FAILURE
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If achievement is among the goods in life, then it is natural to think that failure is a bad. But what might explain that? In this paper, I draw from my account of the value of achievement and perfectionist ill-being to explore the badness of failure. It turns out that failure is complex, and explaining its disvalue involves conceptual resources that make it interestingly asymmetrical with the positive value of achievement.

Let's begin by considering achievements and their value. Many people, at least at first, are inclined to think that achievements accomplish some great good, and this is why they are valuable. Curing cancer is a great good, doing so would be an achievement, and it would be valuable just because curing cancer is a great good. But this "Simple Product" view of the value of achievement is too simple. Many paradigmatic great achievements accomplishing nothing whatsoever apart from their own doing. Climbing Mount Everest, running a marathon, or reaching the South Pole are all achievements, but none of these results in anything beyond their own doing, let alone a great good. So it is not an essential feature of achievements that they result in a great good, or even any good at all.

Achievements are a motley crew: running a marathon, curing cancer, getting your driver's license, writing a novel, baking a soufflé, learning a new language, memorizing a Shakespeare sonnet, memorizing all of Shakespeare's sonnets, landing a spacecraft on Mars, organizing the pantry, stopping the levee from breaking, knitting a sweater. One feature they all appear to share is that they are, to some degree, *difficult*.

Indeed, even a perfectly ordinary activity can be an achievement so long as it is difficult enough for the person who is doing it. Tying my shoes is not an achievement for me in ordinary circumstances, but it certainly would be, say, if I could only use one hand, or for a small child who

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is just learning how. Likewise, eliminate the difficulty from what would otherwise be an achievement, and it loses its status. Taking a helicopter to the top of Mount Everest is not an achievement, but climbing is.[1] It's reasonable to conclude that difficulty is an essential feature of achievement. And indeed, most philosophical discussions of achievement recognize difficulty as a central feature (Hurka 1993, Portmore 2007, Bradford 2015).

But surely not just anything that's difficult is an achievement. A hare-brained scheme that succeeds only by the wildest deviant causal chain, no matter how difficult, does not seem to be an achievement. If Charlie, who has never golfed in his life, takes a wild swing at the ball facing the wrong direction and a bird catches the ball mid-air and deposits it into the hole, the apparent hole-in-one is not an achievement for Charlie.

As a result, any good account of achievement will need something of an "anti-luck" condition. It's important, however, not to throw the baby out with the bathwater on this point. Achievements often involve a significant amount of luck, which neither detracts from their status as achievements nor their value. There's more to be said, but, in brief, my preferred view is that achievements are also characterized by a certain degree of *competency* – the product or outcome of an achievement must be *competently caused* by the achiever. This amounts to have some degree of understanding about their activities. You need to know what you're doing, in a nutshell.

These two features, difficulty and competence, are what I argue are essential to achievement. But how can achievements then be valuable? To be sure, competence seems like a good candidate for value, but difficulty is something we typically avoid and dislike.

Hedonism can straightforwardly say that we typically enjoy the feeling of accomplishment that comes after completing something difficult – the more difficult, the better the feeling of relief that it's over. That may be

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[1] A well-worn example that needs the following qualification: it turns out that flying a helicopter anywhere near Mount Everest is incredibly difficult, given the weather conditions and so on. So while *taking* a helicopter to the top might not be an achievement, flying one there certainly would be. Indeed, as of writing this, it has only been done once, by Dider Dalsalle, in 2005. Thank you to Christine Tappolet for drawing my attention to this remarkable achievement.

true, but it's far from clear that all worthwhile achievements result in more pleasure than pain, and, moreover, hedonism quite simply has no way to distinguish the mere experience of achievement from the actual achievement – achievement is one of the big-ticket items drawing people away from the experience machine.

Desire satisfaction theory can give an account of the value of achievements that's so straightforward it barely merits explaining: an achievement simply is a desire that was difficult to satisfy, and now that it's satisfied, it's valuable. While appealing in its simplicity, as with hedonism, it's only compelling if the view itself is compelling more broadly. Moreover – and this is controversial – I'm inclined to think that achievements can still be valuable even for someone who doesn't desire them or even desire the particular thing they are achieving. And, one might also point out, the difficulty required for achievement doesn't entail a difference in the value of the satisfaction of the desire.

This leaves the objective list theory, which of course can add achievement to its list. But this, of course, does not illuminate *why* achievements are valuable.

Perfectionism is the most natural fit for explaining the value of achievement. The manifestation of the best of human capabilities seems most evidently on display in achievement. Perfectionism, unlike other theories of value, can value difficulty *directly*.

Difficulty can be characterized as the exercise of one of our fundamental capacities: the *will*. The will, as I am understanding it, includes our ability to exert effort, and doing something difficult simply is a matter of doing something that involves a significant amount of effort. Hence, difficulty is valuable because it is a matter of the excellent exercise of the will. Competence is, obviously enough, an exercise of the rational capacities. Putting these two things together in the same process toward a unified outcome is an instance of organic unity – or so I argue – and, as a result, achievements have significant value in virtue of their essential features.[2]

One perhaps surprising feature that is missing from my account of achievements: a *goal*. This is no mistake. Some achievements involve surprising outcomes that would be artificial to characterize as goals, yet are

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[2] For the full account: Bradford 2015.

creditable to the achiever, such as discoveries, inventions, and other projects that evolve and develop in surprising ways. Achievements nevertheless involve competence, or practical reasoning. I'll return to this later.

Interestingly, on this account, many failures are also achievements. Insofar as any process is difficult and competent, it is an achievement, even if it involves a goal that was not attained. Perhaps even more interestingly, when a failure is an achievement, it "has value *in virtue of* it being an achievement" (Bradford 2015, p. 172).

