, to the question of when it is in your best interests to accrue an achievement, even if doing so will, say, make you unhappy or lose you a friend?

Perfectionism

As a result, philosophers who are attracted to the idea that achievement is a constitutive part of well-being often turn to **Perfectionist** theories of well-being. According to perfectionism, the exercise and development of characteristically human capacities is intrinsically good. If some such capacities are exercised in achievements, that could explain the role of achievement in our well-being. Which capacities might

be the relevant ones? One thought is that purposiveness and effort engage our *practical rationality*, and practical rationality is one of the perfectionist capacities. Our capacity for practical rationality is the capacity to set goals and make plans to attain them. The value of achievement, on this approach, is a matter of having complex plans and bringing them to fruition (Hurka 1993).

One might think, however, that not all achievements are characterized by complexity. Some achievements involve quite simple plans, and their impressiveness is more a matter of the sheer effort involved in their accomplishment. Running a marathon is a paradigmatic impressive achievement, but it seems that its impressiveness is not a matter of its complexity. Indeed, it is quite simple – just a matter of putting one foot in front of the other. What is impressive about it is the sheer grit of running for a very long time. As a result, one might think that effort itself matters. This thought can be captured if we think that there is a perfectionist capacity to exert effort – one might think the *will* is precisely this (Bradford 2013B, 2015).

Particular details aside, perfectionist theories capture the relevance of achievement for our well-being because achievement involves setting and following plans: a distinctive and characteristically human activity, and hence a site of human excellence.

Rational life plans

Both perfectionism and the Objective List Theory acknowledge that there are other aspects of our good beyond achievement. But one might take a different approach and instead think that well-being is a matter of forming and carrying out rational plans – that is, well-being is a matter of attaining our rationally held goals. Our lives go well when we achieve the goals that we have good reason to pursue. If

Jane's aim is to get a job, and going to art school will help her get a job, then she has good reason to go to art school and her life goes better when she does (Raz 1986: 301). Achievement, or something very much like it, would then be the central constitutive element of well-being.

The desire-fulfilment theory

Achievement involves the attainment of goals. One might think that to have something as a goal, you must desire it. If so, then our goals form a subset of our desires, and so it is possible that the value of achievement for well-being could be subsumed under a wider value of desire satisfaction. Perhaps the way to explain the significance of achievement for well-being is to take well-being as a matter of desire satisfaction more generally. This brings us to the well-known **desire-fulfilment theory** of well-being.

The desire-fulfilment theory of well-being, in its simplest form, says that something advances your well-being just in case it satisfies one of your desires. The desire theory has a straightforward explanation of why achievement contributes to well-being. If you achieve your goal of curing cancer, then that contributes to your well-being, just because in curing cancer you get what you want.

In this simple form, the desire-fulfilment theory does not discriminate between achievements based on their independent value. All that matters is the strength of the desires involved. If my desire to count the number of blades of grass on my lawn is as strong as your desire to cure cancer, then my counting blades of grass contributes as much to my well-being as your curing cancer contributes to yours. The desire-fulfilment theory also does not discriminate between cases in which you attain your

goal through your own efforts and cases in which you attain your goal without trying or through a deviant causal pathway. All that matters is that you get what you want, one way or another.

While the desire-fulfilment theory of well-being incorporates the value of achievement, it does not make achievement, as such, look special. The factors that characterize paradigmatic achievements – independent value, effort, and purposiveness – have no significance under the desire-fulfilment theory. Something's qualifying as an achievement, rather than a mere desire satisfaction, turns out to be incidental. This is true also on more sophisticated forms of the desire theory, including the influential informed desire theory, on which something counts towards your well-being only if you would desire it if you were fully informed and rational. Desire-fulfilment theories can explain why achievement contributes to well-being, but do not find achievement to have significance in its own right.

Hedonism

The desire-fulfilment theory values achievement only insofar as it involves our getting what we want, and we could go a step further and say that achievement is valuable only insofar as it brings us pleasure. The objects of our goals, often, are things that will bring us pleasure. The feeling of achievement itself is often pleasurable. When achievement does not bring pleasure – when your goal was never to make yourself happy, when attaining a goal does not bring the happiness you expect, or when the feeling of achievement is just a feeling of emptiness – we might wonder whether it really contributes to well-being. According to **hedonism**, all that matters for well-being is good subjective experience, and it is not out of the question that hedonism could tell the right story about the value of achievement.

