

Achievement and the Meaningfulness of Life¹

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Abstract: In this paper I present a novel account of achievement and I argue that, all other things being equal, the presence of this particular type of achievement (an 'm-achievement') in a person's life makes that life more meaningful. In arguing for this conclusion, I explore the connections between m-achievements and a person's self-conception and especially the idea that m-achievements provide a reason for the revision of one's self-conception.

All other things being equal, a life with some achievements in it is more meaningful than one without any achievements. This thesis is, at a first pass, intuitively obvious. Yet, as we will see when we attempt to uncover the substance of this thesis, it is not at all obvious how the thesis is to be understood. In particular, it is not at all obvious what counts as an achievement. I will offer a controversial account of achievement and I will defend that account against objections and also explain why it, and not some other account of achievement, explains why achievements contribute meaningfulness to a life.²

Surprisingly, there has been no analysis of achievement (that I could find) proffered in the philosophical literature.³ Part of this paper will be devoted to looking at two different senses in which 'achievement' is used.

1 Many thanks to Michael Stocker, Thaddeus Metz, Ben Bradley, Dave Horacek, Elliot Paul, and Irem Kurtsal Steen, for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

2 There is one sense of achievement that I want to dismiss immediately. One might say that X achieves Y iff X tries to do Y (puts some effort into it) and does Y. This sense of achievement applies to virtually everything we do. For reasons that will become clear, this cannot be the sense in which achievement makes a life more meaningful. One reason I can give here, though, is that on this sense of achievement, everyone's lives would be replete with meaning, and that is obviously not the case.

3 Achievement is rarely mentioned, and when it is, it is not the primary focus of analysis. See, for instance, Philippa Foot, 'Moral Beliefs,' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 59 (1958-59): 83-104, in particular, 87-89.

So, to refine my thesis, I am going to argue that there is only one particular sense of achievement that is operational when we say that achievements make a life more meaningful. Let me also say now that I do not think that achievements are the *only* things that can make a life meaningful (nor are they sufficient) and to that extent, my account is not necessarily contrary to other accounts of factors that contribute to a meaningful life.

I will begin the discussion by stating a necessary condition that an achievement must satisfy if it is to add meaning to a life. As the paper progresses, I will state three additional necessary conditions an achievement must satisfy if it is to contribute meaning to a life. These three conditions are not logically implied by the first, but together with it, they help to distinguish the sense of achievement I have in mind from another sense of achievement, and also to ensure that my account is immune to a certain powerful objection. At no point in the paper do I claim that the four conditions I provide are sufficient for an achievement to contribute meaning to a life. That is an interesting question but it is not one I will attempt to answer here.

The first necessary condition that an achievement must satisfy if it is to add meaning to a life is this:

- 1) Something, Y, counts as an achievement for X only if, were X to fail at attaining Y, X would have a reason to reassess herself.

This can best be elucidated through examples. One who attempts to get a Ph.D. must, as we all know, invest an enormous amount of time, effort, and energy in this endeavor. If one gets her Ph.D. she would most likely consider that to be an achievement. Here's why: were she to fail at getting that Ph.D. because, say, the committee rejected it as being unclear, incomprehensive, or trite, she may very naturally come to this line of thought (though probably not immediately): 'Am I really cut out to do this? I thought I was a good philosopher but it turns out I can't even get my Ph.D. I guess I was wrong all along. I'm not the philosopher I thought I was.'

Likewise, if one attempts to publish a paper and gets twenty rejections in a row, one may quite naturally take that as evidence that one is not a professional-caliber philosopher. What this implies, however, is that were one of those papers (probably one of the later ones) to get published, it would indeed be an achievement. In both cases, the failure to attain *Y* would provide a reason for one to reassess oneself and hence, *Y* is an achievement. Note, however, that from the fact that one has a reason to reassess it does not follow that one will *in fact* reassess.

To further flesh out my account, let me take an example of a putative achievement that does not count as an achievement in the sense that I am using it. If Tiger Woods were to shoot a round of golf that was sixteen-under-par, it would not count as an achievement. The reason for this is that were he to fail at doing so, he would not thereby have a reason to reassess himself. This is in part because no one has ever shot sixteen-under-par before and if Tiger did, it would be a fluke, and not something he could reasonably intend to do. The fact that significant luck would be required is a big part of why Tiger could not *reasonably* consider shooting sixteen-under-par an achievement and likewise, why failing to do so would not provide a *reason* for him to reassess himself.⁴

There seems to be an obvious objection here: If sixteen-under-par is not an achievement, then nothing is. Any account of achievement that cannot capture this fact can be dismissed tout court.