But it's natural to resist the thought that *all* failures are *nothing but* intrinsically good. In fact, it's quite natural to think that at least some failures are not *merely* the absence of the good of success, but themselves constitute a robust, intrinsic bad.

So we come to the central question of this paper: just what is failure, and why is it intrinsically bad?

THE SIMPLE PRODUCT VIEW

It is tempting at first to begin with cases like this:

> *Sick and Still Bald*. Researchers at the pharmaceutical company DrugCorp aim to develop a cure for male-pattern baldness. DrugCorp runs a test for their most promising formulation. It turns out, however, that not only does the drug not cure baldness, it is in fact an awful toxin, and makes all the test subjects horribly ill for weeks.

DrugCorp's attempt to cure baldness was a failure. One might think that it was a failure precisely because it resulted in something bad: all the test subjects got sick. A failure, one might then conclude, is characterized by a product that's intrinsically bad, and this is what explains the intrinsic badness of failure: failure results in some great bad. Further, one might then also claim that this is what explains the badness of failure: the badness of failure is a matter of the intrinsic badness of the product. Call this the Simple Product view of the badness of failure.

But just as the Simple Product view doesn't explain the value of achievement, the Simple Product view doesn't explain the badness of failure. Many failures do not result

in intrinsically bad outcomes; rather, the outcome is neutral or even intrinsically good.

Consider:

> *Still Bald*. Researchers at the pharmaceutical company DrugCorp aim to develop a cure for male-pattern baldness. DrugCorp runs a test for their most promising formulation. It turns out, however, that the drug does not cure baldness. Nothing happens to the test subjects.

The product in Still Bald is intrinsically neutral. Yet it is still a failure, and intrinsically bad as such.

Moreover, some failures have products that are intrinsically good. Consider this semi-fictionalized story of the invention of the telephone:

> *Bell*. It is well known that Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone. However, he began his project with the aim of inventing a hearing aid to help his wife and mother, both of whom were Deaf. But Bell's experiments with acoustic technology did not produce a hearing aid. Instead, the result was the telephone.

Intuitively, Bell's attempt to make a hearing aid failed. Of course, the outcome of Bell's process was the telephone, which, let's suppose, is intrinsically good.[3] So it's possible for a failure to have an intrinsically good product. Further, while Bell's attempt is intrinsically bad in the respect that it is a failure, it nevertheless seems intrinsically good in total. So a failure can be all things considered intrinsically good.

In any case, failure is neither characterized by an intrinsically bad product, nor is an intrinsically bad product necessary for the intrinsic badness of failure. We should reject the Simple Product view failure, just as we should reject the Simple Product view of achievement. We

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[3] One might point out that a telephone is merely instrumentally good, but the first telephone can be seen as an instance of an object that is intrinsically good in virtue of its instrumental value (Kagan 1998), or, perhaps more plausibly, the product of Bell's invention is a world in which telephones exist, which at the very least has greater intrinsic value than one where they do not. That is to say, Bell made the world a better place by inventing the telephone.

should turn instead to the theory of value that does the best job explaining the value of achievement to see whether it can offer an explanation of the badness of failure. This is perfectionism.

TRIPARTITE PERFECTIONISM

Explaining why anything is intrinsically bad can be surprisingly difficult.[4] It is especially challenging for perfectionism, which is the theory of value that best explains the value of achievement.

Perfectionism holds that the exercise of fundamental human capacities is good. We fare better to the extent we exercise our fundamental capacities, and we fare less well the less we exercise them. But the result of this account is that the *worst* we can fare is *zero – not* exercising any capacities at all. This point on its own constitutes an objection to perfectionism, since one might think that surely there are some intrinsic welfare bads – pain, for example. But traditional perfectionism must hold that pain and other candidate intrinsic bads are at worst instrumental bads, and any apparent intrinsic bad is merely privative.

Tripartite perfectionism appeals to teleology in order to explain at least some intrinsic bads (Bradford 2021). Traditional perfectionism, as I have just characterized it, holds that there are fundamental human capacities, and that the exercise of those capacities is good. Tripartite perfectionism, in contrast, holds that there is a third evaluative category: the *fulfillment* of the exercise of the capacities. Capacities are, after all, capacities to *do* certain things. The capacity for theoretical rationality is the capacity to attain certain epistemic states, such as knowledge or understanding. It isn't simply a capacity to engage in meandering cognitive activity, rather, it is the capacity to *reason* through ideas and evidence to gain knowledge, understanding, or at the very least justified beliefs. The rational capacity is *fulfilled* when such states are attained. Tripartite perfectionism values not only the exercise of the rational capacity, but also the *fulfillment* of its exercise. It values not only rational activity, but also the outcome, so to speak, of this activity.

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[4] See (Kagan 2014) for an excellent overview.

More precisely, tripartite perfectionism values the *successful* outcome of the activity. Sometimes, of course, we may exercise our capacity for theoretical rationality, but gain no knowledge – as much as we reason our way through the evidence, there is no conclusion to draw. Tripartite perfectionism nevertheless can value this *exercise* of rationality. What distinguishes tripartite perfectionism from the traditional approach is that the *successful outcome* of the exercise of a capacity is of *additional* value, beyond the exercise of the capacity itself. Indeed, traditional perfectionism values states such as knowledge *indirectly* – it is the exercise, not the outcome, that's valuable (von Kriegstein, forthcoming).