While achievement seems to have something to do with well-being, there are reasons to think that its connection with well-being is contingent. For one thing, there appears to be conceptual space for the claim that a life of achievement is not such a great life for the person who lives it. There is something, at least, to the suggestion that the highest levels of well-being are enjoyed by those who renounce striving and live simply or meditatively, or who just lay around; perhaps a theory of well-being should provide the resources to adjudicate the disagreement over whether achievement is good for us, rather than just announcing that it is. For another thing, we often set goals without thinking that their achievement is in our own interests; often, indeed, that is the point. When you set yourself the goal of curing cancer, your motive may be entirely selfless, even self-sacrificing. Perhaps it is perverse to say that all of your achievements, even of selfless and self-sacrificing goals, automatically contribute to your well-being.

Hedonism offers one way of making it an open question whether any particular achievement, or achievement as a general proposition, is enhancing of well-being. In doing so, however, it reduces achievement merely to one of the many things that may or may not contribute to well-being. It makes the link between well-being and achievement no tighter than the link between well-being and playing tennis, or between well-being and eating chocolate.

Do all achievements contribute to well-being?

Regardless of whether achievement is the only constitutive element of well-being, one among others, or only instrumentally relevant, there is still the question of *which* achievements matter for well-being. According to hedonism, the answer is simple: any achievement matters for well-being insofar as it brings you pleasure.

According to the rational plan view discussed earlier, only certain achievements improve your well-being, namely, those with rational goals. But we might think that achieving *any* goal can contribute positively to your well-being (Keller 2004). Indeed, if we reflect on many paradigmatic achievements, we find goals that are not worth pursuing independently from the fact that we set them as goals. Running a marathon, for example, may not be a rational goal insofar as it may conflict with other goals. But successfully running a marathon is a paradigmatic achievement the accomplishment of which improves your life in at least one respect, even if it detracts from other aspects in which it might go well.

One might think that successfully accomplishing even an evil goal makes one's life go better in at least one respect. This seems most plausible when placed alongside the view that there are other goods in addition to achievement that are relevant for well-being. Perhaps someone who accomplishes an evil goal has something going for her that is lacked by someone who tries but fails to accomplish an evil goal, but is evil anyway (Keller 2004). The claim that even evil (and perhaps also pointless and irrational) achievements contribute to well-being might also be made more plausible when conjoined with the view that not all well-being is valuable. Perhaps when an evil person accomplishes an evil goal, her well-being is increased – but perhaps that is not at all a good thing.

Once it is settled which kinds of achievements are relevant for well-being, there is the further issue of *how much* any particular achievement contributes to it, and how much it contributes to well-being in contrast to other goods, if any. Some philosophers hold that the significance of achievements is largely a matter of the comprehensiveness of the plans involved (Hurka 1993, Dorsey 2011) while others think that the amount of effort involved, other things being equal, is a significant

factor (Bradford 2015). Another thought is that the amount that achievements contribute to well-being is a matter of how much well-being is initially sacrificed in their undertaking (Portmore 2007).

Achievement and the truth about well-being

Achievement, we have seen, finds different places in the different theories of well-being. A convinced advocate of a particular theory of well-being could appeal to her preferred theory to explain the true nature and value of achievement. The perfectionist may define valuable achievement as a certain manifestation of human excellence, the hedonist may say that the value of a given achievement is a matter of how much pleasure it produces, and so on. To that extent, an investigation of the value of achievement is not especially helpful for selecting between theories of well-being.

Thoughts about the value of achievement may offer more constructive insights for the theory of well-being, however. First, if we judge that achievement advances well-being, or even just that certain specific achievements advance well-being in their own rights, then we can evaluate theories of well-being in light of our judgment. It may be a drawback of hedonism, for example, that it sees many of the things we care about, and for which we are prepared to make demanding commitments and exert great effort, as having nothing to do with our best interests.