This objection is based on a different sense of achievement. The sense of achievement it uses is the sense in which something is an achievement if

4 There will, in general, be questions about which types of luck will make it the case that some achievements do not contribute meaning to one's life. I do not have a complete account of this but let me say something about the particular case I am discussing. The luck involved in the Tiger Woods case is luck in consequent circumstances. In particular, luck concerning the way in which a gust of wind might influence the flight of the ball, luck concerning how the ball bounces when it hits the fairways, luck concerning how the ball rolls on the greens once struck. A reasonable golfer *knows* that, all other things being equal, such luck can make all the difference between an average round and a great round. Moreover, a reasonable golfer *knows* that he can do nothing (or at least not much) to control for such extraneous factors. It is for that reason that failing to shoot sixteen-under-par is not something that can provide a reasonable golfer a reason to reassess himself.

it is an impressive feat. Since sixteen-under-par is an impressive feat it is also an achievement. Other achievements in this category are Neal Armstrong's first steps on the moon, Columbus' discovery of the Americas, Cantor's diagonal theorem, and Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel.

My thesis, however, is that these types of achievements (henceforth 'f-achievements') are not the type of achievements that confer meaningfulness on a life *except* for when they are what I call 'm-achievements,' i.e., achievements that would give a person a reason to reassess himself if he were to fail. Sometimes m-achievements and f-achievements overlap, but they need not. I do not know whether the above f-achievements are m-achievements because I do not know the specific details of each of the cases. The Tiger Woods case is intended to be an example of an f-achievement that *is not* also an m-achievement. An example of an f-achievement that *is* also an m-achievement is that of Évariste Galois. Galois was a French mathematician, responsible for the branch of mathematics called group theory. He died at the age of twenty-one in tragic circumstances that arguably resulted from his perceived failure to have important papers of his embraced by a couple of famous mathematicians, Cauchy and Fourier. Galois invested himself greatly in those papers, and when, through circumstances he could not be privy to, he received no response from Cauchy and Fourier, he took that lack of response as an indication that his papers were worthless. This disappointment led him to enroll in the military, where later he would confront a higher-ranked soldier in a duel over, as some speculate, a woman. He lost the duel and died.

His perceived failure provided him a reason to reassess himself which resulted in his military enrollment. Had he succeeded, he would not have enrolled in the military because he would have had confirmation that he was the mathematician that he thought he was. As such, Galois's work on group theory was an m-achievement. Due to the impressive nature of his work, it also counts as an f-achievement.

M-achievements and non-overlapping f-achievements differ because m-achievements provide an occasion for self-reassessment while non-

overlapping f-achievements do not. I now want to say more about the nature of this reassessment and especially about how such reassessment ties into one's self-conception.

How one sees oneself is a vastly important facet of human psychology that carries a great deal of normative force. If I do not like how I see myself then I will want to change how I see myself (if, of course, I am reasonable). Likewise, if I am in a situation where I like how I see myself, but there is pressure to change in the opposite direction, I will do what I can to maintain the self-conception that I have.

It may seem odd to say that one's self-conception is so important in relation to the meaningfulness of one's life. It seems odd, however, only if the value of a person's self-conception is underestimated. To see why the value of self-conception should not be underestimated, we may take a page out of Hume. In *A Treatise of Human Nature*, in a section entitled, 'Of Greatness of Mind,' Hume argues that 'nothing can be more laudable, than to have value for ourselves, where we really have qualities that are valuable.' Moreover,

... nothing is more useful to us in the conduct of life, than a due degree of pride, *which makes us sensible of our own merit*, and gives us a confidence and assurance in all our projects and enterprises. Whatever capacity any one may be endow'd with, 'tis entirely useless to him, if he be not acquainted with it, and form not designs suitable to it.⁵

Thus, an accurate self-esteem is among the most valuable things to us when it comes to being able to confidently and assuredly complete any projects. And, an accurate self-esteem can be had only with an accurate self-conception.⁶

An accurate self-conception can help one choose which projects to take on. Projects that are clearly beyond one's abilities will be avoided because one knows it is futile to attempt those projects. Projects that are

5 In David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton, eds., *A Treatise of Human Nature* (New York, Oxford University Press: 2001), p. 381, my italics.