Tripartite perfectionism therefore can distinguish between the relative value of exercising a capacity more and less excellently, just as traditional perfectionism can, and between the successful and non-successful exercise of a capacity. Attaining knowledge constitutes the successful exercise of the capacity for theoretical rationality, *not* attaining knowledge, even after much rational activity, is a non-successful exercise of theoretical rationality. The non-successful exercise has less value, according to tripartite perfectionism, than the successful exercise. Such a non-successful exercise is not intrinsically bad; rather, it is a privation of good.

Most importantly, tripartite perfectionism can explain intrinsic bads. It can distinguish not only between the successful and non-successful exercise of a capacity, but also the *failed* exercise of a capacity. Suppose Sam exercises his rational capacity perfectly well, and yet comes to the wrong conclusion. Sam has weighed all the evidence appropriately, but nevertheless forms a belief that is justified yet false. Sam's rational capacity has produced an epistemic state, but it is not the sort of state that the rational capacity is *for*. The rational capacity is *not* fulfilled. It is not simply *unfulfilled* either. Rather, it is "malfilled," as I'll call it. The malfillment of the rational capacity is intrinsically bad.

Tripartite perfectionism therefore has the resources to claim not only that the fulfillment of capacities is intrinsically good, but, more to the point, that the malfillment of capacities is intrinsically bad.

We can now develop the account of achievement and explain both the intrinsic badness of failure as well as some further features of achievement.

According to the account in *Achievement* (Bradford 2015), any exercise of the will and rationality are intrinsically good, and more is better. As long as something is sufficiently difficult and so on, it's an achievement and therefore good – even if it results in failure. But as interestingly counterintuitive as the conclusion that failures can be intrinsically good may be, it does, of course, clash somewhat with the very natural thought that failure can be intrinsically bad.

Tripartite perfectionism invites us to consider the teleological nature of human capacities. In this case, it's the capacity for *practical rationality*. In the original account of achievement, rationality is a matter of *competence* regarding the process. As we just saw, I embrace the interesting feature of achievement that having a goal isn't strictly speaking necessary for something to be an achievement.

However, having a goal *is* necessary for an achievement to be a *success*, and, I propose, it is also necessary for something to be a failure. To develop this idea, I will elaborate on the teleological structure of practical rationality. Just as the function of theoretical rationality is to attain knowledge (or understanding or whatever may be the best epistemic states), the function of practical rationality, one may say, is *to attain ends*. Practical rationality is therefore successfully fulfilled when an end is attained (Bradford 2021).

In the original account of achievement, I focused largely on the *exercise* of practical rationality, understood as *competence* of the process of achievement, i.e., the planning and understanding of one's actions. Now, by appealing to tripartite perfectionism, we can also add that the function of practical rationality is fulfilled when one attains an *end*.

An end isn't a necessary feature of achievement, but now we may say that it *is* a feature of *success*. Interestingly, then, success and achievement are distinct – something may be a success without being an achievement and vice versa (at least in theory). A success that is not an achievement is the successful attainment of an end by way of one's own efforts, where those efforts are

not sufficiently intense that the activity is difficult. Peeling a banana, answering the telephone, making a sandwich, and so forth, are all successes – ends are attained, but not with much effort. Achievements without success might include unplanned or semi-unplanned achievements, such as inventions. They nevertheless involve successful attainment of ends, just not in the way one may think, as I will discuss later.

So, then, what is the *malfillment* of practical rationality? What is the opposite of attaining an end? One might be tempted, of course, to say that it is a matter of failing to attain the end, but this, of course, is a mere *privation* of the successful fulfillment of the capacity, not a *malfillment*. The analogue to belief is simply *withholding* rather than forming a belief – i.e, one fails to come to have a belief.

What I propose is this: the malfillment of practical rationality is the obtaining of the *negative contrastive* of a contrastive end.

I've now introduced even more terms of art! I will explain.

CONTRASTIVE ENDS

Many (but certainly not all) of the ends that we hold are *contrastive*. Contrastive ends take a certain form: *to ϕ rather than ψ*. Although, as I have just said, not all of our ends take this form, many of them do, perhaps more than one might think.

Consider, for example, the Houston marathon. Runners entering the race may, of course, have winning the race as their end, but only the very few elite runners truly aim to win. Moreover, it's hardly the case that *not* winning the race constitutes a failure for the thousands of other runners. Quite the contrary: for many, simply finishing the race is an achievement and a success. What makes something a success or a failure for a particular runner is determined by their specific ends: both what they aim *for* and what they aim *against*.

> *Frida*. Frida is an elite runner, and aims to place in the women's race, rather than anything less.

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> *Georgia*. Georgia is a seasoned recreational runner. Georgia aims to run in at least as fast a time as last year, rather than slower.
>
> *Henry*. This is Henry's first marathon. His end is to run the whole course, rather than stopping to walk.

The idea of contrastive ends is simple enough. Success is a matter of attaining what we can call the positive contrastive, and failure is a matter of not simply *not* attaining the positive contrastive, but rather attaining the *negative contrastive*. If Frida finishes first, she succeeds; if she finishes seventh, she fails. If Frida finishes in 564th place, she fails. But if Georgia finishes in 564th place, and one minute faster than her time last year, Georgia succeeds. Henry succeeds so long as he crosses the finish line having run the course. If, however, just moments after the start, there is an unexpected tornado, and the officials cancel the race, no one attains either their positive contrastive or negative contrastive. In this case, there is a privation of attaining ends. Failures are a matter of the *negative contrastive*.[5]

Now, there is more to say about these cases (as well as a world of possibilities in between). But let us say more about contrastive ends.

