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Practical judgment and the well-rounded life

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ABSTRACT

Even though grit is an important resource in our practical arsenal, I argue that practical judgment is an even more important capacity that we need in order to live well because it allows us to effectively pursue our various long-term ends. To show this, we will examine a theory of instrumental rationality that differs from the decision theory that underlies recent accounts of grit. This theory is Tenenbaum's (2020, *Rational Powers in Action: Instrumental Rationality and Extended Agency*. Oxford University Press) Extended Theory of Instrumental Rationality. I will then expand on Tenenbaum's account of the instrumental virtue of practical judgment and show how developing it can help us achieve a well-rounded life.

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1. Introduction

We need grit because it helps us overcome significant obstacles to our ends. Yet, the recent philosophical literature on grit by Morton and Paul (2019) and Rioux (2022) often focus on agents who are deeply committed to singular overarching ends. This brings to mind people like Confucius, Marie Curie, Nelson Mandela, or Ludwig van Beethoven who are focused on the pursuit of specific overarching ends such as creating knowledge, enacting political change, or making art. While these lives can be extremely meaningful, they can also be very imbalanced.¹

Crucially, these lives are not the only good lives we could lead. Most of us would not achieve nearly as much by having the same devotion that Marie Curie or Nelson Mandela had to one specific end. Nor would we be excellent at everything we tried to do like Leonardo da Vinci. In other words, concentrating too much on one end will only result in marginal payoffs while being a

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¹Hammerton notes that, 'when it comes to the meaning in our lives, balance seems unimportant. What matters is sheer quantity. The greater the quantity of goods in your life, the more significance and meaning it has (2022, 582)'.

dilettante would not allow us to achieve any of our ends sufficiently well. Instead, Hurka (1987) has argued that most people with limited time, talent, and resources are better off aiming for a well-rounded life that is moderately specialized around a balance of different goods.²

In what follows, I argue that even though grit is an important resource in our practical arsenal, practical judgment is an even more important capacity that we need in order to live well because it allows us to effectively pursue our various, and often difficult to achieve, long-term ends. To show this, we will examine a theory of instrumental rationality that differs from the decision theory that underlies recent accounts of grit. This theory is Tenenbaum's (2020) Extended Theory of Instrumental Rationality (ETR). I will then expand on Tenenbaum's account of the instrumental virtue of practical judgment and show how developing it can help us achieve a well-rounded life.

Here is the roadmap for the paper. Section 1 introduces the basic components of decision theory and shows how recent discussions of grit assume a decision theoretic framework. These discussions tend to focus on pursuing highly imbalanced rather than well-rounded lives. I point out how these sources of grit have limited application and the underlying decision theoretic framework they assume is ill-suited to provide advice on how to live a well-rounded life in pursuit of multiple difficult long-term ends. Section 2 examines ETR in more detail. A key advantage of ETR is that it provides a more plausible account of what is rationally required of an agent when she pursues multiple ends at various levels of determinacy over time. Section 3 draws on ETR and expands on Tenenbaum's account of the instrumental virtue of practical judgment. I then show how developing this virtue can help an agent overcome obstacles and realize her various difficult long-term ends. In short, I argue that developing practical judgment is vital to living a well-rounded life.

2. Decision theory and grit

2.1. Decision theory

Recent accounts of grit try to explain how it can be rational for some agents to continue pursuing a specific project despite significant internal

²Hurka (1987) argues for this point by appealing to indifference curves and empirical assumptions regarding the costs of concentration and the costs of being a dilettante. He argues that rather than having relatively flat indifference curves, most of us have M-shape curves that favor moderate specialization.

obstacles (e.g. lack of motivation, adopting incompatible ends, etc.) and external obstacles (e.g. rejection, failure, emergencies, etc.). To understand how these accounts of grit work, we need to consider their underlying approach to instrumental rationality: decision theory.

Any theory of instrumental rationality has at least four components:³

- (1) A basic attitude that is the input into the reasoning process
- (2) An output of reasoning
- (3) Principles of derivation from inputs to outputs
- (4) Coherence requirements on inputs

According to decision theory:⁴

- (1) The basic attitude is a momentary mental state such as a preference, desire, or utility.
- (2) The outputs of instrumental reasoning are rational choices.
- (3) The principle of derivation is maximization.
- (4) Coherence principles require that the basic attitudes have a certain structure (e.g. non-cyclical, complete, etc.).

Most versions of decision theory also adopt a form of time-slice rationality (i.e. the rationality of an agent's choice is determined by the attitudes that she has at the time of choice).⁵ For example, when deciding between two options, what matters in the rational evaluation of an agent's choice is the expected utilities that she assigns to each option at the time of choice. If option 1 has higher expected utility than option 2, most versions of decision theory tell her that instrumental rationality requires her to choose option 1 rather than option 2.

