

Achievement Matters with Gwen Bradford

[flute music]

Sandra Bertin: Examining Ethics with Sandra Bertin is hosted by The Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University.

Christiane Wisehart: The views expressed here are the opinions of the individual speakers alone. They do not represent the position of DePauw University or the Prindle Institute.

Sandra: Oh my gosh, Christiane, where is all this beautiful music coming from? Who's playing that?

Christiane: I'll let her tell you.

Eleanor Price: Hi, I'm Eleanor Price and I'm a senior at DePauw University.

Sandra: Wow. She's so talented.

Christiane: Yeah. Basically as soon as we decided to do achievement for this show, I wanted to interview her because she's one of the top flute players here at DePauw, correct me if I'm wrong, it's hard to get into the school of music here.

Eleanor Price: Yeah. Yeah. It's not an easy one.

Christiane: One of the most interesting things she said was that for her, any feeling of ever having achieved something was usually pretty fleeting.

Eleanor Price: My flute professor gave me a chance to just play a professional kind of rehearsal. And that was super exciting. And I felt before that happened, like I was offered this amazing opportunity. And so I had a moment of "I've achieved something. I've finally gotten into the music world," but then going into that actual, um, rehearsal situation, I had to take a step back and say, these are all professionals that they don't know me as a musician. I don't know them. They know that I'm young. So I have to just kind of show that I'm aware of my own weaknesses so that they like I'm open to correction and open to changing as a player.

Sandra: Wow. She's so wise

Christiane: She's wise, but that idea is kind of sad, right? That she's not giving herself time to bask in her achievements.

Sandra: Yeah. I can relate to that though. <laugh> like, I, no matter what I strive for, like, even if I reach for something really unattainable and then I get it, like I never bask in my achievement because I automatically convince myself that, that thing wasn't that great anyway.

Christiane: Is it, is it kind of like that old joke? Um, you, you wouldn't wanna be a member of a club that would have you as a member.

Sandra: Yeah. It's super sad.

Christiane: <laugh> so you, so you basically can't give yourself credit for any achievements that you've done because it's you that did them. Yeah,

Sandra: Exactly. And no basking, no basking at all.

Christiane: Well, and according to Eleanor, it doesn't seem like musicians in general give themselves much time to bask in their achievements.

Eleanor Price: Auditioning can be kind of the scariest thing I think you can do as a musician, since it brings out either kind of like the best of your achievements or the things that you wanna show most like your greatest achievements kind of fall away when you need them the most, I guess. Um, so I was actually talking to another music student who's applying to grad schools and he was telling me that I know that I can play this part, but I'm not sure if my audition self can,

Christiane: Man, I can 100% relate to that idea that like under pressure, sometimes I completely forget, or I lose any kind of like good feeling I've ever had from any of my achievements.

Sandra: Yeah. You're like, and now I am nothing <laugh>

Christiane: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Sandra: Achievements can be tricky that way.

Christiane: Achievements are very tricky.

[interstitial music fades in and out]

Christiane: So Sandra, you actually interviewed the philosopher, Gwen Bradford.

Gwen Bradford: I'm Gwen Bradford. I'm an assistant professor in the philosophy department at Rice University.

Christiane: And she wrote a book which conveniently for us is titled achievement.

Sandra: It's funny because you don't think that a person could write a whole book just on the definition of a single word, but you can.

Christiane: Yeah. And I mean, after reading the book, I realized, oh no, there needs to be an entire book on just this one topic.

Sandra: Yeah. And even though she obviously goes into a lot of detail, her definition is actually pretty straightforward.

Gwen Bradford: What I argue is that achievements are all characterized by difficulty. Uh, so difficulty is an essential feature of achievement and uh, so is having a certain degree of competence. So knowing what you're doing. Uh, and so in a nutshell, you could say that in achievement is a difficult and competent process that culminates in its product.