One might be skeptical that there are such ends. Now, first note that the claim is simply that *at least some* of our ends take this form. Importantly, it is a largely unremarked-upon yet easily observable point that by and large, we do not *consciously entertain* or reflect explicitly upon our ends, no matter their form. One doesn't typically wake up in the morning and say to oneself, "ah, yes, my end is to rise from bed, and take a shower." One simply *does* this. But it is certainly an end nevertheless.

Nevertheless, some philosophers write as if rational planning is an active, vivid, and explicitly conscious part

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[5] Consider the badness of pain for tripartite perfectionism: pain is bad because it constitutes the malfillment of a standing end *to feel good rather than feel bad* (Bradford 2021, p. 14). The conceptual resources that I invoke in the explanation of pains badness are what I am developing here to explain the robust badness of any failure (although I did not use the term "contrastive end" in that paper). After all, the badness of pain, according to tripartite perfectionism, is a particular instance of the more general bad of a malfillment of practical rationality.

of our thinking, and if it is not, our lives would be better if it were. But this seems extremely un-lifelike and inaccurate as a depiction of what rational reflection is like or what it should be. Practical reasoning and rational planning need not be explicit in order for our actions to make sense, or in order for our practical reasoning to be excellent.

It is also an easily observable point that we may refine and develop our ends as we proceed with some project. One starts out with certain aims, and then, as the project progress, one may discover that this is not, in fact, the direction you'd like things to go, that you had something else in mind entirely, or that you have just now realized a better or more detailed outcome than what you thought. All this changing horses midstream is entirely compatible with your activity being, in fact, end-directed, and with there being an identifiable end with an identifiable form.

At least some of the time, and I am willing to hazard, more than one might realize, our ends take a contrastive form. We do not simply aim to f but to do so in a rather specific way. More to the point, contained in our aiming is something that we very much aim *not* to do instead. For example: Anne aims to have the paper accepted for publication *rather than* rejected; Bianca aims to perform the aria and receive applause, rather than silence or boos; Carlos aims to sell the car for $15,000, rather than $10,000; Dave aims to come in first place rather than anything else.[6]

The claim is that *failure*, rather than mere *privation* of attaining the end, is a matter of the attainment of the *negative contrastive*.

We can understand contrastive ends as involving (at least) two places of contrast. The positive contrastive, which is what the agent wills and when attained constitutes success. The *negative contrastive* is what the agent *aims against* bringing about (I will elaborate more shortly). If a negative contrastive comes about, this is sufficient for failure to that extent. Ends may be more complex. Positive or negative contrastives may involve many disjuncts or conjuncts. Something may be a partial success if some components of the positive contrastive

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[6] Hasko von Kriegstein gets close to this idea in (von Kriegstein 2014, p. 28 ff).

attain, or a partial failure if some components of the negative contrastive attain.

Suppose Kristine's end is to bake a cake – specifically, her end is to bake a cake that is excellent, rather than awful. If the cake that Kristine bakes is simply passable, and neither excellent nor awful, the cake is neither a success nor a failure. If her end is to bake an excellent cake *rather than anything inferior*, it is a failure.

In any case, what counts as a success or a failure is, therefore, *relative* to the agent's ends – it is a matter of whether or not the outcome fulfills or malfills the agent's ends. The ends, of course, are up to the agent.

Whether or not the outcome of the activity constitutes a fulfilment or malfilment is an objective matter of fact. But just what would count as a fulfilment or a malfilment is a matter of the agent's end. Success and failure, therefore, have both objective and subjective aspects.

The range of possibilities from success to failure is wide. Mediocrity is multifarious. There are various ways in which something can be a failure, a mere privation of success, or even a success in some respects. Indeed, according to my account of achievement, in some cases, a mediocre achievement is nevertheless *an achievement*, and valuable in the same ways and for the same reasons as greater achievements, that is, to the extent that it is difficult and competently caused. Indeed, as we know, even robust failures can *still* be achievements according to my view. The difference is that contrastive ends provide further resources for value-theoretic discriminations among these variations in the range between utter failure, through the full spectrum of mediocrity, and ultimately wild success.

What's key about negative contrastives is that they constitute a negative end – something one *intends against*. We could further illuminate this idea by drawing from a distinction that is familiar from medieval philosophy – Duns Scotus, in particular. Scotus distinguishes between willing (*velle*), not willing (*non velle*), and *willing-against* (*nolle*). *Nolle* is a distinct attitude from mere *privation* of willing – a distinct attitude of willing-against, or anti-willing.[7] We might

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[7] See, for instance, Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio* II, distinction 6, question 2. Thank you to Thomas Ward for guidance.

draw from this idea of *nilling* to claim that there is an attitude that is the robust opposite of intending, anti-intending, or nilling, that takes negative contrastives as its target. So, one might suppose, with contrastive ends, we don't simply not will (or not intend) the negative contrastive – rather, we *nil* it (to coin yet another phrase).

Acknowledging an opposite attitude from intending that is not merely privative opens more conceptual space for a robust bad, rather than a merely privative bad. For comparison, consider the challenge of accounting for robust rather than privative bads as it is posed to desire satisfaction theories. As Kagan points out, if S desires X but X does not obtain, S's desire has merely *not been satisfied* – a privation of what otherwise would have been good, rather than the robust presence of an intrinsic bad (Kagan 2014). What desire satisfaction theory needs in order to establish intrinsic bad is an opposite attitude, such as aversion. What I am suggesting here is similar: when ends are contrastive, we might suppose that there is a robust attitude toward the negative contrastive which is the opposite of willing, *nilling*.

Now one might be skeptical that (a) ends really are or can be contrastive and (b) that there is indeed an attitude of nilling that is opposite to willing.