Second, achievement is notable for bringing together elements of both “objective” and “subjective” stories about well-being. As mentioned earlier, achievement is naturally taken to have a place in objective list and perfectionist theories of well-being: theories that are classified as “objective” because they say that our well-being is not just a matter of our own attitudes, or of what we happen to care

about. Yet, achievement is a matter of achieving goals, and goals are attitudes. When you take on a goal, you commit yourself to trying to achieve it – otherwise it would not really be a *goal* – and so you can be judged as a success or a failure depending upon how close you come to achieving your goal. Whether or not you achieve your goal determines, as we might put it, whether or not you are successful in imposing your will upon the world. A recognition of the importance of achievement for well-being, and of the respect in which achievement is a value naturally seen as both objective (in that it is an element of human perfection) and subjective (in that it involves success according to standards set by an agent's own attitudes) may help to identify a middle road between objectivist and subjectivist approaches to well-being (Keller 2009).

Beyond Well-Being

For all that, there are reasons to think that the value of achievement has nothing to do with well-being. As much as achievement can contribute to or constitute well-being, let's not forget that achievement can also be a source of pain. In fact, given that effort is a central feature of achievement, we should not be surprised that many achievements are unpleasant to accomplish. In some cases it appears that achievement comes at the expense of well-being – early expeditions to Antarctica, for example. And even if achievements contribute positively to well-being (either instrumentally or constitutively), one might be inclined to think that at least some also have value independently. The invention of the telephone, for example, was an extremely valuable achievement, but its value cannot be fully accounted for by its role in the well-being of Alexander Graham Bell. It may be that the value of achievement is not best explained by way of any connection with well-being.

There are at least two different strategies for explaining the value of achievement beyond its contribution to well-being. First, in many paradigmatic great achievements, the *product* of the achievement has significant intrinsic or instrumental value. The telephone is an extraordinarily valuable contribution to civilization, responsible for improving communication and even playing a crucial role in saving lives. Similarly, we might think that Michelangelo's ceiling of the Sistine Chapel is a great artistic achievement, but its value is hardly a matter of the role it had in Michelangelo's well-being – rather, its value is in the product: one of the most impressive artistic achievements in the world.

Alternatively, however, we might notice that some great achievements do not seem to have a product of any significant intrinsic or instrumental value, nor do they have much of a positive impact on well-being. Consider, for example, Robert Falcon Scott's expedition to the South Pole in 1912. Intuitively, this is a great achievement, but its value cannot be explained by its role (either constitutive or instrumental) in Scott's well-being or that of the explorers, since their expedition was extremely unpleasant and culminated in their deaths. Moreover, it is hard to pinpoint precisely the *product* of the expedition or its value as such. It does not have the value of the telephone or the Sistine Chapel ceiling.

We might think that the value of the achievement is at least in part explained by the sheer grit, perseverance, and frontier spirit of the explorers. Such features, we might think, are valuable in themselves, apart from any role they might play in well-being. This thought can be captured by some versions of perfectionism, when it is construed as a theory of intrinsic value, instead of a theory of well-being. According to this approach, the exercise of perfectionist capacities such as the will and rationality is *intrinsically good*, independently of any considerations of well-being.

Because Scott's expedition involved remarkable effort and planning, it scores highly in terms of perfectionist value, independent of its impact (positive or negative) on the explorers' well-being. Alternatively again, we might think that achievement imbues lives with *meaning*. Indeed, achievement is an element in many accounts of **meaningfulness** in life (Cf. Wolf 2010; Metz 2007). Meaning can be taken either as an element of well-being or as a kind of value that a life can have, independently of well-being. In Scott's case, taking the meaningfulness of his achievement as an element of well-being may be counterintuitive – it might not seem to have done him much good – but we might think that his achievement made his life valuable insofar as it made his life meaningful, even if not a life high in well-being.

Conclusion

Most of us want to achieve something with our lives. If we can better understand the nature of achievement, then we can make progress in answering the question of what we look for in life and what we take to be a life worth living. Achievement may or may not be valuable for its own sake, and if it is valuable for its own sake, its value may or may not be a matter of its relationship with well-being. The most intriguing aspect of achievement, arguably, is its connection with the will. We express ourselves as wilful individuals by setting our own goals and trying to achieve them. A verdict on the value of achievement is a verdict on what place our wilful nature takes in a meaningful life, a valuable life, a flourishing life, and a life high in well-being.

RELATED TOPICS

Desire-fulfilment theory; Hedonism; Meaningfulness; Objective list theories;
Perfectionism

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