

ACHIEVEMENTS, LUCK AND VALUE

Duncan Pritchard

1. Achievements: A First Pass

Achievements are clearly something that we care about. We want a life rich in achievements, and we value the achievements of others. To be appointed to the job of one's dreams as a result of one's hard work and raw talent, such that it constitutes an achievement on one's part, is far more satisfying and worthy than getting it through other means where no achievement is involved (e.g. as a result of nepotism). Similarly, the Olympic goal medal winner who gets her award by being the best in a strong field exhibits an achievement and is lauded for it, but her counterpart who attains the same result through, say, mere good luck (e.g. none of her competitors is able to compete due to injury), and who thus does not exhibit an achievement, is not gifted nearly as much praise. But what is an achievement, and what is it about achievements that makes us care about them so much?

Note first that an essential ingredient of achievements is that they involve *success*. Failure may be glorious, but it does not involve an achievement. This point is easy to miss, since the most glorious failures often do involve *related* achievements. For example, that you came second in a 100 metre sprint means that you cannot exhibit the achievement of being the race winner. But that doesn't mean that you don't thereby exhibit any number of related achievements. Perhaps, say, you have overcome a significant injury in order to race this day. If so, then that you came second may well constitute an achievement on your part. Or perhaps you recorded your personal best time in this race. If so, then this would also be an achievement on

your part. The point remains, however, that you cannot exhibit the achievement of *winning the race* if you fail to win the race.

Clearly, however, success does not suffice for an achievement, since success can be attained in all kinds of ways, not all of them suitable for *bona fide* achievements. In particular, one can be successful through brute luck – e.g. as when all of one’s competitors in a sprint race succumb to injury – and in such cases being successful does not constitute an achievement. There is a related point to be made here, which is that achievements involve the exercise of the relevant *abilities*. That is, your abilities should be playing a role in enabling you to be successful, rather than the success in question being due just to blind fortune. Winning the sprint because you are the fastest person in the field is part of what constitutes the relevant achievement; winning the race as the slowest person in the field, albeit the only one who doesn’t pull up with an injury, doesn’t come close.

So achievements involve both successes and the exercise of one’s relevant abilities. Does this suffice as an account of achievement? Interestingly, it doesn’t, and the reason for this is that one can imagine cases where there is both success and the relevant ability being exhibited, and yet where the success is nonetheless due to dumb luck.

In order to see this, imagine the case of an archer, who we’ll call ‘Archie’. Archie has all the relevant archery abilities, and using those abilities he fires an arrow at a target and hits the target. He is thus successful and also exhibiting the relevant abilities. Does this suffice to exhibit an achievement? No. In order to see this, notice that it is quite compatible with how we have described this case that the success in question could be due to luck rather than Archie’s archery abilities. Suppose, for example, that a freak gust of wind blows the arrow off-course and then a second freak gust of wind blows it back on course again.¹ Would we regard Archie’s success as an achievement? Surely not.

If our account of achievements is to exclude this kind of luck, then we must add a further clause to our account which specifies the way in which the success is attained. In particular what we want is an account of achievements which demands that one's success should be *because of* the exercise of one's relevant abilities, in the sense that this success is primarily creditable to this exercise of ability rather than to some other factor which is external to one's agency (like dumb luck). The addition of this clause deals with the case of Archie because his success is precisely not creditable to his archery abilities, even though it is undeniable that he is manifesting them, but is rather creditable to the luck that the gusts of wind cancelled each other out in the way that they did. In contrast, we can imagine an analogue to the Archie case in which no luck is involved. In this case Archie's success would be primarily creditable to his abilities. It would also straightforwardly count as an achievement on this account, just as it should.

We will say more about how achievements should be understood in a moment, but first let us ask why we care about achievements on this account of them. For what is undeniable is that we do care about achievements, and so any account of this notion ought to be able to explain this fact. If one doubts this, then consider the following two options: a life in which one achieves the most fundamental goals of one's life (one has a fulfilling marriage, one raises happy well-adjusted children, one is successful at work, and so on) *versus* a life which is subjectively indistinguishable and yet where the successes in question are simply due to luck (one's apparently fulfilling marriage is based on a lie, but luck means that this has never come to light, one's apparent success at work is a sham, the result of others covering for your inadequacies, and so on). Isn't the former kind of life so much more preferable to the latter kind of life, even though it will be experientially the same?²

If that's right, however, then it seems that achievements have a special kind of value. In particular, it seems to strongly suggest that achievements are non-instrumentally – or

finally – valuable, in the sense that they are valuable for their own sakes rather than merely being valuable as a means to a further valuable end. After all, given that the two lives described above are experientially the same, then it seems there can be no practical difference between the two lives. That is, from the point of view of getting what one wants, either life is just as good (since from one's own point of view they are the *same* life). And yet the life rich in achievement is intuitively so much better. The value of achievements, then, cannot it seem be just an instrumental value. Put another way, while achievements are undoubtedly typically of great instrumental value – one often gets plaudits for one's achievements after all – the value of achievements is not exhausted by this instrumental value.