First, then, (a) asks whether people really have such ends, or to what extent they are common. There's not much I can say to defend this apart from pointing to the natural appealingness of the description and inviting you to reflect on your own intentions (and nillings). A better question to raise is whether such contrastive ends are *explicitly* held. I am not claiming at all that these ends – or any ends, for that matter – are explicitly held in mind. It is simply not necessary that one consciously and explicitly thinks to himself, "I intend to φ rather than ψ." It is simply a commonsense feature of human agency that it is not necessary for something being an end that it be explicitly held in mind. Indeed, by and large, our ends (of any form) are not explicitly contemplated. When was the last time you explicitly thought to yourself, "ah yes, my end is to φ …"? To be sure, we certainly do say to ourselves things like, "I shall make a cup of coffee," but we do not always formulate our intentions as ends consciously or explicitly.

Turning to (b), skepticism about nilling, my reply is that I find it to be deeply appealing based simply on the basis of introspection, and support from the fact that this feature of agency that has been discussed (albeit sparsely) at least since 700 years ago, thanks to Duns Scotus. In any case, I do not need *indubitable* support for nilling – the form of my argument is to propose nilling as a distinct, opposite attitude of willing, show that it is at least somewhat independently intuitively plausible and illuminates the account. The coherence of the overall picture provides support for its various components.

But one might press that nilling ψ is just as well described as *willing not-ψ*.[8] Now, I think a full exploration of these issues in practical reasoning would take an entire paper of its own. But, to clarify, the proposal is to follow something like what Duns Scotus has in mind, namely that nilling is distinct and not simply defined in terms of content or a matter of privation of willing.[9] The comparison is to the opposite attitudes of desire and aversion. While it's consistent to be averse to X and desire not-X, they do not amount to the same thing. Likewise, the claim here is that nilling ψ is not the same thing as not willing ψ, or willing not-ψ. The claim is that the distinction is one of the attitude, not just a distinction of content.

That said, one nevertheless might remain skeptical that there is a distinct attitude of nilling, but, in any case, it is not essential for the account of failure. It is merely

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[8] Thank you to Mauro Rossi for objections on this issue that pushed me to clarify.

[9] Duns Scotus describes the distinction: "I say there is a twofold act of the will, namely, to like [*velle*] and to dislike [*nolle*], for dislike is a positive act of the will whereby it turns away from the distasteful and shuns the inconvenient, whereas to like or love is the act whereby it accepts some appropriate or suitable object" (*Ord*. II, dist. 6, q. 2). It appears that Scotus sees willing and nilling, here translated as liking and disliking, as indeed akin to liking and disliking, which are opposing attitudes. This supports that the distinction is made in terms of the attitudes themselves rather than their content. Further, *nolle* is not simply a matter of not-willing, since the distinction between not willing and nilling allows Duns Scotus to develop his account of the freedom of the will and moral responsibility. For example, one cannot nil what one knows to be good or right, but one may not will it, and instead will something else, such as one's own happiness. Even though the action that pursues one's happiness is in conflict with what is right, in this case, it does not amount to *nilling* what is right.

suggested as a way to further illuminate or enrich contrastive ends. The structure of contrastive ends on their own suffices to explain the robust badness of the malfillment of practical rationality.

This, then, is the view. Failure is a matter of the obtaining of a negative contrastive. It is an intrinsic bad according to tripartite perfectionism because it constitutes the malfillment of practical rationality.

Now let me turn to address the peculiar point that failures nevertheless can be achievements according to my view. As I acknowledged earlier, failures can be achievements; moreover and interestingly, failures are also valuable as achievements. Now, what I have developed in this paper supports that failure is *also* intrinsically bad. So a failure may involve *some* intrinsic good – insofar as it shares good-making features with achievement – but insofar as it involves the attaining of a negative contrastive, a failure also involves intrinsic bad. Whether any particular failure is *overall* intrinsically good or bad, or the extent to which it is either, is a matter of the *relative value* of these components.

We now have the matter of the relative value of failures. Why are some failures better or worse than others? To begin, let's look at the relative value of the various components of achievements and failures.

THE RELATIVE DISVALUE OF FAILURE

Much of this depends on the details of tripartite perfectionism. Recall that there are three components relevant for value, according to tripartite perfectionism: the capacity, its exercise, and its fulfillment. The relative value of each of these components can be developed in a variety of ways. By and large, most perfectionists will agree that a capacity, simply on its own, is not intrinsically good; rather, the *exercise* of the capacity is intrinsically good. Tripartite perfectionism allows that both the exercise and its fulfillment may be intrinsically good. But just how good is the exercise of a capacity compared to its fulfillment, and how bad is malfillment?

Some may be attracted to a view that hews closely to traditional perfectionism: the main source of value is the exercise of the capacity, and fulfillment adds some, but a comparatively small, amount. On this view, attempt

is rewarded heavily, incorporating the thought that no effort is wasted: even if an attempt is not successful, success would add only slightly more positive value. Similarly, malfillment contributes a relatively small amount of intrinsic disvalue. Since attempt is worth a lot, and malfillment has a small amount of disvalue, failures in many cases may be overall intrinsically good. Each failure is only *somewhat* less good overall than it would be had the same attempt resulted in success.

Alternatively, one might favor a view according to which fulfillment is the main source of value, and exercise is worth a comparatively smaller amount. Those who are inclined to think that efforts are wasted if unsuccessful will be attracted to this view, which heavily rewards success, and heavily penalizes failure. The badness of failure can easily outweigh attempt, according to this approach, meaning that failure can be net intrinsically bad.

