***Why Is Having a Baby like Running a Marathon? Gendered Embodied Reproductive Achievements and Philosophical Analyses of Achievement***

*Fiona Woollard* ([f.woollard@soton.ac.uk](mailto:f.woollard@soton.ac.uk))

*Draft: 24th September 2020. Please excuse typos.*

**Background:**

During pregnancy, birth and, the early days of parenthood, we do amazing things with our bodies, easily comparable to the achievements of any marathon runner. When we are pregnant, we use our bodies to shelter and nourish the growing human from microscopic blastocyst to full-term foetus. We push the boundaries of human endurance with peaks of energy use comparable to elite athletes.[[1]](#footnote-1) In labour, the cervix dilates to ten centimetres wide, roughly the size of a bagel[[2]](#footnote-2), while the uterus exerts 100-400 Newtons of downwards force with each contraction during birth, equivalent to the force exerted by many men’s Olympic weightlifting record holders (and outdoing some of them).[[3]](#footnote-3) When lactating, we might produce over 1000g of milk a day.[[4]](#footnote-4) This milk is tailor made to meet our babies’ needs, becoming higher in calories when the baby signals a growth spurt by feeding frequently throughout the day[[5]](#footnote-5) and contains antibodies to protect the baby when either the mother or the baby gets sick.[[6]](#footnote-6)

But pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding seem to be treated very differently from other physical achievements like running marathons. They are either celebrated in the wrong way: treated as yardsticks for motherhood with shame doled out to those who do not measure up. Or they are ignored or diminished, treated as a simple matter of luck or uninteresting biology.

I think pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding are all examples of what I call gendered embodied reproductive achievements or GERAs. My current work seeks to (a) show that pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding are indeed correctly understood as GERAs; (b) explore our attitudes towards GERAs. GERAs are *embodied* because they are things that we do with our bodies. They are *reproductive* because they occur as part of the process of creating and raising children. And they are *gendered*. Not everyone who does these things is a woman: trans men and non-binary people become pregnant, give birth and lactate. Nonetheless, the thought that these are things that women do is central to the way that they are understood – or rather misunderstood. These activities also form a core part of dominant understandings of what a woman is and should be.

Each of these aspects of a GERA contributes to the way GERAs are treated and needs further discussion. However, my central claim is that GERAs are *achievements* even though they are often not recognised as such. With that in mind, my first task has been to explore the philosophical literature on achievement with an eye to what this literature can tell us about whether GERAs are genuine achievements and whether thinking about GERAs can support amendments to the prominent accounts in the literature.

**Plan for the paper**

I will use Gwen Bradford’s account of achievement as a starting point. I will begin by describing Bradford’s account. Bradford argues that an achievement must (a) be difficult and (b) be competently caused by the agent’s action i.e. the agent must ‘know what they are doing’ in the sense of having a grasp of how their actions might produce the desired product. The second epistemic condition is an anti-luck condition, designed to rule out cases where the difficult activity only causes the would-be achievement by luck. I will refer to the existence of such cases as ‘the luck problem’.

I note that we often think of GERAs as automatic bodily processes and that thus the epistemic condition may seem to cause problems for recognising GERAs as achievements. I argue that GERAs often do involve purposeful agency. Most GERAs count as achievements on Bradford’s account.

Nonetheless, I argue that we should drop the epistemic condition. An achievement does not require the agent to know what they are doing. I argue that epistemic conditions do not help to solve the luck problem. I argue that a better solution to the luck problem can be found by drawing on Sukaina Hirji’s suggested replacement for Bradford’s other condition, the difficultly condition. Hirji replaces Bradford’s difficulty condition with the requirement that an achievement must test the limit of an agent’s perfectionist capacity, but retains the requirement that the process competently cause the product (Hirji 2019, 19). However, I think it makes more sense for this account to reject the competent causation condition too. On the amended Hirji Account, an achievement is a manifestation of a perfectionist capacity that tests the limits of that capacity. I argue that this analysis, when correctly understood, avoids the luck problem, as well as bringing other benefits.

I then argue the amended Hirji’s Account correctly recognises GERAs as genuine achievements even when they do not involve consciously planned and purposeful activity. I show this account helps us to recognise GERAs as achievements relative to physical capacities or capacities which combine the mental and the physical, such as endurance of great pain. In doing so, the account allows us to recognise GERAs as achievements, while avoiding the common mistake of thinking that GERAs make us better mothers or morally better.

**Philosophical Literature on Achievement**

Achievement has been the topic of an increasing amount of work in ethics since the early 2000s. The most extensive treatment of the issue is Gwen Bradford’s 2015 monograph, *Achievement* (Bradford 2015).[[7]](#footnote-7) Bradford’s account will form the starting point for my discussion.

Before we begin, a few words about what the philosophical literature on achievement is trying to achieve (pun intended).