If achievements are finally valuable, however, then that puts them among pretty exalted company, since very little that we value is finally valuable. The good, whatever that is, is certainly finally valuable. Other plausible candidates include friendship, beauty, truth, wisdom and virtue, but not much else. If achievements are valuable for their own sake, then that means that they are a very special kind of thing indeed.

2. Achievements: A Closer Look

Here again is our rough account of achievements, stated a little more formally:

Achievement (I)

An achievement is a success that is because of the exercise of one's relevant abilities (rather than due to some factor external to one's agency, such as luck).³

The questions in hand for this account of achievement are twofold: (i) is this a good account of achievement, and (ii) can this account of achievement accommodate our intuition that achievements are finally valuable. As we will see, these issues are inter-related.

Here is one problem that faces this account of achievement as it stands. For notice that by the lights of this account some very easy successes count as achievements. Take, for instance, raising one's arm in normal circumstances. This is certainly a success, and it is also certainly a success that is because of the exercise of one's relevant abilities. But is it an achievement? This seems too strong, for achievements are not *that* easy. A related problem here is that if achievements are this easy then it is hard to see why we would intuitively regard them as finally valuable. What, after all, is so finally valuable about lifting one's arm? Call this the *problem of easy achievements*.

This is not to say that all achievements are difficult. After all, when Tiger Woods sinks a put with ease, or when Rafael Nadal hits a winning shot with no trouble at all, we would certainly regard the successes in question as achievements, even though they are, for them at any rate, easy successes. Moreover, if achievements are finally valuable at all, then the successes attained by Tiger Woods and Rafael Nadal in these cases are certainly finally valuable. So what is going on here? Why are some easy successes achievements, and hence in the market for final value, and some not?

I think the answer to this question lies in the fact that we have a bifurcated conception of achievements. In particular, I suggest that we need to replace the simple account of achievements set out above with the following more complicated account:

Achievements (II)

An achievement is a success that is either: (i) because of the exercise, to a particularly significant level, of one's relevant abilities; or which is (ii) because of the exercise of one's relevant abilities (rather than due to some factor external to one's agency, such as luck) *and* which involves the overcoming of a significant obstacle to that success.

In order to see the attraction of such a modified account of achievement, notice how it deals with the problem posed by the easy achievements of Tiger Woods and Rafael Nadal. For while the respective achievements are easy for them, they are only easy because of the exercise of such a great level of skill in attaining this achievement. Thus, these successes qualify as achievements because they satisfy the first condition of this account of achievement.

In contrast, in cases where no great skill is on display then the overcoming of a significant obstacle to success is vital if it is to count as an achievement. In order to see this, notice that while simply raising one's arm (in normal circumstances) does not qualify as an achievement, it could qualify as an achievement if there were some significant obstacle to this success. If, for example, one had hurt one's arm in a car accident, such that one had considerable difficulty raising it, then raising it *could* constitute an achievement. In the former case, the easy success does not count as an achievement since there is neither a significant level of skill on display nor the overcoming of a significant obstacle which stands in the way of one's success. In the latter case, however, the success in question could constitute an achievement because there is a significant obstacle to that success. The agent would thus satisfy the second condition of this account of achievement.

Notice too that it is far more plausible that this account of achievements can accommodate the intuition that achievements are finally valuable. For while we surely have no intuition at all that easy achievements of the sort exhibited by raising one's arm in normal circumstances are finally valuable, it is far more plausible to suppose that the highly skilful achievements of Tiger Woods and Rafael Nadal, or the obstacle-overcoming achievement of someone injured raising their arm, do constitute successes that are finally valuable.

Still, there is a problem remaining for the new account, at least insofar as it is meant to be both an adequate account of achievements and also an account which can accommodate the putative final value of achievements. The problem

relates to the fact that some 'achievements', on this account anyway, don't seem to be finally valuable because they seem to be inherently 'bad'. For a vivid illustration of this, consider the many highly skilful successes of a tyrant like Hitler or Stalin. Take, for example, Hitler's success in seizing effective absolute power through a series of political executions in the so-called 'night of the long knives'. Here we have a success that is certainly due both to the exhibition of a significant level of the relevant skills and which also involves the overcoming of a relevant obstacle – indeed many potential obstacles – to that success. But even if we are willing to consider this success an achievement on Hitler's part, we would certainly not be willing to consider such a success as finally valuable. Call this the *problem of wicked achievements*.

