

NO GRIT WITHOUT FREEDOM

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GRIT IS THE TRAIT of persevering in difficult courses of action in the face of adverse odds—for example, of persisting in the pursuit of a career. In their important and interesting article, “Grit,” Jennifer Morton and Sarah Paul articulate a philosophical account of the rationality of grit.¹ The topic is important, because grit is conducive to success and flourishing, and it is interesting, because it promises a welcome enrichment of the philosophy of action by extending the focus from mundane to temporally extended, difficult action.

Morton and Paul identify grit as “a trait or capacity that consists partly in a kind of epistemic resilience,” and they defend its rationality in terms of a permissivist ethics of belief (178). The gritty agent, according to Morton and Paul, is epistemically resilient in her response to what an impartial observer might perceive as evidence of incapacity, and she is rational in doing so, insofar as such a response is permissible in her situation.

Though much of Morton and Paul’s account of grit is illuminating and plausible, I think they underestimate a crucial element that is required for the explanation of the rationality of grit: freedom. In this paper, I will explain the significance of freedom for an account of the rationality of grit and suggest that, once this is properly understood, the rationality of grit can be regarded as an instance of practical rationality.

I

Morton and Paul defend what they call the Evidential Threshold Account. They argue that “the gritty agent’s evidential threshold for updating her expectations of success will tend to be higher than the threshold an impartial observer would use” (195). This can be rational because, they suggest, as long as there is more than one rationally permissible doxastic response to a body of evidence, a “grit-friendly” epistemic policy can be defended on pragmatic grounds: “within the

1 Morton and Paul, “Grit.” Page references will be inserted parenthetically into the text.

set of epistemically permissible policies an evidential policy is better insofar as it protects to some extent against despair" (194). On Morton and Paul's view, a gritty agent will take many setbacks not as a reason to weaken or abandon her belief in success. This is because she uses a permissible evidential policy that requires a higher evidential threshold for such belief revision.

In this explanation of the rationality of grit, freedom does not play a significant role. To bring out why this is an omission, I would like to contrast two examples: the gritty graduate student and the gritty gambler. The gritty graduate student persists in her efforts to publish a paper in a prominent journal in her field, despite repeated setbacks. Analogously, the gritty gambler persists in his efforts to win the jackpot at a slot machine. And we may suppose, not entirely unrealistically, that the odds of publishing an article in a prominent journal are similar to the odds of winning the jackpot at a slot machine. Of course, the opportunity costs will be different, though sustained pursuit of each goal will be costly, and the value of the goals will be different—so the analogy is imperfect. Nonetheless, neither the gritty graduate student nor the gritty gambler—unlike an impartial observer—takes their respective setbacks as evidence that they lack the capacity to succeed in the paths they have committed themselves to.

It is not hard to imagine the gritty graduate student to be rational. After all, this is what it usually takes in graduate school—to persevere despite considerable setbacks. In contrast, it is hard to imagine that persevering in playing the slot machines in pursuit of a jackpot could be rational. Indeed, this seems like the paradigm of irrationality. To imagine it as rational, after all, we would have to assume that the cost of playing is really low, so that the gambler is neither spending a lot of his money nor forgoing opportunities to pursue a better goal. Perhaps we have to imagine that the only real cost of playing is the time invested, so that the rationally gritty gambler would be someone with a part-time job that, though it pays no wages, gives him the chance at a one-time high payout.

But if the odds for the gritty graduate student and the gritty gambler are comparable, and if pursuit of each goal has significant costs attached to it, why does grit in one case seem paradigmatically rational, whereas in the other case it does not? I submit the following: whether one will win a jackpot at the slot machine has very little to do with one's agency. The only involvement of the agent is the act of playing, but the agent has no influence over the outcome of the gamble. Once the coin is in the slot, the outcome is entirely determined by the machine. In contrast, if grit in the pursuit of a strong publication is rational then this is so at least partly because whether one succeeds in publishing a paper in a leading journal is *to some extent* up to the agent. Of course, obviously, it is not entirely up to the agent. However, the agent's efforts will make a decisive

difference in whether the paper is accepted or not. One does not publish a paper in a prominent journal through sheer luck—in contrast to winning the jackpot at a slot machine.

II

One might respond that Morton and Paul can capture this observation. After all, they do say: “As we see it, the central question for an agent considering whether to persevere is, ‘Will continued effort be enough?’” (188). It seems that they do allow that what is important for an assessment of the rationality of grit is the agent’s appreciation of her effort. However, even though they recognize the significance of agency for an account of the rationality of grit, they do not take freedom to be crucial to explaining the rationality of grit but *commitment*. They write, “As a consequence of committing to a goal, the agent’s threshold should go up for how compelling new evidence must be” (194). It is through the notion of making a commitment that Morton and Paul aim to capture the thought that agency matters for understanding the rationality of grit, not through the fact that something is up to the agent.