Further variations arise. We might opt for *asymmetry* across the positive value of fulfillment and the negative value of malfillment. Some might wish to claim that fulfillment is a greater good than malfillment is a bad. Combined with the second of the above views, this asymmetry would continue to reward success heavily, but penalize failure only slightly. But, since unsuccessful attempt is only worth a very small amount of positive value, many failures would be overall intrinsically bad, since the small amount of positive value from success could be outweighed by a small yet just slightly greater disvalue of malfillment.

Alternatively still, we might favor a *conditional* view: exercise of a capacity is valuable only on condition of fulfillment, and not otherwise. This approach gives an all-or-nothing take: attempts are valuable only if successful. Effort that doesn't succeed is wasted. The fulfillment itself can add additional value; that is, fulfillment of the capacity is both the condition of the value of the exercise, and itself has intrinsic value. This prizes success above all: not only does fulfillment of the positive contrastive make possible the value of the attempt, but it is valuable in itself.

There are many variations of conditional views. Perhaps, for example, fulfillment is the condition of the value of the exercise, but is not itself intrinsically

valuable – this is a way to remain true to the traditional perfectionist stance that exercise is the only source of value, but its value is conditional on success.

A dramatic variation holds that exercise is valuable on condition of fulfillment, neutral in privation of fulfillment, and *disvaluable* on condition of *malfillment*. Unsuccessful attempts are of zero value, but *failed* attempts, i.e., those that result in a negative contrastive, are intrinsically *bad*. Negative contrastives flip the polarity, as it were, of the otherwise positive value of effort. This view can provide a basis for holding that failure is *very* bad. This, perhaps, cuts against the grain of both perfectionism and intuition, but nevertheless is an option.

There are even more permutations of tripartite perfectionism, each giving slightly different takes on the comparative value of success and failure. I won't go through any more, having already stretched the limits of tolerable pedantry exploring just a few. As to which is the best approach, none of the considerations I've laid out here is anything close to decisive. I'm inclined to favor something like the first approach: exercise of capacity is the main source of value, which is in the spirit of traditional perfectionism, yet fulfillment is additionally intrinsically valuable and malfillment is intrinsically disvaluable, which is the contribution of tripartite perfectionism. Failures are intrinsically bad to the extent that they are malfillments, but the positive intrinsic value of the effort may in some cases outweigh the badness of failure, making the overall effort worth it.

Another distinct dimension of the relative badness of failures is a feature of the agent's ends. Some variations in badness can, I'd like to suggest, be explained by the usual features that explain the relative goodness of attaining ends. Philosophers who discuss the relative value of fulfilling ends or satisfying desires often point to two factors: an objective, or structural, factor, and a subjective factor. I think that these two factors also play a role in the relative badness of failures. (And, I'll add, that's a good thing – the explanation is harmonious with claims that are attractive and persuasive about the goodness of success.)

The distinction is familiar enough, but here is roughly what I have in mind. Ends are often related to

each other within an agent's life – some support the attainment of other ends. Ends that are higher up in this hierarchy matter more in the objective sense than ends that have a less significant role. In contrast, some ends are subjectively important, in the sense that they matter a great deal to the agent, but not necessarily in any structural way. This can be reflected in an agent's overall mental ecosystem: the agent would feel happy and fulfilled if a subjectively important end is fulfilled, and feel especially disappointed if a subjectively important negative contrastive is malfilled. These two factors come apart: it might matter a great deal to Elaine that she beat her personal record in this year's half-marathon, but Elaine's running goals are unconnected to other aspects of her life, and whether she succeeds or fails will have little impact on her career aims or family life. It's also possible for structurally significant ends to matter relatively little subjectively to an agent, but this is relatively rare, since usually one cares a great deal about ends that are structurally significant in one's life.

Contrastive ends, like other ends, can also be measured in their importance in terms of structural importance and subjective importance. Importantly for failure, negative contrastives are also subject to these factors. Negative contrastives that are structurally more significant than others constitute *worse failures*. This is why Bob's missing the Boston cutoff is a worse failure than it might have been had he run a similar time in a different, less significant race: it prevents him from pursuing his further end of running the Boston marathon. Similarly negative contrastives that are subjectively significant also constitute worse failures. If Elaine is *very* passionate about her half marathon time, failing to beat her personal record is a worse failure than it would be if it were less subjectively important to her.

One might object that we can fold the subjective component into the objective, since they so often go hand in hand. I could be persuaded by such an argument. I find that I could also be persuaded by an argument that goes the other way: perhaps we can fold the objective into the subjective, since ends arrange themselves hierarchically largely as a result of how much we care about them, or so one might argue. I am not especially deeply committed to any of these approaches. The approach that carries the

day, in any case, will be the one that best accounts for the relative badness of failure (as well as the relative goodness of success). My point here is that whatever the best account of the relative value of ends amounts to – be it objective and structural or subjective – can be used to explain failure just as much as success.

One final element can figure in to the relative disvalue of failures: the independent value of the product. As we saw above considering the (semi-fictional) case of Alexander Graham Bell's invention of the telephone, the value or disvalue of the product or outcome – be it an achievement or a failure – contributes value to the overall endeavor (see also Bradford 2015, pp. 160-162). So if a failure has an outcome that is intrinsically good or bad independently from its structural or subjective significance, the intrinsic goodness or badness of the outcome also contributes to the overall badness of the failure. Hence a failure that produces a great good, such as the invention of the telephone, may be overall good. A failure that produces a great bad, such as a nuclear war, may be overall bad, even if it was the result of a very excellent attempt.