There are two ways that one might respond to this problem, both of which can plausibly rescue the account of achievements in hand. The first is to take the problem head-on and argue that while it is in the nature of achievements to be finally valuable, this is consistent with the fact that not all achievements are finally valuable. That is, perhaps some achievements, like wicked achievements, lack final value. This is not as odd as it might at first sound. Consider, for example, a claim such as that *tigers are fierce*. This statement seems true. Moreover, notice that this claim does not seem to be at all undermined by the fact that there are tame tigers in the world who are not fierce at all. In particular, in saying that tigers are fierce we are not making a claim about all tigers but rather making a claim about the *nature* of tigers – *a fortiori*, we are making a claim about how tigers would behave in normal circumstances.⁴

With this point in mind, one option is to bite the bullet on the problem of wicked achievements and argue that in saying that achievements are finally valuable one is not thereby saying that all achievements are finally valuable but rather saying something akin to the claim made when we say that tigers are fierce. That is, that it is in some sense in

the nature of achievements to be finally valuable, even though not all achievements are finally valuable.

An alternative, and possibly more hard-nosed, way of responding to this problem is to argue that contrary to appearances all achievements are finally valuable, it is just that the value in question is overridden by other factors. An analogy here might be beauty. That something is beautiful is, we might argue, always a consideration in favour of it, even though this value can be overridden by other factors. If saving a child's life depends upon throwing the only copy of Turner's masterpiece 'Rain, Steam and Speed' into the fire, then one should do so, since a child's life is clearly more important than a painting. Note, however, that in saying this one is not thereby saying that this painting has no value, much less that it is not finally valuable. Rather, one is merely saying that its value, great as it is, has been overridden by the greater value of the child's life.

In a nutshell, the distinction in play here is between *prima facie* and specifically *pro tanto* value. The former kind of value can, in effect, be undermined, such that it no longer in fact applies. To say that achievements are (finally) valuable on this reading is to say that they are usually valuable in normal circumstances, but that they sometimes aren't (i.e. when the value is undermined). This is the kind of value that achievements have if they are to be thought of along the lines of the claim that tigers are fierce. In contrast, on the latter kind of value, the value is always generated, it is just that it is sometimes overridden by other factors. So, for example, that something is beautiful is always a consideration in its favour, even if sometimes the all things considered value of a beautiful thing is quite low, perhaps negligible or of negative value, because of other factors (e.g. that a child's life depends on the destruction of the artefact in question).

Some things certainly are of *pro tanto* value in this way, and finally valuable things seem to be an obvious case in point in this respect. If we had to destroy a beautiful art work because a child's life depended on it, then while we would no doubt grant that this was the right thing to do all

things considered, we would surely also recognise that in destroying this art work we are destroying something precious, something of final value. That is, we would recognise that we are destroying something of final value whose value has not been neutralised by the value of the child's life (even though we recognise that the child's life should take precedence over the value of the art work).

We do not need to take a view as regards these two kinds of response to the problem of wicked achievements here. The important point is that either would constitute a solid response to this problem on behalf of the new account of achievements on offer and hence the proposal is not fatally wounded by this problem.

3. Achievements and Luck

We noted earlier that achievements are, in a certain sense at least, immune to luck. That is, when one's success qualifies as an achievement then it is not down to luck. This is certainly true, but I want to close by noting that we need to qualify the claim made here in an important respect. This is because there is a kind of luck which, rather surprisingly, is entirely compatible with achievements.

As noted earlier, it is not enough for an achievement that one be both successful and in addition relevantly skilful, since this way of thinking about achievements is compatible with the success in question being nonetheless due to dumb luck (as in the Archie case we described where the two freak gusts of wind cancelled each other out). Adding the 'because of' relation to the account excludes success that is due to dumb luck of this sort, and hence rescues the proposal. Interestingly, however, the addition of this relation doesn't exclude a second type of luck that could play a role in one's success. Consider the following variation on the Archie case. This time we suppose that there are no freak gusts of wind or anything like that. Instead, Archie simply picks out a target, skilfully fires at that target,

and hits the target. The twist in the tail in this story, however, is that of the targets that Archie chose from, every one bar the target he actually chose contains, unbeknownst to him, a forcefield that would repel an arrow were one fired at it.