As Bradford notes, the word achievement can be used in different ways. “There is a sense of the word ‘achievement’ in which every little thing we do, every aim we accomplish is an ‘achievement’. But there is another sense of the word ‘achievement’ which seems to be reserved for exceptional accomplishments – those endeavors that are particularly noteworthy in some respect, and evoke a sense of awe, admiration, and of being impressed. It is achievements in this latter sense that we aim for in our lives.”(Bradford 2015, 4). Bradford calls these latter accomplishments “achievements with a capital A”. It is these valuable achievements that are the target of her investigation.

Bradford explains that her aim is to look into what descriptive (if any) features such achievements share that make them distinctive and see if these descriptive characteristics shed light on what makes them valuable. (Bradford 2015, 5). For this reason, Bradford’s discussion, like much of the literature on achievement, involves four interrelated questions about the nature and value of achievement: What makes something *count as* an achievement? What makes one achievement *more of* *an achievement* than another? What makes achievements *valuable*? What makes one achievement *more valuable* than another? In each case remember, ‘achievement’ refers not to any old thing that is accomplished, but to those accomplishments with the distinctive value, which evoke admiration. Arguments about how to answer the descriptive question will often appeal to intuitions about value (Bradford 2015, 5-6) or to comparative judgments. This make sense given that the target for analysis is identifiable through its value.

This matches well with my own concerns. I am interested in identifying GERAs as achievements because I believe that they should be valued and that they should evoke admiration. The focus is less on linguistic intuitions and more on finding something that is suitable to play a certain role in human life.

On Bradford’s account: “achievements are comprised by a process and a product, where the process is difficult and competently causes the product” (Bradford 2015, 25). Bradford notes that sometimes the product is distinct from the process and sometimes the process and product are one and the same thing (Bradford 2015, 11): writing a novel or painting a landscape are examples of achievements where the product is distinct from the process; a ballet performance is an example of an achievement where the process is the product.

Bradford understands difficulty in terms of total intense effort. To calculate the total intense effort, she sets a threshold of minimum intensity – only effort above this threshold counts towards the total effort (49). An activity counts as difficult if it the total intense effort expended is high enough.

According to Bradford, what counts as high enough depends on the kind of activity under consideration. This is because we evaluate whether effort is high enough relative to the background of an average, unexceptional level of effort for a given kind of activity. “Difficult things require some sufficient degree of intense effort *greater than* the average intense effort”(55). This means that difficulty is relative to the kind of activity. Marathons typically require more effort than board games. So, to count as difficult *for a marathon* requires a lot more effort than to count as difficult *for a board game* (55).

Of course, the same activity can fall under many different kinds (marathon, physical activity, way to spend the weekend). Fred’s marathon may not be difficult for a marathon, but difficult for a physical activity or a way to spend the weekend. Bradford argues that the relevant kind is simply what it is we are interested in evaluating something as.

Recall, on Bradford’s account difficulty is necessary to count as an achievement. So, if difficulty is relative, achievement must be relative too. Bradford would say that Fred’s marathon does not count as an achievement *as a marathon* but could be an achievement as a physical activity or a way to spend the weekend. Again, she holds that the relevant background is simply the kind under which we’re interested in evaluating the activity (62).

Bradford’s competent causation involves an epistemic condition: competent causation requires you to ‘know what you are doing’. Bradford understands this in terms of having justified true beliefs about your actions causing the produce, while you perform the action. You don’t need to have all possible true beliefs about the effects of your actions. In fact, you can competently cause something even if you have some false beliefs: in Bradford’s example, Rudy competently causes his Smartcar to take him from A to B even though he believes in runs on a giant Duracell battery. Bradford argues that competent causation requires enough justified beliefs, where structural beliefs (about how all the discrete steps fit together) count for more (67) and what counts as enough for a given process depends on the complexity of the process (69).

Why does Bradford require that the process competently cause the product rather than just that it cause the product? This condition is motivated by a type of problem case for achievement that Bradford sees as an echo of the famous Gettier cases in epistemology (Gettier 1963).[[8]](#footnote-8) Consider Bradford’s case:

Buried Treasure: Lucky Lon uses a difficult but ridiculous programme aimed at finding treasure involving magic-8 balls, Ouija board, and downing sticks. By utter coincidence, his programme leads him to the very spot where the treasure is buried. (Bradford 2015, 13-14)

As Bradford points out, it is clear that Lucky Lon’s discovery of the treasure is not an achievement even though he achieved his aim through a difficult process. To block such cases, she requires not just causation, but competent causation. Conditions aimed to block these kinds of case are known as anti-luck conditions (von Kriegstein 2019a).

According to Bradford, achievements are valuable because they involve the excellent exercise of two diverse capacities that are characteristic of human beings and intrinsically worth developing: engaging in difficult activities is the excellent exercise of the will; competent causation requires the excellent exercise of the rational capacity (Bradford 2015, 121). Moreover, Bradford argues, achievements require the exercise of these two diverse capacities “together, in unity”. They thus exhibit what Bradford calls “unity in diversity”: “Where diverse elements are united together, there can be greater value in the unity of the diverse elements than there is in the diverse units themselves when they are in a mere aggregate. The more diverse the elements, or the greater the unity, the better.” (Bradford 2015, 124). This is Bradford’s explanation for why achievements are valuable when neither competent causation nor difficulty alone seem to be.