Christiane: So like a lot of people, I used to think of achievement as more of a product, like a great painting or something, but what Gwen Bradford says is that that might not be the right way to look at achievement. So for her, the focus is on the process.

Sandra: Yeah. So if you did something difficult with competence, that's an achievement.

Christiane: And I actually wanna dig into that competence thing first.

Sandra: I was really interested in that too. So when in our interview I actually asked her why competency? Like why does doing something well matter as part of her definition? And she has this really great example of looking for buried treasure.

Gwen Bradford: So in my example, um, this person thinks that, you know, if they use a ouija board and a dowsing wand, they're gonna find buried treasure, it just so happens that there's treasure buried there. Uh, but of course that's not, that's not really an achievement. If they find the treasure, it is very good luck, but it's not an achievement. And so having a certain element, having a certain degree of knowing what you're doing is necessary for something to be an achievement, luck can still help just not too much luck.

Christiane: So basically it's not an achievement to just trip over a gold piece and suddenly unearth hidden treasure.

Gwen Bradford: You have to know at least some sufficient degree of which you're up to in order for it to count as an achievement.

Christiane: Okay. So one essential feature of achievement is that you have a basic knowledge of what you're doing and that you do it well.

Sandra: Yes. And the other part of the process that's important is the difficulty of the thing.

Christiane: And difficulty turns out to be like a key to her definition. Um, but it also helps determine what makes an achievement valuable.

Gwen Bradford: I argue in the book that the more difficult something is, the better of an achievement it is other things being equal. Uh, and I give a somewhat involved account of what, what it is for something to be difficult. It has to involve a certain amount of effort. That means that more effortful achievements are more valuable, at least in that respect than less effortful achievements. Um, because effort is indeed the seat of the value or at least one of the sources of value.

Christiane: So it sounds like a huge part of difficulty is effort, but can you just put a lot of effort into something really easy and call it an achievement?

Sandra: Yeah, that was really my problem too. When I was talking to Gwen, I had a trouble understanding, like why, like, let's say cleaning your tub, for example, instead of cleaning it with something big, like a sponge, you cleaned it with a toothbrush and you obviously have made it more difficult for yourself, but like the fact that you've made it more difficult on purpose, like doesn't that soil, the achievement

Gwen Bradford: Cleaning your bathtub with a toothbrush is not a valuable achievement. Uh, one might think, and yet, uh, my view seems to entail that it is in fact, my view does entail that it is, but of course, um, there are more important things to do sometimes other than other than achievements like that, there might be more valuable achievements that you could be devoting your life to. Um, but there's an argument that be given, can be given to show that things like that gratuitously difficult things can have value. Now that's a hard one because it sounds also very unpleasant. So presumably the pain and the, uh, onerousness of cleaning your bathtub in that way will diminish its value, even though it's very effortful.

Christiane: In Gwen Bradford's view cleaning the tub with the toothbrush is still an achievement, just not a super valuable one.

Sandra: Yeah. And to her, that distinction is important. Like it's still important that that is an achievement.

Gwen Bradford: If you think about what most people's hobbies are, um, generally in our downtime, the things that we choose to do for no reason other than just that we directly wish to do them. Um, they're generally quite difficult things, even something like collecting stamps involves a certain amount of intelligence and research and seeking things out. The whole DIY thing, people making these very fastidious and ornate crafts and whatnot, or, you know, playing recreational sports or something like that. These are all difficult things. And I think it goes to

show that when we have leisure, we generally find the best use of our time and our leisure time are things that are difficult. So indeed, uh, all other things being equal, it seems as if difficulty is good in itself.

Christiane: And so if difficulty is a good thing, then that leads into why achievements might be a good thing.

Gwen Bradford: It's part of being a good flourishing human being to exercise and develop our will to exercise effort. And since difficulty, which is to say, effort is a core feature of achievement. This is what explains why achievement is good, because it just is the manifestation of one of the most important and central elements of our human nature. And so all achievements insofar as they are characterized by difficulty have this feature, they have this exercise of will. So they're at least, uh, other things being equal, they have that going for them in terms of value.