What's interesting about this case, so described, is that we have no hesitation in describing Archie's success as an achievement. After all, it really is because of his archery abilities that he hit the target, unlike the case involving the freak gusts of wind where the success seems more attributable to dumb luck. In a very general sense, however, both cases involve lucky successes. It's true in both cases, for example, that Archie could so very easily had been unsuccessful (i.e. had the second gust of wind not come along as it did, or had he chosen a different target). So why are we happy with the fact that an achievement is exhibited in the one case but not the other?

I think the answer lies in the fact there are two kinds of luck in play here. The first is an 'intervening' kind of luck where something actually gets between the agent's abilities and the target success. This is the kind of luck in play when the two gusts of wind do their work. Luck of this sort is incompatible with achievements, since it entails that the success in question was not because of the exercise of the agent's abilities but rather down to luck. The second kind of luck – the one in play when all the other targets are fitted with forcefields – is very different, however, in that it does not 'intervene' in this way. Instead, it is of a purely 'environmental' type. Instead, the luck in question specifically concerns the fact that this is a pretty unfriendly environment in terms of making a successful shot (whatever one's ability). As luck would have it, however, Archie was not affected by this and hence skilfully hit the target nonetheless.

Although the claim that environmental luck is compatible with achievement might be initially surprising, it does become more plausible on closer inspection. Consider another example. Suppose our agent, let's call her 'Viola', is a fantastic violinist. Imagine that Viola successfully

undertakes a performance of a tricky piece of music and pulls it off with aplomb. Here is the twist in the tail. Suppose that unbeknownst to Viola the room she is standing in is surrounded by water, and it is just pure luck that this water did not break through the walls during her performance and prevent her from continuing. In the relevant sense, then, her success is lucky, in that she could very easily have been unsuccessful. But still, the fact remains that the water didn't impede her performance, just as the forcefields didn't affect Archie's shot, and hence it follows that she does exhibit a *bona fide* achievement in this case.

What the compatibility of environmental luck and achievement demonstrates is that it can be a matter of luck that one is in a position to exhibit an achievement, but that this does not entail that it is any less of an achievement. In this specific sense, then, achievements can be lucky.^{5,6}

Duncan Pritchard is Chair in Epistemology at the University of Edinburgh. duncan.pritchard@ed.ac.uk

Notes

¹ This kind of case is in effect a variant of a 'Gettier' example, albeit applied outside epistemology. See Gettier 'Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?'

² A related intuition is elicited by Nozick's (*Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, 42–5) 'experience machine' – viz., that experientially identical lives can be very different in terms of their value due to external factors. In Nozick's example, the issue is whether one is genuinely living the life that one takes oneself to be living rather than a 'fake' life in which one is, unbeknownst to one, being 'fed' one's experiences by the experience machine. Interestingly, note that what is missing from the fake life in this thought experiment is the kind of achievements that are available to the agent who is not hooked up to the experience machine. Thus, one can, in part at least, account for the distinction that Nozick is drawing by appeal to the value of achievements.

³ Greco (in 'The Value Problem') defends a version of this account of achievement, as part of his account of knowledge,

though note that the general idea of thinking of knowledge along the sort of lines that it would qualify as an achievement originates in Sosa (e.g. *Knowledge in Perspective*). See also Sosa (*Apt Belief and Reflective Knowledge, passim*). Note that there are competing ways of reading the 'because of' in play in this account of achievement – with Greco and Sosa each offering different analyses – but it would take us too far afield to explore this issue further here. Accordingly, for our purposes this relation is to be read intuitively. For a comparative discussion of the main ways of understanding this relation, see Haddock, Millar & Pritchard, *The Value of Knowledge* and Pritchard 'Knowledge and Virtue: Response to Kelp'.

⁴ This example was suggested to me by John Turri.

⁵ For more on the notion of luck, see Pritchard, *Epistemic Luck*. For a more detailed discussion of the distinction between environmental and intervening luck, see Pritchard, 'Radical Scepticism, Epistemic Luck and Epistemic Value'.

⁶ This paper was written while in receipt of a Philip Leverhulme Prize.

References

Gettier, E. 'Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?', *Analysis* 23 (1963), 121–3.

Greco, J. 'The Value Problem', *Epistemic Value*, (eds.) A. Haddock, A. Millar & D. H. Pritchard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

Haddock, A., Millar, A., & Pritchard, D. H. *The Value of Knowledge: Three Investigations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

Nozick, R. *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974).

Pritchard, D. H. *Epistemic Luck*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

———. 'Radical Scepticism, Epistemic Luck and Epistemic Value', *Proceedings and Addresses of the Aristotelian Society (suppl. vol.)* 82 (2008), 19–41.

———. 'Knowledge and Virtue: Response to Kelp', *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 17 (2009), 589–96.

Sosa, E. *Knowledge in Perspective: Selected Essays in Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

———. *Apt Belief and Reflective Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).