Bradford argues that requiring more effort (135) and more exercise of rationality (146) makes achievements more valuable. Achievements are also more valuable if they involve more unity in diversity i.e. if other capacities that are characteristic of human being and intrinsically worth developing are exercised within the same process (150). The value of achievements can also be affected by other features which are not part of the essential feature of being an achievement, for example the value of the product.

**Bradford’s Account and GERAs as achievements**

Does Bradford’s account count GERAs as achievements? One big problem seems to be the epistemic understanding of the anti-luck condition. On Bradford’s account, for something to count as an achievement, the agent must know what they are doing, but we usually think of GERAs as automatic bodily processes. Insofar as GERAs are automatic bodily processes, which take place without the agent’s knowledge, they will not count as achievements on Bradford’s account.

It’s important to challenge the idea that GERAs are merely automatic bodily processes. We often overlook the ways in which GERAs involve both knowledge and deliberate agency. Consider pregnancy. First, many conceptions are very carefully planned. Even putting aside IVF, so-called-natural conception can involve a range of measures from the obvious (increased sexual activity) or low tech (manual cycle tracking) through expensive and complex fertility monitors. But even when a pregnancy is unplanned, the pregnant person may knowingly make many adjustments to their daily life, sometimes in order to support the health of their foetus, and sometimes simply to accommodate their pregnancy and its effects on their body. Similarly, women and other gestating persons will often knowingly prepare for birth, both carefully planning for the situation of birth (thinking about where it will take place, who they want present, what they want to happen in various eventualities) and preparing their bodies and minds for birth (using exercise, meditation, perineal massage etc.). Breastfeeding also often requires significant exercise of deliberate agency not just to learn how to do it – for breastfeeding is a learned skill – but to manage the logistics of bringing breasts and baby (or breast-pump) together at the right time. Women also often act purposely to increase their milk production, for example by stimulating production using manual stimulation or a breast pump or by adjusting their diet or lifestyle. Indeed, even in cases which seem most like automatic bodily processes such as the production of significant amounts of breastmilk due to naturally high milk production, there is almost always at least some purposeful agency: the mother must normally either breastfeed or express milk in order to both get the milk out of the body and to stimulate production. These ways in which women and other lactating/gestating persons purposely exercise their agency are very often unseen.

Thus, when we take this often-unseen purposeful agency into account, almost all GERAs are able to meet Bradford’s epistemic understanding of the anti-luck conditions.

**Knowledge isn’t Necessary**

Nonetheless, I do not think we should accept this epistemic understanding of the anti-luck condition. Bradford summarises her condition as requiring that the agent *know what they are doing* (Bradford 2015, 64). However, achievements need not involve an agent knowing what they are doing. Consider the following case:

Accidental Milk Stash: Sally ran into a problem when breastfeeding her baby: milk would leak from the breast on which the baby was not feeding, leading to Sally’s clothes becoming soaked with milk. Sally’s wife, Anne bought Sally a Haakaa breastshell to solve this problem. After feeding the baby, Sally would give the breastshell to Anne to deal with. Sally doesn’t realise that the milk from the breastshell can be kept. She thinks Anne is throwing it away. Anne is actually collecting and freezing the milk that Sally collects. She assumes that Sally understands she is doing this – after all that is part of the point of a breastshell. After several months, Anne observes: “You’ve produced an amazing stash!” As Sally is registered as a milk donor, she is able to donate 10 gallons of milk to a human milk bank for use by premature babies.

Sally does not know what she is doing. Nonetheless, I think that her production of the milk stash is a significant achievement. The achievement is in some sense accidental. It is an unexpected happy by-product of Sally’s other goals. Nonetheless, it is not a mere accident in the way that Lucky Lon’s discovery is in the Buried Treasure case. Sally’s activity causes the milk stash in the right way, even if she is not aware of it.

Bradford might argue that Sally does in fact have the right kind of justified beliefs about what she is doing. Even if she does not realise that she is producing a stash of breastmilk, she knows that she is producing milk from one breast as a side effect of feeding her baby from the other breast. However, I’m not sure even these beliefs are necessary. Suppose Sally believes that the substance that leaks from her other breast when she feeds her baby is OffMilk, a substance that is full of toxins and unsuitable for human consumption. Does this undermine her achievement in accidentally producing a fantastic stash of milk ready for donation? I do not think it does. Again, what Sally does, albeit accidentally, causes the milk stash in the right way. It does this whatever funny beliefs she has about what she is doing.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Thinking about Sally shows that an epistemic understanding of the anti-luck condition is misguided. The problem with Lucky Lon isn’t that he does not know what he is doing. The problem is that what he is doing is not related in the right way to the outcome. Consider the following case:

Bizarre Benefactor: As in Buried Treasure, but Lucky Lon’s sister Betty has always looked out for her little brother. She sees the joy he gets from his madcap schemes and wants to encourage him. So she watches his search carefully and, once he has worked out where to dig, she quickly swoops in and hides the treasure in that exact place.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Here as in Buried Treasure, even though Lon’s difficult activity causes the discovery of the treasure, it does not cause it in the right way. And adding knowledge or justified true beliefs does not help. Consider the following:

Bizarre Benefactor Bluff: As in Bizarre Benefactor, but this time Lon knows exactly what his sister is up to. He enacts the difficult and bizarre research programme, knowing that the research programme is bizarre and that this will lead his sister to bury the treasure so that he can find it.