2.2. Grit and the meaningful life

Let us return to grit and its relation to the good life. Duckworth (2016) has argued that grit rather than talent is what distinguishes people who are

³This is drawn from chapter 1 of Tenenbaum (2020). Also see Tenenbaum (2023, 67–69).

⁴For an overview of decision theory, Thoma (2019). Note that there are versions of decision theory that abandon straightforward maximization for satisficing or risk-weighted utility maximization.

⁵Some philosophers within the decision theory framework such as Bratman (1987) do think that the rationality of an agent's choice can depend on past actions and attitudes such as intentions. Thus, they defend a form of diachronic rationality. That said, the rationality of an agent through an interval of time still supervenes on the rationality of the agent at each moment in that interval. As we shall see, Tenenbaum's theory denies this supervenience thesis.

able to achieve their long-term ends despite significant internal and external obstacles. In recent philosophical literature, Morton and Paul (2019) and Rioux (2022) have proposed accounts of grit that rely on the decision theory framework above.

These accounts are motivated by a specific type of case. Morton and Paul's (2019, 177) main example is a PhD student who, despite long odds, is devoted to becoming an academic. Likewise, Rioux (2022, 267) raises the case of an aspiring novelist who has abandoned all other ends and persists in trying to get his book published. These cases involve agents who pursue highly imbalanced lives organized around a singular overarching project. We will see that focusing too much on these kinds of cases overlooks the fact that most of us aim for more well-rounded lives involving multiple long-term ends and goods.

For the discussion below, we will refer to the following structurally similar case:

Mattie is a sharp philosophy graduate student trying to finish her dissertation and has submitted articles to several top journals. She has one overarching end: being a prominent philosophy professor. Unfortunately, she also comes from an underprivileged family that is skeptical of her academic pursuits and has nobody to bail her out if academia does not work out. Despite *Mattie*'s considerable philosophical gifts her advisors are not particularly supportive, referee reports from top journals are unfairly negative, and the job market is as brutal as ever. Nevertheless, *Mattie* persists and has given up most of her other ends in order to continue doing philosophy as well as she can.

2.3. Sources of grit: epistemic resilience and substantial practical hope

Morton and Paul (2019) propose epistemic resilience as a source of grit. Working from a decision theoretic framework, they propose that if an agent is invested in a project and there are genuine practical reasons in favor of the project, they are permitted to adopt a higher evidential threshold for the belief that failure is forthcoming.⁶ To illustrate, suppose that *Mattie* and another agent *Jane* are alike in every internal

⁶Many philosophers now grant that different agents are rationally permitted to adopt different epistemic attitudes towards the same body of evidence. This is called epistemic permissivism. See Schoenfield (2012) for a defense of this thesis. If epistemic permissivism is true, an agent is permitted to adopt a range of epistemic policies with respect to a body of evidence. Also, even if we are skeptical that practical considerations can serve as evidence/reasons for belief directly, they can nonetheless influence which epistemic policies we adopt. If we have already invested in a project and have other practical reasons to stick with it, these facts can favor adopting an epistemic policy that sets a higher evidential threshold that failure is forthcoming.

respect and facing the same external circumstance and evidence except for one difference: Mattie sets a higher evidential threshold for the belief that failure is forthcoming while Jane does not. In this case, Mattie, unlike Jane, can assign a higher expected utility to persisting instead of quitting. Since decision theory tells agents to maximize their expected utility, it can be rational for Mattie to persist but not for Jane to persist at that time.⁷

Rioux (2022) has a structurally similar proposal and argues that substantial practical hope is another source of grit. Rioux states that ‘venture-someness with respect to a particular goal, combined with a desire for success and the belief that success is possible, amounts to a substantial practical hope for the realization of that goal (2022, 274)’. For Rioux, venturesomeness is a higher risk inclination towards some desired outcome. The idea is inspired by Buchak’s risk-weighted expected utility theory (Rioux 2022, 280). In addition to probability assignments and preferences, Buchak (2013) allows agents to assign a risk tolerance weighting to each outcome. This generates a risk-weighted utility function for an agent’s options. On Rioux’s view, if Mattie is able to develop substantial practical hope for becoming an academic, then she can assign a higher risk-weighted expected utility to persisting than a less hopeful agent. *Ceteris paribus*, it would be rational for Mattie to persist towards her academic career even though it may not be rational for Jane who is less hopeful to persist.

2.4. Limits to grit and decision theory

While these sources of grit may be of some use, they have serious limitations. First, Morton and Paul (2019, 199–203) admit that most agents, especially underprivileged agents, would not benefit from adopting a higher epistemic threshold for the belief that failure is forthcoming. It is a high-risk high-reward strategy. Those who are already privileged can gain a lot if their persistence results in success. At the same time, even if they fail, they can weather bad outcomes. Unfortunately for Mattie, things can turn out disastrously if she failed. Her epistemic resilience can lead her to rationalize persisting even though she should quit. The same worries arise for agents who draw upon substantial practical hope.