These components of failure's badness can explain a wide range of cases. I'll turn now to show how they can illuminate other discussions of failure.

EXPLAINING CASES

Eric Mathison develops an artful and compelling account in his paper in this volume. Mathison observes that many failures support the "Outcome Gap" view of the disvalue of failure: the greater the gap between goal and outcome, the greater the disvalue of the failure. If Amanda crashes her bicycle just moments after the race starts, this is a worse failure than if Amanda finishes the race in fourth.

On the other hand, other failures support a "Proximity View": the closer you are to success the worse the failure. Indeed, although Mathison ultimately sides with the Outcome Gap view, he finds this view attractive too, when considering examples such as Al Gore losing the 2000 US presidential election by a mere 537 votes.[10] As a result, we might combine the relative badness of failures according to the two views like this:

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[10] Mathison, in correspondence.

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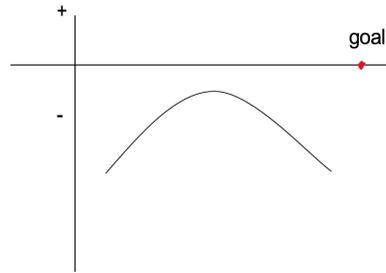
On the x axis is the proximity to the goal, which in this case is the red point. The y axis is value, with intrinsic disvalue increasing downwards from the x axis. The combined Proximity and Outcome Gap views give us the overall Frown of Failure: failures are worse when they are either very far from or very close to the intended outcome, and less bad when they are at a middle distance.

A problem with the Frown of Failure is instances of the disvalue of failure that adhere more closely to either the Outcome Gap view or the Proximity view, but not the other. For Amanda, it may be a worse failure to crash shortly after the start of the race than it is to, say, come in a close second. But it may not be the case that the close second is a worse failure than, say, finishing in the middle of the pack, far from her goal. For Amanda, if her contrastive end to win rather than anything less, one might imagine that finishing *closer to winning*, while nevertheless a failure, is better than finishing further from winning. The graph of badness of Amanda's failures is a simple slope.

In contrast, as Mathison points out, it seems worse that Al Gore lost by a mere 537 votes than if he had lost by a great many. Similarly, if Fred's aim is to qualify to run in the Boston marathon, he must run a time faster than three hours and ten minutes. If he misses the time by a mere fraction of a second, it seems the failure is worse than if he hadn't even come close, and had finished in four hours.

Contrastive ends explain why some failures follow the frown of failure, whereas others fit the Outcome Gap view, and still others fit the Proximity view. Failure is a matter of an agent's ends. If an agent has a negative contrastive and nils outcomes that are far away from the

positive contrastive, the Outcome Gap appears: failures that are farther away from the positive contrastive are bad. Presumably Amanda's ends are of the form that results in an Outcome Gap. In other cases, an agent's nils alternatives to the positive contrastive that are very close. One might imagine that Gore intensely nilled outcomes very much like what in fact occurred.

Additionally, one might wonder about unrealistic expectations.

> *Track Meet*. Chris is the best sprinter on his college varsity track team. At the regional track meet, on the starting line, he thinks to himself, "I'm the best in the world – faster than Usain Bolt! I'm going to go to the Olympics and win gold! I'm going to win this race!" The starting pistol fires! Chris runs an incredible race, finishing in 11.5 seconds. A personal record for him, and an excellent time. He advances to the state finals. Not as fast as the meet records, and not quite as fast as the winner of this race, who finished just ahead in 11.4 (and certainly nowhere near as fast as Usain Bolt).

According to my account of failure, it may seem that Chris's second place finish is a failure – and a bad one, at that. His goal, as he said to himself at the starting line, is to compete at the Olympics and run faster than Usain Bolt. Coming in second place at the regional track meet seems a dismal failure.

An advantage of Mathison's account is that it provides a picture of the relative badness of failure that is a matter of objective measure, rather than relative to the ends of the agent. An objective measure may seem to do a better job capturing something about the badness of failures in cases where agents have outsized expectations, or highly unrealistic ends. Chris's second place finish is only a very mild failure, according to the Outcome Gap view, or so one might argue, given that his goal (at least in the short term) was to win this race, and he came very close.

I'm willing to grant that there may be more to the badness of failure beyond the malfillment of contrastive ends. Some related elements also may be contributing to the overall badness of such failures – such as, for

example, having such inaccurate sense of one's own abilities or reality in general. False or unjustified beliefs may be their own source of intrinsic bad. Moreover, setting ends is itself an activity of practical reason – someone who sets extremely unrealistic or impossible ends is not a good practical reasoner. In fact, one might even argue that impossible to attain or otherwise very irrational ends are not, in fact, ends. Ends *warrant* action, after all, and so a case can be made that a bad end is no end at all.

While all that may be true, Track Meet does not, to my mind, illustrate a case of bad ends. Rather, it is an example of disposable ends that are adopted as tools to attain real ends – temporarily outsized ambition as an instance of the healthy sort of self-deception that can be a helpful and effective tool. Chris's true end is not, after all, to run faster than Usain Bolt, or perhaps even to win. He tells himself that in order to drum up the energy and confidence he will need to attain his *real* end, which is presumably, to run as fast as he can, perhaps to place, and so on. Whether or not this is Chris's true end would be revealed in his reaction after the race: he may be elated with his incredible time and second place finish. If that's the case, this is evidence that his real end was to run as fast as he can, and place. Examples such as Track Meet highlight the complexity of practical reasoning: the adoption of disposable ends that enable us, through benevolent self-deception, to attain our true ends.