Lon’s discovery of the treasure is not an achievement in Bizarre Benefactor Bluff any more than it is in the other cases. What he does is still not related in the right way to the discovery of the treasure. This remains true whether or not Lon knows what he is doing. Epistemic approaches to the anti-luck condition are misguided. Whether or not someone knows what they are doing does not determine whether they cause the product in the right way.

I want to address here two possible connected responses to these variations of the Buried Treasure case. First, you might think that there is an achievement in the Bizarre Benefactor Bluff case: Lon achieves something *by* pulling off the deception. Second, you might think that we do not have the same product in these variations as we did in the original case: in the original case, Lon *discovers* the treasure while in the variations, he digs up treasure that has been hidden for him to find. I will show later that that these responses fit well with the Anti-Luck solution that I endorse, and indeed help us to explain why an epistemic approach is misguided.

**An Unexpected Solution: Hirji’s Critique of Difficulty**

I think the solution to the anti-luck problem can be found in a critique of another aspect of Bradford’s account: Sukaina Hirji’s critique of the difficulty condition (Hirji 2019). Hirji argues that, contra Bradford, achievements need not be difficult. On Bradford’s account, to be difficult is to involve great effort. Hirji argues that not all achievements are difficult and indeed in some cases part of the value of an achievement lies in its effortlessness. Consider the example of a talented musician effortlessly performing a complex piece of music after months of training: “it would be natural for him to feel proud not just that he played the piece without mistakes but also that he played it without exerting significant effort or struggling. The effortlessness of his performance is, I want to suggest, part of what makes his performance feel like an achievement for him. The effortlessness reflects the degree to which he has honed and developed his skill and then succeeded in realizing this skill in the performance” (Hirji 2019, 13).[[11]](#footnote-11)

Hirji also discusses a case in which Elizabethan poet Judith, sister of “William”, with the same natural talent as her brother, finds it extremely difficult to write due to many structural barriers (life-long discouragement, no access to education, household duties etc). With great difficulty, she overcomes these barriers enough to produce a body of mediocre sonnets. William with his greater opportunities produces some of the most enduring classics of Western literature (Hirji 2019, 6). As Hirji argues, the difficulty account cannot recognise the ways in which the oppression Judith experiences prevent her from achieving as much as she could have if she had been allowed to develop her creative abilities.

Hirji argues that the problem with Bradford’s account is that it focuses too narrowly on the development of a single capacity. Bradford argues that achievements require difficult activity to competently cause a product. She argues that their value comes from the combined exercise of the will (in expending effort) and rationality (in doing so competently). Hirji suggests that instead we recognise that there are a variety of capacities which it is valuable for us to manifest. Achievement can involve the manifestations of any of these valuable capacities. Thus: “an achievement is a process culminating in a product that is competently caused and that *tests the limit of an agent’s perfectionist capacity*.” (p. 1-2). According to Hirji, a perfectionist capacity is one which it is valuable for us to develop and exercise. Hirji seems to use ‘test the limits of a perfectionist capacity’ and ‘fully express a perfectionist capacity’ and ‘fully manifest a perfectionist capacity’ interchangeably. I will do so too.

In some cases, perfectionist capacities are only fully expressed if a particular product is produced or in effortless activity (p. 2). For Judith’s creative abilities to be fully expressed, she needs to in fact produce excellent poetry. For the musician to fully express his skill, he needs to play a complex piece effortlessly (p. 15).

An important aspect of Hirji’s account is that achievements are relative to the different capacities: we can simultaneously recognise Judith’s achievement as greater than William’s qua force of will and William’s as greater qua creative ability. (Hirji 2019, 16).

Bradford does have some resources to reply to Hirji’s objections. She discusses a case she calls Virtuoso in which Heifetz “effortlessly tosses off a flawless performance of the complex Paganini caprices” (Bradford, 2015, 31). Bradford argues that a flawless performance is difficult for the typical violinist but not difficult for Heifetz (39) and, thus, an *achievement (sans* “for”) even if it is not an achievement *for Heifetz* (62). Similarly, Bradford could argue that the oppression Judith experienced prevented her from doing something that would be a greater achievement (sans “for”) because it would require more effort from the typical writer. Bradford could also argue that William’s achievement is more valuable because it requires a greater exercise of rationality[[12]](#footnote-12) and because the product is more valuable.