[interstitial music]

Christiane: Oxford University Press has generously provided us the book that we are discussing on the show today. To find out more about Oxford University Press, visit them on the web@globaldotoup.com. Oxford University Press has kindly offered to provide you the listener with a 30% discount on Gwen Bradford's book *Achievement*, to access a link for the discount, visit our show notes page at examiningethics.org. And thanks again to Oxford University Press for sponsoring today's show.

[music fades]

Sandra: Welcome back. So Gwen Bradford lays out her definition of achievement pretty clearly. Yeah, but you actually, don't a hundred percent agree on whether it's ethical to view achievement as sort of a universal truth rather than as decided by each individual person.

Christiane: Yeah. That was something that I just, I couldn't stop thinking about. Um, and so I wanted to talk to you and Andy about that question. Um, and, and then like, while we discussed that, we ended up talking about the use of the word achievement as well.

Sandra: Yeah. And here's an example that Gwen gave us that got to three of us gabbing about these juicy questions.

Gwen Bradford: This happens all the time I think with Olympic athletes, um, where you see on the face of the silver medalist, this just, you know, horrible disappointment with themselves. And of course, getting a silver medal at the Olympics is an incredible achievement, right. Even if to that particular athlete, it was a genuine disappointment. Um, and of course it, I think it just goes to show that you can, one can be wrong about whether or not one has achieved something or whether or not it's a valuable achievement. Because, of course, it is a valuable achievement, even if they don't recognize it in themselves.

Christiane: The question that I wanna ask you all is, um, do you agree with Bradford or not? Do you think that achievements can be named by somebody other than the person doing whatever the task or the achievement is?

Andy: So let's ask a, I guess a clarificatory question, when you ask, can someone else name the achievement? I, I have sort of two -

Christiane: Ought someone else name the achievement?

Andy: Yeah, yeah. Sort of, is it like, is it wrong to name it or is it, they can't even be right about it. They're just not in a position to even identify it as an achievement.

Christiane: I don't know about the second part of that, but I think the first part of that is what I'm asking is ought another person - Is that okay for another person to name an achievement for someone else?

Sandra: So like, um, in an example where someone doesn't think that they've achieved something, it's still in Gwen Bradford's view, it might still be an achievement.

Christiane: Yes, I think so. Because I think she has a very precise definition of what an achievement is. And I pretty much agree with every single part of how she defines achievement. The one part of Bradford's argument that I disagree with is the part where she says that, you know, it's an achievement for somebody without any arms to tie their shoelaces. Um, and I think that's where things get hairy for me. And that's where I have a problem with this idea of like being able to name an achievement for somebody else. Um, and I think that's specifically because of a Ted Talk that was given by an activist named Stella Young.

Stella Young: I grew up in a very small country town in Victoria. Uh, I had a very normal, lowkey kind of upbringing. Uh, you know, I went to school, I hung out with my friends. I fought with my younger sisters. It was all very normal. And when I was 15, a member of my local community approached my parents and wanted to nominate me for a community achievement award. And my parents said, "Ooh, that's really nice, but there's kind of one glaring problem with that. She hasn't actually achieved anything." <laugh>. Yeah. Uh, and they were right. You know, I went to school, I got good marks. I had a very lowkey, after school job in my mom's hairdressing salon on. And I spent a lot of time watching Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Dawson's Creek. I know what a contradiction, but they were right. You know, I wasn't doing anything that was out of the ordinary at all. Um, I wasn't doing anything that could be considered an achievement if you took disability out of the equation.

Christiane: And so she goes on to say that, um, it's not okay for people to, um, you know, treat people with disabilities as though they've achieved something great just by living a normal life. Um, and so I think, I think that, I think I agree with Stella Young and I think that's where I find this

particular way of looking at achievement problematic.