6 Briefly, here is the relationship between self-conception and self-esteem. An accurate self-conception is seeing oneself for who one is which includes seeing what qualities one has. An accurate self-esteem is the correct valuing of one's accurately perceived qualities.

well within those abilities will be completed often but are less likely to contribute much meaning to life since they are easy to complete and one has no doubts that one will get them done.⁷ It is those projects, right at the limit of one's abilities, at that vague border between what one can do and what one cannot do, that will be most significant in giving meaning to one's life. It is also those projects at the limits where one will m-achieve. Notice too that it is at that vague border between what I can do and what I cannot do where my self-conception is indeterminate. This is why when I succeed at completing a project within the realm of that border I enlarge my self-conception in a positive way, and it is giving me reason to enlarge my self-conception in virtue of which such a project confers meaning on my life.⁸ Now, I see myself as one, who in addition to being able to do the things I previously did, can now do this thing. And, if I fail, then I see myself as one who cannot do this thing and so there too my self-conception is justifiably changed. It is in this way that reassessment is tied in with achievement.

By providing a reason for me to reassess myself, m-achievements make me a person who is better off, either by giving me reason to enlarge my self-conception in a positive direction, or by maintaining a positive quality in me that, given the prevailing conditions, is in jeopardy of being lost. The foregoing thoughts suggest the next necessary condition for an achievement's contributing meaning to a life:

- 2) Something, Y, is an m-achievement for X only if, when X attains Y, X can justifiably enlarge her self-conception.

So far I have provided two necessary conditions that must be satisfied if an achievement is to contribute meaning to a life. Before I move on to a third condition, I want to look at a possible problem for my account as it now stands. One might claim that there are circumstances that provide a reason for self-reassessment as well as a reason to enlarge my self-

⁷ I still want to allow that such activities can contribute meaning to life and I suspect that a complete account of meaning would corroborate this.

⁸ Success, here, acts as a justifier of opinions I have regarding myself.

conception which are not at the same time instances of m-achievements. Consider, for example, an occasion where one has an epiphanic moment during a bout of intense reflection. This epiphany may provide a reason for self-reassessment and a reason to enlarge my self-conception and yet it seems intuitively odd to call the epiphany an m-achievement.

To flesh this idea out we may consider an example from Bernard Williams' paper, 'Moral Incapacity.'⁹ According to Williams, I might, through a process of deliberation, discover that I have a certain moral incapacity, say, the incapacity to ϕ . Once I discover that I am unable to ϕ I will have reason to see myself as one who is unable to ϕ . Since I *discover* this fact about myself, the discovery provides reason for a self-reassessment. The discovery also provides a reason for me to enlarge my self-conception. Clearly, however, the discovery need not be an m-achievement.

I do not want to dispute that this is a case of self-reassessment. Is my account thereby in jeopardy? There are a few ways for me to deal with this objection. First, I may take this insight to heart and revise my account so that it is not just m-achievements that contribute meaning to life, but all instances where one has both a reason to reassess oneself and a reason to enlarge one's self-conception. Such a revision may be encouraged by the seemingly undeniable fact that some epiphanies/deliberative discoveries do add meaning to my life.

I do not favor this solution because I think it misses out on some important facts. First, not all instances where one has a reason for self-reassessment give meaning to one's life. A baseline tennis player¹⁰ may discover after some lessons that his natural abilities better equip him to be a serve-and-volley tennis player. Before, he saw himself as a baseline tennis player and now he sees himself as a serve-and-volley tennis player. He has reassessed himself and yet it seems a stretch to claim that his life

9 In *Making Sense of Humanity* (New York, Cambridge University Press: 2000), Ch. 4.
10 I.e., one who likes to stay at the baseline throughout rallies.

is now more meaningful.¹¹ Second, it is crucial to note that in the cases of deliberative discovery and m-achievements, it is different things that provide the requisite reasons. In the case of a deliberative discovery it is the *success* of that deliberation that provides both a reason for self-reassessment and a reason for one to enlarge one's self-conception. In the case of an m-achievement, it is the *failure* to achieve that provides a reason for self-reassessment, and it is *success* that provides a reason to enlarge one's self-conception.

I do not want to deny that some non-m-achievement cases where the first two conditions have been satisfied could contribute meaning to one's life. In fact, I suspect that there may be interesting work to be done in exploring that connection. However, my focus here is on m-achievements and their relevance to questions about the meaningfulness of life. It is no threat to my account that some other source of reasons for self-reassessment and the enlargement of self-conception can contribute meaning to life since that possibility is not at odds with anything I've said.