This does not fully address Hirji’s point about the talented musician: Hirji’s argues that the effortlessness itself is part of the value of the achievement. Indeed, the achievement is playing the difficult piece effortlessly. Bradford’s account is not able to recognise *that* achievement. Moreover, Hirji’s account seems to give a better account of the Judith / William case by recognising the different types of achievement that are involved.

**Hirji’s Account and The Anti-Luck Problem**

I believe Hirji’s account offers the solution to the anti-luck problem. Hirji replaces Bradford’s difficulty condition with the requirement that an achievement must test the limit of/ fully manifest an agent’s perfectionist capacity, but retains both the first and third features of her account: the claim that an achievement is a process culminating in a product and the requirement that the process competently cause the product (Hirji 2019, 19). However, I think it makes more sense for this account to reject the competent causation condition and to understand the perfectionist capacity condition in a way which avoids the counterexamples that motivate the anti-luck condition. On the amended Hirji Account, an achievement is a manifestation of a perfectionist capacity that tests the limits of that capacity. Once the competent causation condition is gone, it is not clear to me that retaining the mention of process and product is useful. I will not argue for the rejection of this condition here, but I will also not spend time trying to identify the process/ product involved in GERAs.

Hirji already argues that full manifestation of creative capacities requires the production of a certain type of product (Hirji 2019, 19). It also seems to be true that the manifestation of creative capacities requires that the effect be produced *in the right way*. If Judith’s struggle to write inspires William to write a phenomenal poem, then that poem is not a manifestation of *Judith’s* creative abilities. Similarly, we might argue that full manifestation of the will requires not just effort but *effective effort*: effort that produces the intended effect in the intended manner. In Buried Treasure, Lucky Lon’s discovery of the treasure is not a matter of effective effort because it is not related in the right way to his difficult activities.

In addition to avoiding an epistemic approach to the anti-luck condition, this approach has other benefits. Bradford faces a puzzle: if the value of achievements comes from the exercise of the will – manifested in effort – and the exercise of rationality – manifested in competent causation, why are achievements where these are combined in the correct way more valuable than the same amounts of effort and rationality disconnected? Bradford’s answer to this is described above: she argues that it is more valuable because it displays ‘unity in diversity’ (Bradford 2015, 124). But it just is not clear why this is valuable. On the proposed amendment of Hirji’s account, achievements where effort causes the product in the right way are more valuable because only such cases involve effective effort – the full expression of the will.

You might worry that my approach just pushes the anti-luck problem back a step. I have merely said that the product needs to be caused ‘in the right’ to count as an exercise will, creative ability etc. Don’t I owe an account of what ‘the right way’ is? I do not think this is a serious problem. We know what it is for something to count as effective effort or when a poem or artwork is the manifestation of an agent’s creative ability. We can recognise that cases like Buried Treasure fail to count because the products do not express the relevant capacities. Further analysis may be nice, but it is not necessary in order to identify which cases count as achievements and why or to understand why achievements are valuable.

Moreover, I suspect that any attempt to give an anti-luck condition is in fact going to end up appealing to some kind of understanding of being caused in the right way. This is because whatever other features we pick out in order to try and avoid lucky counterexamples, we can create a counterexample which has those features – but where those features don’t cause the product in the right way. Remember the Bizarre Benefactor and Bizarre Benefactor Bluff cases discussed earlier. They were based on the following case discussed by Bradford herself:

Rewarding Benefactor: Diligent Don embarks on a sensible and difficult research programme to try to find some buried treasure. A benefactor spots him in the library and, impressed by his diligence, arranges to have some treasure buried for him to find in just the place his research gives him most reason to believe it to be (Bradford 2015, 19).

As Bradford argues, cases like Rewarding Benefactor show that it is not enough for an agent to be competent and to cause the product, nor even for an agent’s competence to cause the product. Instead: “Don must competently cause the product… he must do so *in a certain way*… It is not enough for Don’s competence to be just one link in the chain of causation that results in the discovery; rather his competence must cause it in the way that we usually expect competence to cause discoveries – such as knowledge of the methods for figuring out the most likely locations and so on” (Bradford 2015, 20).

So Bradford’s account also ultimately involves an appeal to the product being caused *in the right way*. Moreover, I suggest that we can produce similar counterexamples to other accounts which are not focused on the structure of causation. Whatever anti-luck condition we impose, we can create a counter-example where meeting that condition causes the product – but in the wrong sort of way. Given this, we should not be too worried that the alternative I am proposing appeals to the idea of causation ‘in the right way’.

**The Amended Hirji account and GERAs**

I think this amendment to Hirji’s account is independently justified: it makes the account simpler and avoids potential counterexamples. But my main concern was to show that we can recognise GERAs as genuine achievements even when they do not involve consciously planned and purposeful activity. Pregnancy can be an achievement even if it was unplanned and even if it goes undiscovered for most of the pregnancy. Birth can be an achievement even if labour begins unexpectedly and one’s behaviour is largely instinctual. Milk production can be an achievement even if the milk is collected accidentally. For the amended Hirji account to recognise these as genuine achievements, they must be seen testing the limits of a perfectionist capacity - a capacity which it is valuable for us to develop and exercise.