⁷Though operating within the decision theoretic framework, it’s not clear whether Morton and Paul’s proposal assumes a form of time-slice rationality or diachronic rationality. On their view, prior investment in a project can justify adopting a higher epistemic threshold. In that limited sense, prior attitudes can play a role in determining the rationality of present choices.

Second, recall that the examples used in these accounts of grit typically involve agents who are devoted to a single overarching project. Again, most of us are not highly specialized in this way. Instead, we take on multiple ends. While being more epistemically resilient or more substantially practically hopeful can be advantageous for some ends, this could be terrible for other ends. For example, suppose Mattie adopts an epistemic policy that discounts philosophical objections in the seminar room as reasons to abandon a philosophical project. Being gritty in this way is a good idea if she wants to get something published. However, if Mattie also wants to cultivate personal relationships with friends and family, adopting an epistemic policy that discounts their disagreements and worries as reasons to change her personal behavior would be very bad! Being thick-skinned is beneficial in the seminar room but a terrible idea in the living room.

While the solution is to index our epistemic policies or hopefulness to specific ends, we are unlikely to be able to do this well. Kahneman (2011) has pointed out that we fall prey to a variety of systematic cognitive biases especially when making decisions quickly. Furthermore, many of us are susceptible to optimism bias (i.e. our tendency to frequently and systematically overestimate the likelihood of positive events and underestimate the likelihood of negative events). Given these biases, we may tend to adopt higher epistemic thresholds and become more risk inclined across contexts in detrimental ways.

Third, and most importantly, the sources of grit that we've been examining rely on a decision theoretic framework. This framework does a good job of providing plausible advice to someone considering a single choice such as whether to quit or persist: maximize expected utility. Developing epistemic resilience and practical hope can tip that choice in favor of persisting. The problem is that decision theory is not as well-suited for explaining what an agent should do when they are juggling multiple long-term ends with various degrees of determinacy and completion. This is exactly what an agent seeking to live a well-rounded life does.

To see why it is not well-suited, consider the following example:

Mei is a single mother making a decent hourly wage as an autoworker. She has several long-term ends at various stages of completion and determinacy: (i) retire modestly, (ii) pay for her daughter's college education, and (iii) develop her passion for jewelry making. While *Mei* is well on her way to her retirement savings goal, she is just starting to save for her daughter's college fund. *Mei* has been learning how to make jewelry from a local artisan but is considering taking

her passion to the next level. Despite being very financially responsible, *Mei* will have to consistently budget, save aggressively, and hope that she does not encounter too many unforeseen adversities over the next decade.

On most versions of decision theory, at every moment, rationality requires *Mei* to maximize expected utility. But it seems implausible that there is always some exact thing that *Mei* has to do in order to realize her various ends. It is clear that she can't frivolously spend all of her resources and time because that would prevent her from realizing her long-term ends. But it is unlikely that there is an exact optimum balance of resources and time that she should spend between her ends at every given moment. Nor would a plausible theory of instrumental rationality require this of her.

The issue is not just that *Mei* is epistemically limited and therefore cannot know what that optimific balance is. The deeper reason is due to how we set our ends. As Tenenbaum (2020) has pointed out, *Mei*, like almost all of us, have multiple indeterminate and adjustable ends that get realized over a long period of time. Effective agents set ends at the level of determinacy that is appropriate to their skills and capacities (Bratman 1987). It can sometimes be better to set relatively indeterminate ends that allows one to be more flexible. Given that *Mei* has set her ends rather vaguely, putting one extra dollar into college savings won't ruin her ability to retire modestly or invest into her jewelry making altogether. There are many different ways to divide her time and resources that would still allow her to realize her three ends.

Of course, things could change if she decided to make her ends much more determinate. For example, *Mei* can aim to retire at an exact time with an exact standard of living, pay for all or only some of her daughter's college, or pursue jewelry making in Italy rather than as a side hobby. Perhaps when her ends are maximally determinate, there is some optimific way of splitting time and resources between those ends. But since it is implausible and even counterproductive for us to have maximally determinate ends at every moment, it should also come as no surprise that there is typically no optimific way to divide our time and resources between our various ends at any given moment.⁸

⁸For more discussion on why decision theory provides implausible verdicts in these kinds of cases, see chapter 2 of Tenenbaum (2020) as well as Tenenbaum (2023, 73–74). In chapter 4, Tenenbaum (2020) uses the case of the self-torturer to further argue that there is no optimum strategy. These cases are structurally similar to the ones discussed by Temkin (1987). Andreou (2022) discusses similar cases involving accumulation of trivial effects as well as cases where agents have preference structures that are non-ideal according to decision theory.

Summing up, we've examined how recent accounts of grit can be of some use to agents who are deeply committed to an overarching project. But most of us *are not* just committed to one overarching end. We pursue a wide variety of ends over time as we aim for a well-rounded life. Since we are not just deciding to persist in one single overarching project at a single moment, the accounts of grit that we have examined and the decision theoretic framework that they presuppose are of less use to us. Let us consider a theory of instrumental rationality that *is* more helpful precisely because it is sensitive to how normal people pursue well-rounded lives and issues plausible rational requirements on what they should do to realize them.