On a first glance, this view faces two problems: first, the problem of how to coordinate assessments of evidence prior to committing with assessments of evidence afterward, and, second, the problem of how to understand the rationality of grit from the agent’s own perspective.

To see the problem of coordination, suppose that before committing to, say, a career in physics, someone judges her odds of success to be very poor. Nonetheless, for whatever reason, she subsequently commits to it. At this point, it seems that she will have to change her odds of success *just because she committed to pursuing physics*. Yet this is problematic, because it is an irrational updating procedure. If, before committing, she gave certain low odds to success, conditional on committing, then it is irrational to raise the odds *just because she made the commitment*. Moreover, after committing, she can no longer regard her earlier judgment of the odds as rational, even though she can offer no new reasons for why it was mistaken.

Morton and Paul recognize these potential problems and formulate their view so as to avoid them. They write: “the change in threshold does not apply retroactively; resolving on a goal should have no effect on how one understands the significance of the evidence one already has” (197). However, in avoiding the coordination problem, their view faces another difficulty: it turns out that grit can only be rational if, in advance of making a commitment, one has not carefully considered the evidence concerning the prospect of success in pursuing a goal. That is because the evidential threshold for assessing the odds of

success can only be as grit friendly as the evidential threshold used prior to commitment. Yet this strikes me as a flaw: it implies that the only room for grit comes from evidence that has not been considered prior to commitment. Therefore, the less consideration one has given to a project before committing to it, the more room there is to be rationally gritty afterward!

There is also a second difficulty: Morton and Paul explain the rationality of grit by appeal to permissible epistemic policies whose adoption is justified on pragmatic grounds. They are careful to distinguish their view from pragmatist accounts of doxastic rationality, according to which pragmatic grounds directly make belief rational. Instead, they opt for a tiered approach, according to which an agent's first-order deliberation is informed by exclusively evidential considerations, and pragmatic considerations kick in only at a second tier—at the justification of the agent's policy concerning how to weigh those considerations.

What is problematic for such a two-tiered approach is that it makes it hard to see how an agent could understand herself as rational in being gritty. Suppose you adopt a "grit-friendly evidential policy" and you exhibit "some degree of inertia in [your] belief about whether [you] will ultimately succeed, relative to the way in which an impartial observer would tend to update on new evidence" (194). And suppose you now meet an impartial observer—perhaps a guidance counselor or a bookie who sells bets on the outcome of your project.² You agree with them about what the evidence is, but you disagree with them about which beliefs it renders rational. You say, "I think that I will make it in physics!" The other replies, "Why will you succeed where many others have failed?"

What should you say, on Morton and Paul's view? The true answer would be that you are pragmatically justified in adopting the evidential policy you have, because you have made a commitment. However, you can neither justify your assessment of the odds by appeal to having made the commitment, nor by appeal to what justifies your use of the grit-friendly policy. That is because this justification is in the background and not something you could appeal to, at least not without falling into pragmatism. On Morton and Paul's view, "since [evidential] policies govern the way in which we respond to evidence in a given situation, they cannot themselves be called into question while first-order reasoning is in progress" (191). Yet if the standards for reasoning cannot be called into question while first-order reasoning is in progress, then it is not clear how the gritty agent can be self-consciously gritty—how she can understand herself as gritty and rational at the same time.

2 See Marušić, *Evidence and Agency*, ch. 1.3.

III

I hold that an appeal to freedom can help resolve both problems. To see this, let us return to the contrast between the agent and the impartial observer.³ I concur with Morton and Paul that they have different views of the odds concerning success in pursuit of the relevant goal. However, I do not think that this is because the agent, but not the observer, is in need of avoiding despair. Rather, it is because their relation to the achievement of that goal is fundamentally different: whether the goal is achieved depends essentially on the agent's efforts—on her exercise of her freedom. In contrast, whether the goal is achieved does not depend on the efforts of the impartial observer; it is not subject to his freedom.⁴ It is *this difference* between them that accounts for why they are rational in differently responding to the same body of evidence. Indeed, the contrast between the gritty gambler and the gritty graduate student brings this out: the less we take each of their efforts to matter, the harder it is to see the rationality of their assessment of the odds to differ from the impartial observer's. Thus, even if we can imagine the gritty gambler to be rational, we cannot imagine his odds to be any different from those of an impartial observer.

We can now hold on to the thought that grit is doxastic resilience. However, the rationality of such resilience is explained differently than Morton and Paul propose to do. What justifies the agent in responding differently to the evidence than the impartial observer is that, since it is at least to some extent up to her whether she achieves her goal, she has a different view of what is going to happen, precisely to the extent that matters are up to her. In particular, when an agent reasons about what she is going to do, her answer to that question is supposed to be settled by the very reasoning that she is engaged in, to the extent that what she is going to do is up to her. (Kant's dictum is that we act under the idea of freedom!) For the agent, insofar and to the extent that matters are up to her, the question of what she is going to do is a *practical* question.