Hirji says: “Although I leave the details to other work, it seems to me plausible that the following capacities are intuitively worth developing and exercising: one’s practical rationality, one’s theoretical rationality, one’s creativity, and one’s physical abilities. The exercise of these capacities will constitute achievements ranging from an agent performing a good action with the right reasons and desires, to a philosopher developing a sophisticated argument, to William writing great poetry, to my running ten miles. (Hirji 2019, 18).

As noted above, we often underestimate the purposeful agency involved in GERAs. Pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding often involve significant planning, reasoning and decision-making: fully expressing practical rationality. We may also express the will when we use deliberate and effective effort to manage and endure pain. It is important to highlight these often-overlooked aspects of GERAs. Nonetheless, the most obvious perfectionist capacity which we exercise in GERAs are our physical abilities: GERAs are at their core embodied achievements. They are amazing things that we do with our bodies.

It might be tempting to think that if I am to count as exercising a physical capacity, I must know what I am doing. I must be doing it deliberately. Otherwise, it might seem that we have a mere automatic bodily process, something my body does on its own, and not something that *I* do with my body. I want to push back against this. Including things that my body does automatically or instinctively as things that *I* do is an important part of recognising me as an embodied person. It is true that in some cases we may want to distinguish between what I do and what my body does. This is because sometimes it matters whether something was done intentionally or not. So if I injure someone because of an arm spasm, I can avoid certain types of blame by showing that I did not do it intentionally. As Anscombe argues, certain requests for justification only make sense for intentional actions (Anscombe 1963). Nonetheless, it is still I – and not someone else – who caused the injury. Harms to others that result from reflex actions of our bodies result in what Williams calls ‘agent regret’ (Williams 1976): we recognise ourselves as implicated even if not blameworthy. We can also be required to take on costs to mitigate such harms that we would not be required to take on were the harms nothing to do with us. Similarly, I argue, we should recognise each agent as implicated in the ways in which their body tests the limits of human physical capacities[[13]](#footnote-13) – and should recognise pride in such achievements as appropriate. This doesn’t of course mean that there is no relevant difference between intentional and non-intentional bodily achievements. Moral praise and blame is not usually appropriate for the latter.

Some might worry that my position has absurd implications. If we recognise high volume milk production as an achievement, do we also have to see other bodily functions as achievements: would we have to see the production of a high volume of urine as an achievement? Here we must remember that testing the limits of just any capacity is not enough for achievement. Instead, for testing the limits of a capacity to count as an achievement then the capacity must be one that it is valuable for us to develop and express. Breastmilk production is a reproductive physical capacity which it is valuable to develop and express. Pregnancy tests the limits of physical endurance – another valuable capacity. More work is needed on which capacities are valuable. Issues include whether these being instrumentally valuable is enough or whether some kind of final value is needed, and how that could be understood. We also need to know whether value is relative to context, relative to supposedly general facts about human nature or universal. Urine production is valuable in some specific circumstances. According to the National Geographic, “Ancient Romans valued urine for its ammonia content. They found the natural enemy of dirt and grease valuable for laundering clothes and even whitening teeth… Emperor Vespasian (r. A.D. 69-79) earned a pretty penny by taxing the trade in urine that was gathered at public restrooms.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Milk production, physical strength, physical and mental endurance seem to be valuable for humans more generally. Nonetheless, I would argue that *that* is the discussion we need to have. We need to ask whether the capacity displayed is valuable not whether the agent knows what they are doing.

There is also a less extreme position to which I can retreat. Even if we want to avoid recognising automatic bodily processes as achievements, we should still recognise cases where the agent is clearly doing something even when they do not know what they are doing. In Accidental Milk Stash, Sally does not know that she is producing and collecting milk, but nonetheless this is something she does, by breastfeeding her baby while wearing the breastshield. When in labour, a woman may move her body instinctively, knowing that she must walk, crouch, push but not necessarily knowing why. Nonetheless she is actively moving. If we must draw a distinction between what I do with my body and what is merely done by my body, we should at the very least recognise that I may do things with my body without knowing why I am doing it. Such behaviour can still express valuable capacities.

**Back to the Buried Treasure Cases**

I noted above that some people might be dissatisfied with the discussion of the variations of Buried Treasure in which Lon’s sister buries the treasure for him to find. First, they might think that there is an achievement in the Bizarre Benefactor Bluff case: Lon achieves something *by* pulling off the deception. Second, they might think that we do not have the same product in these variations as we did in the original case: in the original case, Lon *discovers* the treasure while in the variations, he digs up treasure that has been hidden for him to find.