3. The extended theory of instrumental rationality and the well-rounded life

Tenenbaum's Extended Theory of Instrumental Rationality (ETR) has four components:⁹

- (1) The basic attitude input is intentional action (2020, 43).
- (2) The output of instrumental reasoning is intentional action (2020, 43).
- (3) Principle of Derivation: An agent derives intermediate actions (i.e., means) from ends by figuring out the sufficient and contributory means to her ends (2020, 44).¹⁰ She is rationally required to take at least some sufficient means to her ends.
- (4) Principle of Coherence: 'When an instrumentally rational agent realizes that her ends are incompatible (cannot be jointly realized), she abandons at least one of the ends from the smallest subset of her ends that cannot be jointly realized (2020, 45)'.

Let us examine how the theory works and see how it makes plausible predictions about what is rationally required of an agent when they adopt multiple indeterminate ends.¹¹

On ETR, the fundamental input of instrumental reasoning is intentional action. An intentional action is directed towards some end which can be

⁹For another related theory of instrumental rationality that also pays attention to extended action and pushes back against conventional decision theory, see Andreou (2022). Thanks to an anonymous referee for the citation suggestion and for pushing me to explain Tenenbaum's theory in more detail.

¹⁰The specific formulations of the derivation principles can be found in the citation.

¹¹For critical discussion of Tenenbaum's theory, see Howard (2021), Paul (2023), and Brunero (2023). As mentioned in footnote 8, Tenenbaum's theory is motivated by problems with standard decision theory such as the self-torturer puzzle and the problem of cyclical preferences. See Thoma (2019) for discussion and potential responses to these problems.

specified in multiple ways. As noted earlier, Mei can further specify her end to retire modestly by setting a precise date, a specific amount, or deliberately leaving it vague. She can also revisit that end as time goes by. Intentional actions are related to each other in a means-ends structure. If Mei aims to retire by 67, she will have to consider and execute various intermediate actions that are sufficient for achieving her end (e.g. save 15% of her monthly income, cut back on expenses related to her jewelry making, etc.). Once an agent identifies the sufficient means to her ends, instrumental rationality requires that she at least takes some of them. Otherwise, by the principle of coherence, if she is unwilling to take any sufficient means, she has to alter her original ends.¹²

A key difference between ETR and standard decision theory is that it does not require maximization at every moment (though it can accommodate some features of decision theory by appealing to the implicit preference orderings in our adopted ends).¹³ As we noted, because our ends are often indeterminate, there is usually no optimum strategy for how we should divide up our time and resources across our various ends. A theory of instrumental rationality would be too strict if it requires Mei to stop saving for her daughter's college fund once she reaches an exact dollar amount. It would also be too strict if it requires Mei to keep giving to her daughter's college savings so long as she prefers to do so. This would result in her not saving enough money to retire modestly.

Instead, ETR issues the following permissions and requirements (Tenenbaum 2023, 74):

- (i) Permissions not to choose a most preferred alternative in order to pursue an intermediate end.
- (ii) Requirements to exercise some of those permissions.

Applied to Mei's case, ETR permits Mei to save for her own retirement even if she prefers to put money into her daughter's college savings instead. To require her to do more for her retirement goes beyond ETR's principle of derivation which only requires her to take at least some sufficient means to her end of retiring modestly. But ETR also requires her to take this permission at least once in a while. If she never

¹²Brunero (2023, 118–119) has argued that Tenenbaum's rationality requirement is too strong. Tenenbaum's fix is to suggest that in some cases, when an agent refuses to take any of the sufficient means to her end, she will have to adopt a new end that is related to the first (e.g., *trying* to achieve the end). The following discussion will not be affected by this issue.

¹³In chapter 9 of Tenenbaum (2020), Tenenbaum explores how ETR can plausibly take on some elements from decision theory.

took any sufficient means towards retiring modestly, she would never do so. This violates ETR's principles of derivation and coherence.

ETR also implies a result that conflicts with the time-slice rationality underlying most versions of decision theory. According to time-slice rationality, one acts rationally through an interval of time by acting rationally at every single point in that interval. In contrast, ETR implies the following:

Non-Supervenience Thesis: an agent can act rationally at each moment in time from t_1 to t_n without having been rational *through* t_1 to t_n . (Tenenbaum 2020, 187)

For example, if Mei prefers to put any extra money into her daughter's college savings, it is rational for her to do so at any moment between now and a decade from now. However, even if she acts rationally at any given moment when she does this, she would fail to be rational through that time if she never takes any sufficient means to also save towards retiring modestly.

Importantly, Mei's case is not just a rare one-off that should be ignored in favor of decision theory. The structure of this case is ubiquitous and the Non-Supervenience Thesis applies to all of us who have multiple indeterminate ends that extend across time. ETR makes sense of the fact that our instrumental reasoning involves constantly balancing what is most attractive to us in the short-term with our need to make progress on our long-term ends.