Sandra: I think based on Gwen Bradford's qualifications, she would have agreed that, um, Stella Young didn't deserve a certificate of achievement as a kid because she didn't do anything difficult or, and didn't, you know, spend time doing it, all of the qualifications that Gwen gives. Um, so that's one thing. And then the other thing is that I think that it's possible for Gwen to bring up that something is an objective truth. Like whether something is a, um, an achievement or not, it's just a fact, it's an objective truth. And, but that doesn't mean it's okay in a social setting to go around, calling people out on their achievements and like naming that for other people, whether something is an achievement or not just exists,

Christiane: Just to clarify, even in, even in her book, she says, um, that she's mostly interested in defining what achievement is like, she's not really interested in the use of the term. Um, so I think, I think what we're talking about is something that she would describe under the umbrella of like the use of the term achievement.

Andy: I actually think there's a more substantive disagreement here with the Young piece. We started this question talking about whether or not it's wrong to label something in achievement when you're sort of from the outside looking in, but what she says here in the clip, she says, it's not an achievement, not just that it's wrong, but that you are actually wrong about it being an achievement. So this is, um, a stronger claim than just saying it's wrong to not, I mean, she might think it's wrong to call it an achievement. Um, but she's going a step further and saying, and by the way, it's not even an achievement. So I actually think Young might disagree with Bradford on some of her views, because I think there are ways, at least in so far as I understand Bradford's view of thinking that what Young does in certain circumstances do count as achievements. Am I wrong about that?

Christiane: No, because like in Gwen Bradford's definition an achievement is something that's difficult to do, difficult for the person done competently. And I think you could argue, and I mean, I don't wanna put words into Stella Young's mouth, but, um, her disability from my perspective seems like it causes great difficulty in her life. It seems like it might be incredibly difficult for her to do certain things, but I'm sure that she does them whatever they are. I'm sure she does them competently. So in Gwen Bradford's definition, she definitely has achieved something.

Sandra: Well, one thing when Gwen was talking about difficulty, she was saying, um, that, okay, when we, when we heard her speak here at DePauw, people pressed her on the issue of how to label people with disabilities and their achievements. And she said that it just depends on how difficult something is. And so in that way, I think there's sort of room for the person's view of their own life to come into play. So there, I feel like there's the room for somebody's like personal experience to influence whether someone's something is an achievement or not

Christiane: So in her book and in the interview, she uses the same example over and over again. So let me just play that for you.

Gwen Bradford: One of my favorite examples is tying your shoes. So it's not an achievement for me. It's not difficult for me to tie my shoes. Uh, but for somebody who only has one hand, it presents an incredible challenge. It's very difficult to tie your shoes if you only have one hand. And so it's an achievement. Um, and I think that resonates with our intuition and that's exactly what my view captures. So something that's a seemingly, uh, that under other circumstances, wouldn't be difficult, can be difficult in other, in other circumstances,

Christiane: I can imagine like five or six people that I know who would say, like, absolutely not. Don't call that an achievement for me. Like that's for me to decide even just that first instance.

Andy: I wonder if there's room for working in the source of the difficulty, into your account of achievement. So let me give you an example, completely unrelated to the disability case. Suppose I overcome some obstacle that's just there, because some madman psychopath wanted to put me through some kind of weird game, right? Like a *Saw* scenario or something like that. But I beat the game or whatever. It's weird to call that an achievement, right? I mean, like, there's something weird about the difficulty that was somehow weirdly imposed and I wouldn't want to think of it as an achievement in the other cases where we kind of regard it as problematic. Like it's weird to identify achievements for people who have some kind of disability. The source of the difficulty is this weird kind of unfairness. Elizabeth Barnes has this view about what disability is, that it's kind of like having a minority status that there's no like fundamental fact in nature or there's no fact about the way the natural world is that makes you disabled. You're only disabled because society is structured in a certain way.

Christiane: It's the social model of disability.