I agree that the product may be different in the different variations of Buried Treasure. One of the morals from Hirji’s discussion is that we have to be more careful about how we describe the relevant achievements and that the proper description of an achievement often includes the way in which it was produced. In Bradford’s Deserving Discovery case, Diligent Don finds the lost treasure after a sensible research programme. I would say that Don *finds the lost treasure*, while Lucky Lon, who finds the treasure due to luck in Buried Treasure, *stumbles on* it. In the Benefactor cases, Lon and Don do not find lost treasure at all – they find treasure that has been buried for them. In Benefactor Bluff, Lon may have also achieved something by conning his sister, but this is not the same achievement as finding the lost treasure. Reflecting on the appropriate description of the achievements in these cases clearly shows that they do not support adding an epistemic condition.[[15]](#footnote-15)

**GERAs and Measuring Motherhood**

Quill R Kukla, writing as Rebecca Kukla, has explicitly criticised the view of birth as a “maternal achievement test” (Kukla 2008, 74). Kukla argues that mothers who do not fulfil our expectations of a ‘good’ birth are seen as failures as mothers and that this is held to reflect their overall mothering abilities: “as women are called upon to plan and design their births, they are invited to think of birth, not primarily as the first day of the rest of their children's lives, but as their "special day," during which their tenure as mothers will be symbolically foreshadowed and put on display, just as weddings are often framed as the bride's special day and as the symbolic moment at which the perfection (or imperfection) of the marriage is performed as a spectacle.” (Kukla, 74). Kukla argues that this elevation of birth is part of a pattern that labels underprivileged and socially marginalised women as deficient (82) and distorts the focus of public health policies (83). As well as these wider effects, the impact on the well-being of vulnerable new mothers of feeling like a failure can be devastating.

I think that the above account of achievement not only shows that we should count birth and other GERAs as achievements but shows how we can do so without contributing to the phenomenon that Kukla identifies and rightly critiques. Birth and other GERAs are achievements because they test the limits of human capacities which are valuable to develop and express. These are typically physical capacities or capacities which combine the mental and the physical, such as endurance of great pain. GERAs are thus achievements relative to those physical and mental capacities. Does recognising birth and other GERAs as achievements imply that those who tick the right boxes are better mothers – or worse that someone who does not tick these boxes is a bad mother? It would only do so if we though that the important capacities for motherhood were these physical and mental capacities. This is clearly an impoverished picture of motherhood. Once we see this, we can recognise birth and other GERAs as significant physical and mental achievements. We can understand why it may be important to a women to have a certain type of birth. We can understand why she may feel proud of her birth or regretful if she is unable to have the birth she would prefer.[[16]](#footnote-16) We can do all this, without implying that what type of birth you have is a measure of how good you are as a mother, as a woman or as a person.

**References**

Anscombe, G.E.M, *Intention*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1957; 2nd edition, 1963.

Bradford, G. 2012. 'Evil Achievements'; *The Philosophers' Magazine 59*.

Bradford, G. 2013. 'The Value of Achievements'; *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly 94*.

Bradford, G. 2015. *Achievement*. Oxford. Oxford University Press.

Bradford, G. 2016. “Achievement, Wellbeing, and Value.” *Philosophy Compass* 11 (12):795-803.

Crisp, R. 2006. 'Hedonism Reconsidered'; *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*

*73*.

Gettier, E. 1963. 'Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?'; *Analysis 23*.

Greco, J. 2010. *Achieving Knowledge*. New York: Cambridge University Press.  
Greco, J. 2012. ‘A (Different) Virtue Epistemology’; *Philosophy and Phenomenological*

*Research* 85 (1), 1-26.

Hirji, Sukaina (2019). Not Always Worth the Effort: Difficulty and the Value of Achievement. *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 100 (2):525-548.

Hurka, T. 2006a): 'Games and the Good'; *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society,*

*Supplementary Volumes 80*.

James, L. 2005. 'Achievement and the Meaningfulness of Life'; *Philosophical Papers 34*.

Keller, S. 2004. 'Welfare and the Achievement of Goals'; *Philosophical Studies 121*.

Keller, S. 2009. 'Welfare as Success'; *Noûs 43*.

Kukla, Rebecca (2008). Measuring mothering. *International Journal of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics* 1 (1):67-90.

Lin, Eden (2016). Achievement by Gwen Bradford. *Analysis* 76 (3):402-404.

Portmore, D. 2007. 'Welfare, Achievement, and Self-Sacrifice'; *Philosophy Compass 4*.

Sosa, E. 2007, *Apt Belief and Reflective Knowledge, Volume 1: A Virtue Epistemology*,

Oxford: Oxford University Press.  
  
Sosa, E. 2011. *Knowing Full Well*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.  
Sosa, E. 2015. *Judgement and Agency*. OUP

Von Kriegstein, H. 2017a. ‘Effort and achievement.’ *Utilitas*, *29*(1): 27-51.

von Kriegstein, H. 2019a. “Succeeding Competently: Towards an Anti-Luck Condition for Achievement.” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy 49 (3):394-418*

von Kriegstein, Hasko (2019b). On being difficult: towards an account of the nature of difficulty. *Philosophical Studies* 176 (1):45-64.

Williams, Bernard (1976). Moral Luck. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 50:115-35.