Summing up, ETR provides a more plausible account than decision theory when it comes to what is rationally required of us when we pursue a well-rounded life consisting of multiple long-term ends. Decision theory implausibly tells us to maximize at every moment even when there is no optimific strategy and it tells us that we will always be rational over time so long as we are maximizing at every moment. Neither point is good advice for someone pursuing a well-rounded life.

Nevertheless, one might worry that ETR does not provide enough practical guidance. At least with decision theory, the recommendation to maximize is always clear (even if implausible). ETR only tells us that we have to take some sufficient means to our ends or to adjust them. This massively underdetermines what we should do. In response, while ETR does not provide us with specific guidance directly, we can use it to develop an account of the instrumental virtues. In the next section, we will use it to consider an account of the instrumental virtue of practical

judgment and show how this virtue can help agents overcome obstacles and realize their various long-term ends.

4. The instrumental virtue of practical judgment and the well-rounded life

4.1. *The instrumental virtue of practical judgment*

Following Tenenbaum, let's grant that a virtue is '... a general power or capacity of the will to pursue good ends; that is, a general power to bring about the content of certain attitudes by representing their content as good (2020, 182)'. The core instrumental virtue that allows us to bring about the ends that we represent as good is practical judgment. For Tenenbaum (2020, 189), the person who perfectly displays the instrumental virtue of practical judgment is someone who can realize all of their long-term ends without needing any intermediate policies whatsoever.

Unfortunately, we cannot bring about whatever we want just by snapping our fingers. When we adopt long-term ends, we have to adjust them over time and effectively identify and execute intermediate policies to realize them.¹⁴ With this in mind, we can state Tenenbaum's account of the instrumental virtue of practical judgment as follows:

Practical Judgment: The capacity to appropriately select and adjust one's long-term ends and to realize them through executing appropriate intermediate policies.

Following Tenenbaum (2020, 188–199), we can break this virtue down into two further components:¹⁵

End and Intermediate Policy Selection: The capacity to set appropriate long-term ends and to set appropriate intermediate policies to realize those ends.

Execution: The capacity to successfully pursue one's long-term ends *through* the intermediate policies one has chosen.

Each component addresses a feature of extended instrumental reasoning applied to the selection and execution of multiple long-term ends.

¹⁴See Duckworth (2016) for discussion of how failing to plan is a matter of 'positive fantasizing'. For example, chapter 4 of Duckworth (2016) focuses on the notion of dedicated practice and planning as a way for agents to get grittier. See Kappes and Oettingen (2011) for discussion of how positive fantasizing can sap energy and motivation.

¹⁵End and Intermediate Policy Selection draws upon what Tenenbaum (2020, 189–199) calls the 'vertical dimension' of practical judgment. Execution draws upon what Tenenbaum calls the 'horizontal dimension' of practical judgment.

Consider **End and Intermediate Policy Selection**. In aiming for a well-rounded life, we adopt multiple long-term ends at various degrees of determinacy. A person with good practical judgment is someone who is able to choose long-term ends at the right level of determinacy and knows how to adjust them over time. They are also good at determining the intermediate policies that fit their dispositions and talents well while also facilitating steady progress towards their long-term ends. While there are no set rules on how to do this, empirical research suggests better ways to select and specify our long-term ends and the intermediate policies that we need to achieve them.

Consider **Execution**. Given the Non-Supervenience Thesis, we frequently have to figure out when to pursue some sufficient means to our long-term ends and when to take advantage of other more enticing opportunities. A person with good practical judgment is able to not only figure out the intermediate ends to her long-term ends but also knows when to execute them and when to set them aside for other opportunities. Without this capacity, an agent will either procrastinate indefinitely or lose out on worthwhile opportunities to pursue other goods besides her long-term ends. Again, there is no hard and fast rule for how to do this. However, I will propose that one way for an agent to get better at this is to learn how to be more responsive to the justifying and requiring strength of their practical reasons.

4.2. End and intermediate policy selection

Let us start with the capacity to select appropriate long-term ends first and then turn to the capacity to adopt appropriate intermediate policies to realize them.

4.2.1. Selecting long-term ends

As we noted, ends can be indeterminate. This could be a result of the predicates used to specify them, what counts as realizing them, and the degree to which they are to be realized. Agents can often forestall or pre-empt obstacles by setting their ends at the right level of indeterminacy consistent with their skills, capacities, and other ends. They can also properly motivate themselves by selecting ends that strike the balance between being challenging and achievable.