Andy: Yeah. Yeah. So if you have a view about disability, where there are only really disabilities, because society is structured in such a way that things are more difficult for you, you might think the source of the difficulty sort of matters for the appropriateness of celebrating it, the appropriateness of identifying it. And in the case of disability, the source of the difficulty is systemically unjust.

Christiane: I still say, even if that has, even if that component is there, that the person themselves still gets to decide for themselves what an achievement is or is not for themselves.

Andy: When we started, you said whether or not you, the question was, is it wrong to identify an achievement, whether it's achievement or not, but what you just said there makes it sound like you think whether it is in fact an achievement is relative person to person. So that's a different view. There's two views on the table and we keep jumping around which one we're talking about. Here's one view you could have of Stella Young. What she did was an achievement, whether she thinks so or not given Bradford's definition, but it's wrong for us to be the one to decide whether or not to point it out or decide to have a town wide celebration about it. That's that's one view you could have

Sandra: That's mine. I choose that one.

Andy: The other view you could have is as a matter of fact, whether or not it's an achievement, depends on what Stella Young thinks. And if she doesn't want to call it an achievement, then it's not an achievement full stop. Those are the two issues. And so I guess the question is which one of those are we debating? We could debate both of them or we could discuss both of them.

Sandra: Yeah. And my answer is that I think achievements are not a part of your identity necessarily. So like, it's not, whereas with other things, I would absolutely say you get to name them for yourself. Like what your name is, what your gender is, like, all of what your sexual orientation is. Like, you get to decide all of that stuff for yourself. Like nobody gets to decide that for you. But I don't think achievements are part of that group of things. Although it is still rude for someone to like, argue with you about, wait, — what am I saying?

Andy: Well, you think it's, you think it's rude for somebody to point out some things in achievement when you yourself, aren't like,

Sandra: Yeah, that's not necessary. But in the world, like in the universe, there are truly things that are achievements and things that are not, regardless of whether you'd believe that they are or not.

Christiane: Would you, would you agree with the statement that like, there are parts of your identity that you get to decide, but then there are other parts that get decided for you, right?

Sandra: Yeah.

Christiane: So like, like you get to decide your gender, you get to decide how you perform your gender. Or even if you want a gender, right. Mm-hmm, <affirmative>, that's something you get to decide, but like, I want achievement to be more in the gender category where it's a part of you that you get to decide for yourself,

Andy: Here's a have your cake and eat it too option: It's one thing to decide what your achievements are, whether they are achievements or not, for each thing you do, here's a closely related idea. You might be able to decide which of your achievements give your life meaning or value. So you might say, look fine. If you wanna call this thing an achievement, but I don't want my life to be defined by this achievement, I don't want this to be the thing that people look at and say, "wow, it was great that they existed because they did this." What gives my life value, what makes my life worth living for me are these other things that I've done, something like that.

Sandra: The reason we're upset about it in terms of the disabilities case is because people with disabilities are treated terribly by our society. But if you actually think of these things between people who are not treated terribly by our society, they don't seem bad. Like for me to say like,

no, you did achieve something there. Like you are amazing. That doesn't seem bad when it's between you and me. But when it's like someone saying you tied your shoes, like you are amazing. Um, I think that, yeah, the title of Stella Young's talk even is "I'm not your inspiration." That's the part that's offensive is that we treat people with disabilities as token, a token people. And like, and our view of achievements is tied deeply into that.

Andy: Here's another way to maybe make sense of what's icky about, you know, focusing on the achievements of persons with disabilities. We tend to focus on achievements that add value elsewhere. When you focus on persons with disabilities, who do these things, and then you define it almost purely in terms of inspiration, you're only thinking about what their achievement has done for you and for other people. So it kind of turns them into like a means for our own feelings. Good. Right? And it's kind of weird that to focus on the achievement in that way, you're an inspiration. It sort of trivializes, the achievement is, well, what gives it value is how it makes us feel.

Christiane: Maybe we can end on a positive note and try to think of the value that achievement does add to life.