So far, this is an observation about how an agent arrives at her initial decision about whether to commit to a goal. However, the observation can be extended to the diachronic issue of how to understand the gritty agent who displays doxastic resilience: the gritty agent persists in viewing matters as up to her, rather than undergoing a *gestalt switch* and viewing the question of her success as a simple outcome. The doxastically resilient rational agent is not (permissibly) overconfident but rather thinks about her future, insofar as it is

3 I say a little bit more about partiality in section IV.

4 Here we should assume that observation does not make a difference to the agent's actions. The case in which the agent knows herself to be observed and, for that reason, acts differently, is a special case.

up to her, in a fundamentally different way than someone who thinks merely in terms of odds. A failure of doxastic resilience is exhibited in the shift to the predictive mode—to the frame of mind in which one asks, “And what are my chances of succeeding anyway?” Indeed, it seems to me that grit is best understood in terms of a general focus on the practical—in terms of sustained attention and reflection on things one is free to *do*, rather than on things that happen to one or that are standing traits or properties of the agent.

I hasten to add that my suggestion here is not that the gritty agent ignores the evidence concerning success: doxastic resilience does not consist in an unrealistic assessment of the odds. Rather, the doxastically resilient but rational agent maintains the evidence in view, albeit not *as* evidence but, rather, as considerations of difficulty.⁵ This is so because the rationally gritty agent—unlike an inflexible or stubborn agent—is *practically* rational, and practical rationality requires a proper appreciation of the difficulty of one’s actions. Indeed, on the view I have suggested, the rationality of grit is an instance of practical rationality—of adequately responding to the practical considerations that are relevant in our context insofar as matters are up to us.⁶

Finally, although I have offered here an explanation of the rationality of doxastic resilience, I suspect that there is more to grit than such resilience. Indeed, it seems to me that doxastic resilience may be only a small, even if important, piece of the story of what grit consists in. The gritty agent does not just persist in the pursuit of a goal, despite setbacks. It would be inflexibility, not to say madness, to persist in doing the same thing only to expect a different outcome. As much as grit is about doxastic resilience, it is also a creative response to failure. The gritty agent sees setbacks as particular ways in which difficulty manifests itself and responds creatively to them, without toggling back into prediction mode. Indeed, this further brings out the significance of freedom for grit, because—as the contrast between the gritty gambler and the gritty graduate student illustrates—room for such creativity exists only to the extent that matters are up to the agent. There is no such thing as creative luck.

5 It is hard to work this out precisely. For my vexed attempt, see Marušić, *Evidence and Agency*, ch. 6.1.

6 Morton and Paul argue that “the very same exhibition of grit could count as epistemically rational in a context of privilege and epistemically irrational in a context of scarcity” (202). This strikes me as an important point. The way I would propose to capture it is that the practical situation will be different in a context of privilege and a context of scarcity.

IV

In concluding, let me now return to the two problems I discussed in criticizing Morton and Paul's view: the problem of coordination and the problem of the self-consciousness of the rationally gritty agent. On my view, what licenses doxastic resilience is not the fact that one has made a commitment, but rather the fact that something is, more or less, up to the agent and that, taking into account the difficulty of the project, it is worthwhile to pursue it. Thus, the more it is up to the agent, the more room there is for rational doxastic resilience. This means that there simply is no problem of coordinating assessments prior to and post commitment—since it is not the commitment that would license a practical view. The problem is, rather, one of understanding when things are up to the agent and to what extent. This is partly a conceptual problem, insofar as it requires a proper understanding of freedom, and partly an empirical problem, insofar as it requires a proper understanding of the facts on the ground.

As regards the self-consciousness of grit, what is crucial is maintaining a practical view. The gritty agent who is addressing an impartial observer will speak of the attractiveness of the goal she has adopted and show herself aware of the difficulty she is confronting. And perhaps, if she is philosophically sophisticated, she can point out that, as agent, she faces a practical question that the impartial observer, as observer, does not face.⁷ Ultimately, however, to bring her interlocutor to see things in *her* way, she will have to dislodge his impartiality. The other can share her assessment of her future only as someone who comes to *participate* in her pursuit of a goal, not necessarily as a joint agent, but at least as a person of trust.⁸ This suggests that it may be easier to be gritty in a supportive community—a community that shares one's outlook—rather than have to bear one's freedom alone.⁹

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7 This shows that, on the present account, rational belief is agent relative. However, such agent relativity should be distinguished from permissiveness: even if what it is rational to believe will be different for different agents, it need not be that several doxastic states are permissible for a single agent.

8 For discussion of doxastic partiality, see esp. Stroud, "Doxastic Partiality in Friendship"; and Keller, "Friendship and Belief," as well as the extensive literature that follows them.

9 I am grateful to Jennifer S. Marušić and John Schwenkler for comments and discussion and to an anonymous reviewer for *JESP* for helpful suggestions.

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