The capacity to set appropriate long-term ends is a virtue that lies between two extremes. On one extreme, studies have shown that adopting ends that are too ambitious and too specific relative to one's present

skills and capacities increases the likelihood of failure and can decrease motivation to continue.¹⁶ On the other extreme, studies have shown that if we set ends that are too easy and not specific enough, we end up underachieving relative to our potential which can also sap our motivation to persist.¹⁷

To illustrate, let us focus on a case with just one long-term end. Suppose that Mattie is focused on the following end: establishing a good publication record. She can specify this end in any number of ways. A particularly aggressive way to specify this end is to have six new publications in top ten journals by next year. Even if Mattie were unusually talented, it would be unwise for her to set this goal. For one, even the most seasoned philosophers cannot rely on getting publications in top journals at this rate. Furthermore, failing to meet this end early in her career can sap her motivation to continue. On the opposite extreme, if Mattie specifies the end as publishing a paper or two in any journal in the next five years, that specification would not provide enough direction or motivation for her either. Instead, if she were to set and achieve a more modest but specific end (e.g. publish one paper in a top twenty generalist journal or top-ranked specialty journal by her first job market cycle), this can direct her efforts and boost her confidence if she succeeds. She can then move on to adopt more ambitious or specific ends later.¹⁸

Note that learning how to better select long-term ends can make us more equipped to overcome obstacles. When an agent learns how to appropriately select long-term ends, she is also able to anticipate and incorporate obstacles into her practical reasoning. Frequently failing early on can be demoralizing and motivation sapping. By adopting appropriately ambitious ends early on, Mattie can reduce the probability of failure and its psychological consequences (e.g. burnout and discouragement). As Mattie advances her philosophical skills, she may aim for better journals and tighter time limits recognizing that failure is possible. If she

¹⁶See Höpfner and Keith (2021) and Roose and Williams (2017) on how goal levels can affect an agent's performance and motivation.

¹⁷See Howe (2019) for discussion on how the types of goals an agent chooses can affect the correlation between their general mental ability and their adaptive performance on tasks. See Sitkin et al. (2011) for discussion of how ambitious stretch goals are most likely to work for those with forward momentum (e.g., having had recent successes) and resources to spare.

¹⁸Appropriate planning can also help us to be more epistemically resilient (in a sense). Rather than raising our evidential thresholds, we can set ends at the right level of ambition and specificity that allow for diverse ways of fulfillment or different degrees of fulfillment. By allowing more opportunities for success, an agent would need more countervailing evidence to believe that success is not forthcoming.

succeeds, then all the better. But if not, failure can be useful to her. Rejection and failure are serious external obstacles, but she can plan for them and use them as information about her own level of competence and what she needs to do to improve.¹⁹

Second, an agent who can appropriately select long-term ends knows how to adopt ones that complement each other well. On one extreme, an agent errs when she has too few long-term ends that do not allow her to develop her capacities and to pursue a variety of goods. Recalling Hurka (1987), for most people, living a highly specialized life governed by the pursuit of a single overarching good is unlikely to be as rewarding as living a life in the pursuit of several mutually reinforcing goods. The opposite extreme is when an agent adopts too many long-term ends that are potentially incompatible with each other. This is the problem with being a dilettante. Not only do we not spend enough time and resources getting good at any particular thing, we create internal obstacles for ourselves by having to split our limited resources and time between too many incompatible ends.

Recall Mei who wants to retire modestly, pay for her daughter's college, and pursue her jewelry making. While she can certainly adopt other long-term ends, she nonetheless must be careful about which ones she adopts. If Mei were to suddenly adopt long-term ends that are physically dangerous or costly in time and financial resources (e.g. becoming a professional base-jumper), it would be much harder for her to achieve her other long-term ends. By setting ends that cohere well with one another or are even mutually reinforcing, Mei prevents the internal obstacles that arise in coordinating incompatible ends from the start.

4.2.2. Selecting intermediate policies

Now, consider an agent's capacity to set appropriate intermediate policies that help her achieve her long-term ends.²⁰ If an agent chooses inappropriate intermediate policies, she can create unnecessary obstacles for herself that prevent her from realizing her long-term ends. What would count as an appropriate set of intermediate policies to adopt will depend on her skills, habits, and other long-term ends.

¹⁹Since journal acceptances can be somewhat arbitrary, the reader can fill in other concrete examples (e.g., athletic pursuits, quarterly sales goals, etc.)

²⁰What will count as a long-term versus an intermediate end will be relative to the time frame in consideration. Finishing a dissertation may seem like a long-term end for a graduate student but will only be seen as an intermediate end in light of an even longer-term end of becoming a seasoned academic.

On one extreme, an agent can simply adopt no intermediate policies or actions whatsoever. Suppose that Mattie plans to finish her dissertation in two years but develops no intermediate writing or research policies whatsoever. Likewise, imagine if Mei decides to retire by 67 and pay for her daughter's college but has no intermediate savings goals between now and the next twenty years. Failing to plan is planning to fail.