I said above that I would provide four necessary conditions. The need for a third condition is made evident by considering a couple of closely related objections to the account as it now stands.

Suppose Smith gets into the shower successfully. If, however, he had failed and fallen, at least a few times, he might reasonably regard himself as a klutz. That is, his failing would have provided him with a reason to reassess himself (thus satisfying condition one). Getting in successfully satisfies condition two, that is, he can enlarge his self-conception to include a getting-into-the-shower ability. As such, my account implies that successfully getting into the shower confers meaning on Smith's life. That is absurd, the objection goes, and so too is my account.

Let me turn to a second example. Jones is an atychiphobe, that is, he suffers from a persistent fear of failure. Let us also suppose that his

¹¹ As will soon be evident, the tennis player does not satisfy the fourth condition that I will set out and so, if only for that reason, his self-reassessment is not one that adds meaning to his life.

case of atychiphobia is particularly severe. Things which we ordinarily do not give a second thought carry the distinct possibility of failure for Jones. Making a cup of tea, brushing his teeth, and locking the door all look daunting to him. Jones, nevertheless, usually succeeds in doing these things. Were he to fail, however, the failure in conjunction with his phobia of failing would ensure that he had a reason to reassess himself. Jones satisfies both conditions put forward by my account and hence his life is *replete* with meaning. This too is absurd, and so is my account.

Both of these examples illustrate a common objection to subjectivist accounts of meaning. The objection is nicely summed up by Thaddeus Metz in 'Recent Work on the Meaning of Life,' '... meaning of life is at least partially independent of one's subjective response' because if it weren't, meaning could reside in any arbitrary thing I choose and that is plainly false.¹² If meaning can indeed reside in any arbitrary thing then meaning would be both trivial and philosophically uninteresting.

I agree with this objection that if, according to my account, the klutz and the atychiphobe could get meaning from their respective shortcomings then my account would be absurd. I need not, however, be committed to saying that meaning could be had in such easy and arbitrary ways. It is perfectly plausible to claim that if Y is to be an m-achievement then it must be difficult to do Y. If it is easy to do Y then it is no m-achievement and that is why neither the klutz nor the atychiphobe have m-achieved anything.

One may point out that, contrary to what I have just said, it is in fact very difficult for the atychiphobe to do anything since he is constantly overwhelmed by his phobia. But this sense of difficulty—the difficulty a person perceives in doing something—is not the sense of difficulty I mean here. I am using a statistical notion of difficulty that takes the average human as its class. Showering, locking a door, or brushing one's

¹² Thaddeus Metz, 'Recent Work on the Meaning of Life,' *Ethics* 112 (2002): 781-814, here p. 792.

teeth are not things the average person finds difficult. It is not the fact that the average person does not think these things difficult that makes them easy, but the fact that they simply are easy. These things do not require much effort, physical or intellectual, nor special skills or large temporal investments. It is because these things are easy in this sense that doing them precludes one from m-achieving. The difficult things that one must do if one is to m-achieve are, again, difficult because of what they are and not because of how they are perceived.

We can formulate the third necessary condition as follows:

- 3) Something, Y, is an m-achievement for X only if Y is difficult for the average human to do.

At a first pass, this third condition solves the problems raised by the klutz and atychiphobe. A klutz is someone who, by definition, fails to do things that are considered to be easy for the average person. The atychiphobe is someone who irrationally overestimates the difficulty of something and who has an irrational fear of failure regarding that thing such that failure would be atypically significant for him. By limiting m-achievements to things that are difficult, my account is not subject to these psychological peculiarities.

It is only at a first pass, however, that the third condition appears to solve the sorts of problems raised by the klutz and the atychiphobe. To see why it fails, consider on one hand a person who is rehabilitating from a devastating spinal injury and, on the other hand, a person who is so intelligent that writing publishable papers in mathematics is a menial task. If difficulty is understood in the statistical way just mentioned—relative to the average human—then my account has some counterintuitive implications. The injured person that manages to walk one yard after six months of hard rehabilitation will have m-achieved nothing while the *über*-intelligent person that publishes ten papers in a month will have m-achieved an awful lot. This seems to get things the wrong way around. We should say that the injured person has m-achieved something and the *über*-intelligent person, though f-achieving

something, has not m-achieved anything. Contrary to what I have said here, one might think that the third condition can in fact accommodate the case of the injured person. This is because walking one step after suffering a spinal cord injury would be difficult for the average person if she were so injured.