Andy: I think achievements have value because you are the author or creator of this valuable thing. So when it's, when it's lucky, when it's something that just happens to you, like, it's this good thing, but you didn't make it happen. And in fact, this philosopher asks you, would you plug into some kind of experience machine that would just give you the perfect life, the life you always wanted, but you're not really doing anything? You're just being fed this movie image of the perfect life and it seems like a real matrix to you. And most people are like, no, I wouldn't plug into that. And this guy's ideas that's right, because there's something important and valuable about actually having made that result come about. There's something valuable about you being the causer of these good things. And I think that's where the source of the value of achievement lies. We like the idea that we're the causers of it, not just that it's something happening to us.

Sandra: Wow. That was a surprisingly deep conversation for something that seemed so benign.

Christiane: Yeah. And because we went kind of deep, I didn't get to bring up something that might be kind of silly, but I still think it's interesting.

Sandra: Ooh, tell me!

Christiane: So a lot of times when people talk about achievement, they talk about a mountain climber. They talk about climbing mountains. And even if you see a poster of achievement, the picture is gonna be of a mountain climber,

Sandra: Wait, like a motivational poster?

Christiane: Yeah. Like a motivational poster about achievement. It's gonna be a mountain climber. Um, but I don't get it. I don't understand what's so great about mountain climbing. <laugh>, um, it's really dangerous. Um, a lot of mountain climbers end up killing themselves on the way to the top, right? A lot of them end up killing other people. So I guess, I don't know. It just seems like one of those achievements that doesn't seem worth it.

Sandra: That's really interesting. Yeah. I guess if you put it that way, it almost seems kind of selfish. Like the point of achieving your achievement is just to do something that doesn't have any outside value besides to yourself. I see that for sure. But also I feel like it's part of human nature to like to test our limits in a way, like test our mental limits and our physical limits. And like, that's why mountain climbers are kind of revered in that way. I don't know. It's kind of like a beautiful part of humanity that we like, we have these challenges for ourselves that have no outside purpose.

[music]

Gwen Bradford: Uh, as much as I love achievements, I love achievements so much. I wrote a whole book on it. I certainly don't think that it's the only thing that's valuable. And we would need to have a much larger, more fully developed story of all of the various goods and bads of life in order to figure out whether in any one case achievement is the best source of value for us. I do think it's a very important one. However, and the things that characterize achievement, the thing that makes it valuable, um, is of central importance. It's part of the most important and fundamental things about being a human being.

Christiane: If you liked what you heard today, be sure to check out Gwen Bradford's book achievement. Um, if you buy it through Oxford University Press, you can get a discount. To get the link for the discount, just visit our show notes page at examiningethics.org.

Sandra: Yeah. That's a great way to show Gwen some love and a good way to show us some love would be to write to us on apple podcasts, or you could tell a few friends about us.

Christiane: You can also reach out to us on Twitter, where you can find us @ ExaminingEthics. We're also on Facebook.

Sandra: If you have a comment in general about the show or anything you'd like to say about achievement itself, email us some voice memo. You can send that to examiningethics@gmail.com.

Christiane: All right, folks, go climb a mountain.

Sandra: Bye!

Chris Wolfe: Hi, this is Chris Wolfe and I'm married to one of the producers of the show.

Henry: And I'm Henry. I love microphones.

Chris Wolfe: Examining Ethics with Sandra Bertin is hosted by the Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University.

Henry: And there's a hose!

Chris Wolfe: Sandra Bertin and Christiane Wisheart produced the show. Our logo was created by Evelyn Brosius. Our music is by Franz Schubert, The New Lines, Podington Bear, Latch Swing, and Blue Dot, and can be found online at freemusicarchive.org. Examining Ethics is made possible by the generous support of DePauw alumni, friends of the Prindle Institute, and you the listeners. Special thanks to resident flutist Eleanor Price.

Sandra: Christiane, where is all this beautiful music coming from? Who's playing that flute? Who's playing that flute!? <laugh> sorry. I tried so hard!