But what is less emphasized but equally dangerous is planning or adopting ill-fitting, micromanaged, and inflexible policies.²¹ These too can impede an agent's progress towards her long-term ends. Imagine if Mattie's intermediate policy is to write six days a week with only Sunday off starting at 9 am and ending at 6 pm. Within each day, she sets further policies: first two hours focused on research, one hour for lunch, the next four hours on writing, and the last hour on revising. Within each activity chunk, she also sets further activity ends such as reading a specific number of pages per hour during research time, etc. Though this level of strictness in one's intermediate policies can work well for some, it is far more likely that this is too inflexible and demanding given a normal personal life, non-research obligations, and the exhaustion that comes with hours of high-level mental concentration every day. It also leaves no flexibility regarding unexpected external obstacles such as family, health, or financial emergencies.

Likewise, if Mei budgets every single dollar with almost no discretionary spending, this could leave her miserable and unmotivated to save, or even worse, causes her to lash out and indulge in intermittent splurges that cancel out her strict budgeting.²² A much more plausible strategy for most (though not all people) is to adopt more flexible intermediate policies that facilitate sustained progress while leaving space for life's contingencies (e.g. adopting bi-weekly or monthly writing goals, setting broader spending categories and having monthly, quarterly, annual, and multi-year financial milestones, etc.).

Summarizing section 4.2, we saw how the capacity to set appropriate long-term ends and the intermediate policies to realize them is critical to realizing a well-rounded life with multiple long-term ends. While some of us may already have this capacity and exercise it well, it is something that

²¹See chapter 8 of Tenenbaum (2020) for further discussion of these kinds of policies.

²²Empirical studies and economic reasoning suggest that a mixture of planning strategies can be helpful. Koch and Nafziger (2020) found that research subjects selecting daily goals end up with higher aggregate goals than those who only set weekly goals all at once. This suggests that having daily goals can be more beneficial than weekly goals for some tasks. Nonetheless, Hsiaw (2018) points out that one can do better by adopting more general goals during early-stage uncertainties and more specific incremental goals when late-stage uncertainties arise.

most of us can arguably develop with practice and more self-knowledge about what policies work best for us given own talents and habits. While exercising this capacity is not as easy as simply maximizing expected utility at every moment, this is to be expected as instrumental reasoning in the well-rounded life is simply more complicated than instrumental reasoning about one overarching end in a highly specialized life.

4.3. Execution

Even if an agent properly selects her long-term ends and adopts the right kinds of intermediate policies needed to achieve them, she has to successfully execute those policies. A person with good practical judgment does not achieve her ends primarily through accident or luck. This brings us to the second component of practical judgment: the capacity to achieve one's long-term ends *through* executing one's chosen intermediate policies. This capacity is particularly important because it helps an agent navigate external obstacles such as emergencies as well as enticing opportunities that arise over an extended period of time.

This capacity exists between two extremes. One extreme is to persist in one's intermediate policies no matter what. This leads an agent to ignore pressing matters and external obstacles that she has overwhelming reason to address before returning to her intermediate policies. For example, it would be bad for Mattie to keep writing according to her monthly plan if this would destroy her mental health and relationships. Likewise, Mei should try to make up her monthly savings goals later if a medical emergency requires her to spend money now.

The other extreme is when agents procrastinate too much and fail to execute their intermediate policies every time a more enticing option arises. Recall the Non-Supervenience Thesis from section 3. It is possible to act rationally at every given point but still fail to act rationally through a time period by failing to realize one's long-term ends. Agents who keep abandoning their intermediate policies whenever an enticing option arises will end up either having to abandon their long-term end, to achieve it to a lower degree, or end up sacrificing other long-term ends or short-term ends to make it happen.

Illustrating with Mattie's case, dissertations have distant due dates. Let us grant that Mattie has some other long-term ends as well. Unfortunately, Mattie can always find herself engaging in a more immediately enticing activity or work on some other long-term end that she has

more reason to do presently than to write her dissertation.²³ If she pursues too many of these other activities though, Mattie might still finish her dissertation but it could be of poorer quality or she has to abandon her other long-term ends to make it work. Likewise, Mei could find herself with more reason to spend her money now on some deal than to save it for later. But if she keeps on doing this, she may have to retire with less, work longer, or require her daughter to take on some college debt.

Note that the capacity to execute one's intermediate policies is not just willpower or a failure to be time-slice rational.²⁴ An agent can still want to achieve her long-term ends and is willing to abandon other pursuits when it becomes necessary. They can have plenty of willpower but still fail to realize their long-term ends (or at least realize them less well) because they lack the ability to properly execute their intermediate policies. And as we noted, an agent may be time-slice rational at every instance but still fail to realize some of her long-term ends.

Instead, we need a better understanding of what allows an agent to balance executing the sufficient means to her long-term ends while also pursuing attractive opportunities that may only be available for a limited time or dealing with emergencies that cannot wait. While ETR implies plausible permissions and requirements on an instrumentally rational agent, it does not provide further guidance on how that agent should actually navigate these situations.