1. https://edition.cnn.com/2019/06/06/health/pregnant-women-peak-endurance-trnd/index.html [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.healthline.com/health/pregnancy/cervix-dilation-chart> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Thanks to Teresa Baron for this statistic. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Nutrition During Lactation*, Institute of Medicine (US) Committee on Nutritional Status During Pregnancy and Lactation, chapter 5.

   Washington (DC): National Academies Press (US); 1991. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.parentingscience.com/calories-in-breast-milk.html>Thanks to Phyll Buchanan for sharing this link. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <https://milkgenomics.org/article/protective-cells-in-breast-milk-for-the-infant-and-the-mother/> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Bradford’s monograph built on a number of existing journal articles and, unsurprisingly, has been followed by several more. In a useful overview, Von Kriegstein (2019a) cites Keller 2004, 2009; James 2005; Hurka 2006a; Crisp 2006; Portmore 2007; Bradford 2012, 2013, von Kriegstein 2017a. To this we might add: Bradford 2016; Lin 2016; Hirji 2019, Von Kriegstein 2019b. Von Kriegstein (2019a) also notes that there is also a relevant body of work on achievement in epistemology in the context of the view that knowledge should be understood in terms of achievement (Sosa 2007, 2011, 2015; Greco 2010, 2012) – and urges ethicists to engage with this literature (2019, p. 3). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. It is tempting to think that knowledge is justified true belief. Gettier’s famous counterexamples involve a person who has a justified belief which is true by some wild coincidence – even though the beliefs from which they inferred it were false. For example, Smith has a justified belief that Jones owns a Ford. So he justifiably believes that Jones own a Ford or is in Barcelona. In fact, Jones does not own a Ford, but he is in Barcelona. So Smith’s belief is justified and true but it does not count as knowledge. (Gettier 1963). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. I identify Sally’s achievement as the production of a stash of breastmilk. Without Anne’s actions, Sally would not have produced this stash: she would still have produced the same amount of breastmilk but instead of forming a stash, it would have been thrown down the sink. I still think (a) that Sally’s achievement is correctly identified as producing the stash and (b) that this is *Sally*’s achievement. There is also a joint achievement (making the stash) which requires Anne to collect and store the milk and Sally to produce the milk. But Sally’s part of this on its own counts as an achievement. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This case is inspired by Bradford’s Rewarding Benefactor discussed later. (Bradford 2015, 19). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. An obvious response to this case is to argue that the training was difficult. Hirji responds that the effortless exercise of the musician’s capacity is an achievement over and above the difficult obtaining of the skill. To show this, she suggests we consider an alternative case in which the musician breaks his wrist and is thus unable to perform. The musician has, through no fault of his own, achieved less in this case. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. I am not convinced this is actually so. The logistics which Judith has to navigate to carve out time to write may add up to a greater exercise of rationality than William’s poems. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Hirji like Bradford, relativises achievement to the agent. Thus on Hirji’s account, an achievement must test the limits of *the agent’s* capacities (Hirji 2019, 19). In response to concerns that we may wish to say that some things are greater agent neutral achievements than others, Hirji suggests that there may be two different concepts of achievement: “Understood in this way, Bradford and I are interested in the agent-relative concept” (Hirji 2019, p. 22 footnote 21). This seems strange to me given Hirji’s solution to the way in which we both want to say that Judith’s achievement is greater than William’s given all the obstacles she had to endure and that William’s was greater given the quality of the poems. She resolves that tension by saying that achievement is relative to capacity, so something may be a great achievement relative to one capacity but not relative to another. It seems to me that we see exactly the same sense of being pulled in two different ways when we consider agent-neutral versus agent-relative capacities. Thus it seems we should give a similar response: something may be a great achievement for a certain agent (because it tests the limits of their capacities) but not a great agent neutral achievement (because it does not test the limits of human capacities). GERAs are often both agent-neutral and agent relative achievements, testing the limits of both the individual agent and human capacities. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. I thank Jonathan Grosse for pressing me on this point and for bringing the historical facts to my attention. https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2016/04/160414-history-bad-taxes-tax-day/#:~:text=The%20Romans%20Would%20Tax%20Your%20Urine&text=The%20Roman%20Emperor%20Vespasian%20taxed,ammonia%20content%E2%80%94from%20public%20restrooms. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. I thank Alex Geddes for pressing me on this. He also suggested that thinking about the correct description of the cases shows that they are not really analogues of the Gettier cases at all. This seems right to me. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. My first child was born vaginally at home. However, due to injuries that I suffered during the birth, I was advised that any subsequent pregnancies should be delivered by caesarean section. My son was duly born in the hospital ‘through the sunroof’. Although his birth was lovely, and although I recognise caring for my newborn while recovering from serious abdominal surgery as a different type of achievement, I still feel some regret that I was not able to have another vaginal birth. It is not a moralised regret, but something akin to the regret I felt when I believed that a foot injury was going to prevent me from ever fulfilling my goal of running a marathon. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)