This is no doubt true but it solves only half of the problem. The *über*-intelligent person still needs to be dealt with. Perhaps the way to go is to add an additional condition to account for the fact that the difficulty must not merely be relative to the class of all humans but must also take into account the abilities of the individual in question. Perhaps something like this will work:

- 4) Something, Y, is an m-achievement for X only if it is difficult for X to do Y.

The notion of difficulty invoked by the fourth condition cannot be perceived difficulty, since then we face the problem of the atychiphobe and the klutz. Nor can it be difficulty relative to the average human since then we face the problem of the *über*-intelligent person. If the difficulty in question is none of these, then what is it? One might think that it is the sort of difficulty that goes along with not knowing how things will turn out. This is an interesting idea and an idea that also ties in nicely with what I have said about self-conception. It will not do, however. If this were our operative sense of difficulty it would imply that following a recipe for the first time and asking someone out on a date for the first time could amount to m-achievements. That implication is clearly false.

Instead of trying to give an analysis of the notion of difficulty used in the fourth condition one may argue that the term, as it is used there, is irreducible. Though this may solve the problem it is deeply unsatisfying. For when we think about the difficulty involved in m-achievements we do have some idea of what is going on. M-achievements are things that we care about greatly and that are important to us. We invest lots of time and effort in trying to do them. Realizing that we may possibly fail is

alarming, just as realizing that we might succeed is pleasing. Arguably, m-achievements are sources of justified pride.¹³ These aspects of m-achievements, though not part of the difficulty of m-achievements, indicate that m-achievements are not things that come easily since we don't feel this way about things that do come easily.

These troubles in fixing on a particular sense of difficulty, though disheartening, do not jeopardize the present account of achievement. For though I am unable to articulate what sense of difficulty is invoked by the fourth condition, there is an intuitive sense of the relevant notion of difficulty available to us when reflecting on those occasions on which we, or others, have m-achieved. Ultimately, a more determinate sense of 'difficulty' will need to be provided for the fourth condition, but that need not be done here.

In the foregoing pages I have specified when an achievement may contribute meaning to a life. For an achievement to do this, the following four conditions must be satisfied:

- 1) Something, Y, counts as an achievement for X only if, were X to fail at attaining Y, X would have a reason to reassess herself.
- 2) Something, Y, is an m-achievement for X only if, when X attains Y, X can justifiably enlarge her self-conception.
- 3) Something, Y, is an m-achievement for X only if Y is difficult for the average human to do.
- 4) Something, Y, is an m-achievement for X only if it is difficult for X to do Y.

It is only when an achievement satisfies these four conditions that it may contribute meaning to a life.

I want to conclude by discussing how the foregoing thoughts provide an insight into a distinctive approach to the question of meaningfulness in life. The foregoing account ultimately connects meaning with self-

¹³ See Foot, 'Moral Beliefs.'

conception, self-development, and a deepening of self-understanding. It forges this connection through examining a particular class of achievements.

To be sure, there are distant echoes of both Platonic and Aristotelian approaches in this account. Both of those philosophers realized, respectively, the importance of psychological health¹⁴ and the significance of one's character.¹⁵ These themes underlie, at varying depths and varying points, the present account. Nevertheless, this account is not merely the sum of those themes.

The notions of self-conception, self-development, and a deepening of self-understanding, though crucial to understanding how achievement is connected to meaning, are not exclusively connected to meaning through achievement. There will be doubtless be other phenomena, in addition to achievement, that will connect all of these important notions together. For instance, in connection to these notions, one might discuss deliberative discoveries and meaning.

Another way to expand the foregoing approach is to devote time to exploring the notions of self-conception, self-development, and a deepening of self-understanding, themselves. There are no doubt important questions to be asked regarding these notions, especially as they relate to meaning.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the foregoing approach may provide the tools necessary to fulfill a hope long unfulfilled. That is the hope that questions about life's meaning should occupy as central a stage in moral philosophy as questions about what I ought to do in a given situation.¹⁶ One way in which I can see this hope being fulfilled is through uniting this approach with a virtue ethics. In both, the notions of self-conception, self-development, and a deepening of self-

14 Recall the discussion about atychiphobia.

15 Recall the discussion about an accurate self-conception and a healthy self-esteem.

16 David Wiggins expresses this hope in, 'Truth, Invention, and the Meaning of Life,' in Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, ed., *Essays on Moral Realism* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press: 1988), pp. 127-128.

understanding play a central role. Hence, the marriage of the two is completely natural.

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