One might wonder, however, what this account will say if something unexpectedly *better* happens than one intends in one's positive contrastive – is this a *privation* of success? Surely not. But if one did not aim for an outcome, how can its attainment count as a success? Consider:

> *Modest Ambition*. Dr. Menhaji is an organic chemist working for DrugCorp. Her end is to develop a cosmetic drug that induces eyelashes to grow more plentifully, rather than not. However, to her amazement, the drug that she develops has the surprising effect of curing glaucoma, a serious eye ailment that results in vision loss. Dr. Menhaji is amazed – this was not something she thought she would do, or was aiming for. The drug she created

provides excellent treatment for restoring vision for glaucoma patients.[11]

The intuition is that developing the glaucoma treatment is an achievement for Dr. Menhaji, yet it was not part of her end. Moreover, Dr. Menhaji's negative contrastive has been fulfilled (the drug has no effect on eyelash growth), but it is peculiar to think of her work as a failure. Now, this is easily resolved, since indeed Dr. Menhaji did fail to create a drug that grows eyelashes. It is a failure in that sense. But the development of the glaucoma treatment is neither a successful attainment of Dr. Menhaji's end, nor a failure, and yet it appears nevertheless to be an achievement.

It is examples such as this that support my view that goals are not necessary for achievements. From time to time an achievement involves an outcome that seems obviously creditable to the achiever, yet not the sort of thing that could have been reasonably planned from the outset. As a result, some achievements are not, strictly speaking, *successes*. They are nevertheless achievements and are valuable for this very reason.

A lifelike account of practical reasoning will honor the observation that our ends are rarely explicit, often not tightly specified, and evolve over time. A theme of this paper concerns the artificiality of a certain view of practical rationality according to which planning is ideally foregrounded and explicit in our thinking. In contrast, real projects often involve ends that are sparsely defined at the outset, perhaps even very open, and take shape as the process develops and as new possibilities arise that aren't fully conceivable at the outset. The process of writing a philosophy paper is often like this. You set out with the idea that you will argue in defense of P, appealing to some argument x, but as you go, you realize it's not P, exactly, but P', and arguments y and z are the best defense, and so on. You couldn't have possibly set your end to argue in defense of P' when you first began

[11] As it happens, the converse of this story bears some resemblance to the truth. The cosmetic drug Latisse was developed accidentally, when it was noticed that a treatment for glaucoma resulted in new growth of eyelashes. As far as I understand, the active ingredient in Latisse is the same as (at least some) glaucoma treatments, and growing luxurious eyelashes is a common side effect for glaucoma patients.

your reflections – it's only having thought your way through P that P' becomes apparent. Something similar is true of many achievements, including those that are most central and important in our lives. Good relationships are achievements, and they are characterized very much by the evolving and self-propagating nature of their ends. Of course, one might have "a good relationship rather than a bad one" as a goal, but *precisely* the ends that comprise this goal only take shape as time passes and the contours of possibilities take shape.[12]

        With all that in mind, it becomes possible to argue that cases such as Modest Ambition are not only achievements but also successes. It's more or less impossible to do anything without having *some idea* of what you're trying to do, what you're hoping for, and what you're trying to avoid. The nature of practical reasoning simply makes it impossible to act without responding to reasons or without having intentions. So I'm inclined to say that cases of achievements without success whatsoever are exceptionally rare, if anything.[13] Cases that appear to have no end most likely have *evolving* ends, or ends that become apparent as we engage in the process in which they culminate. Modest Ambition is most likely an example of the latter: it's not the case that Dr. Menhaji *has no idea* what she's doing once she starts to see the results of her work develop. The process of testing and experimenting start to reveal avenues to develop further tests, and so forth.[14]

        Achievement does not require ends as a feature because, by and large, we get ends for free, so to speak, in just about any competent exercise of practical reasoning. Moreover, my account of achievement already embraces a reward for competence, according to which increasingly thorough and global understanding of the process makes for a more valuable achievement. This, to my mind, seems

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[12] See Bradford 2022 for more discussion.

[13] In fact, one might even say that some failures will also include success – since some failures are achievements, as I discussed above, they may also include successes in the way discussed here.

[14] Compare the invention of penicillin, which is often thought to have been a total stroke of luck. To be sure, luck played a key role, but only at one stage of development, and the process of developing the drug penicillin from the serendipitously moldy petri dish was a long and deliberate one, very much in the way one would imagine Dr. Menhaji's glaucoma treatment would be developed.

true to life and does not pull the view toward the artificiality of the rational planning approach.

This way of looking at practical rationality helps us answer a question that one might have about *time*. One might wonder at what time in the process of an achievement do you need to *specify* your contrastive end? When Kristine realizes that she's baked a merely middling cake, and realizes that she regards this as a failure, is it too late, as it were, for her to update her negative contrastive? Indeed it's not. Rational planning is, as I have been emphasizing, an evolving process, and our ends aren't always transparent to us. When Kristine sees her disappointment with the middling cake, she may realize that her goal *all along* was to bake an excellent cake rather than anything inferior. Or, alternatively, she may update her end – while she thought only a truly awful cake would be a failure, as she gets close to completion, she intends against anything inferior to excellent. Now, since ends are what is *intended* they must be set (explicitly or not) at some point prior to the completion of the process. I'm not suggesting that we can retroactively update our ends. Rather, ends can be (and often are) updated as the process evolves; and, moreover, that we are not always consciously aware of what, precisely, our ends *are*, and they are sometimes revealed to us by our attitudes, such as surprise or disappointment. There is more to be said on this point as well as the others, but I will have to leave it here.

In sum: failure's badness is a matter of the malfillment of practical rationality, understood as the attainment of a negative contrastive.[15]

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