I propose that the capacity to execute one's plans well relies on a related capacity to properly respond to the *justifying* and *requiring* weight of one's practical reasons. Philosophers such as Gert (2016), Little and Macnamara (2020), and Tucker (2021) have argued that practical reasons can rationally support actions with two distinct types of normative weight. First, practical reasons have a *justifying weight* that makes certain options permissible. For example, the attractiveness of a party or a limited-run theater production may justify Mattie to go out rather than stay in to write her dissertation. Yet, this type of reason may have little to no *requiring weight* which would make the option to stay at home and write impermissible. As a result, Mattie is still permitted to stay at home and write if she wants to. However, there are actions supported by reasons with such strong requiring weight that all other options are

²³As we shall see, 'more reason' can be ambiguous between the justifying or requiring weight of a reason.

²⁴As Tenenbaum (2020, 189) points out, the vice of procrastination is neither a failure to be resolute with one's long-term end nor being too flexible.

impermissible. For example, if Mattie's father just passed away and the funeral were today, this fact is a reason with overwhelming requiring weight that would make staying home and writing impermissible.

A person who has developed the capacity to execute her intermediate policies towards her long-term ends is properly responsive to the justifying and requiring weight of her practical reasons. On occasion, she may abandon her immediate policies if she has strong justifying reasons to do some other activity. Yet, she also recognizes that she is permitted to ignore that other activity so long as there are no strong requiring reasons in its favor. For example, Mattie can go out to a particularly enticing party or theater production but still make sure to do enough active dissertation writing to finish on time and with good quality. Likewise, Mei can occasionally indulge in a mini vacation or a luxury bag on sale but also make up for it by putting more money next month into retirement, college savings, or her jewelry making. At the same time, when a situation generates practical reasons with overwhelming requiring weight (e.g., an emergency medical bill), Mei and Mattie would deal with that situation first and recognize that pursuing her intermediate policies to write or to save is impermissible for now.

One might object that even though the distinction between the justifying and requiring weight of reasons is plausible, fairly widely accepted, and easily demonstrated by ostension, there is no agreement on what the metaphysical basis for this normative distinction is. Perhaps it is grounded in an objective ordering of intrinsic goods. Or perhaps it is grounded in one's subjective hierarchy of ends. If so, then it is less clear how an agent can develop the relevant capacity to respond to this distinction.

In response, we already accept that agents can learn how to better respond to their practical reasons even if there is no widespread agreement as to whether practical reasons are objective or subjective. Since metaethicists have provided plausible accounts for how we can better respond to practical reasons whether they are objective or subjective, we can simply borrow the best versions of these accounts and apply them to whatever the correct metaphysical basis for the requiring/justifying weight distinction happens to be.

Summarizing section 4.3, the capacity to execute one's intermediate policies involves a sensitivity to the justifying and requiring weight of one's available practical reasons. This sensitivity empowers an agent to navigate external obstacles such as emergencies as well as attractive enticements that can prevent her from achieving her long-term ends. Even though there is no algorithm that would allow us to perfectly respond

to the justifying and requiring weight of our available practical reasons, greater responsiveness to the weight of our practical reasons is something we can all improve on through trial and error.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, while grit can help us overcome obstacles to our ends, developing practical judgment is even more important when it comes to living a good life understood as a well-rounded life. Recent accounts of grit have focused too much on examples of highly specialized agents trying to figure out whether to persist in some overarching end despite long odds. These accounts rely on a decision theoretic framework that is ill-fitted to capture the fact that these kinds of cases are the exception rather than the norm. Instead, most of us are trying to pursue well-rounded lives. Such lives involve adopting multiple and often difficult long-term ends at various degrees of determinacy over an extended period of time.

We then saw how ETR gives us an account of instrumental rationality that makes sense of this complexity, and we used it to examine the instrumental virtue of practical judgment. We then showed how the exercise of this virtue can help an agent live a well-rounded life. We explained how an agent with good practical judgment can wisely select long-term ends and intermediate policies to realize those ends. We also saw how such an agent can balance those intermediate policies with other enticing opportunities as well as external obstacles in order to make progress towards her various long-term ends.

None of this should come as a surprise. Granted, examples of gritty agents are more exciting and memorable. We like celebrating people who become wildly successful through almost irrational displays of persistence and determination. These people lead highly meaningful lives that are highly specialized around certain ends. While these lives can be good, they are not the only good lives available to us.²⁵ We should recognize that most of us do not lead this kind of life. The good life for most of us involves realizing a variety of long-term ends. When we think more carefully about people who lead such lives well, what comes to mind are people who can make steady progress towards their ends through careful planning and discipline. In short, we are thinking

²⁵Hammerton (2022) argues that meaningful lives are ones that produce the greatest quantity of intrinsic goods regardless of whether those goods are balanced.

about people who lead good lives by demonstrating good practical judgment.

If what I have argued is correct, we need to do more empirical work on how to best select our long-term ends and how to select intermediate policies to realize them. I suspect that there is no one-size-fits-all strategy. Perhaps there are strategies that work best for certain personality types or for people with certain habits and talents. We should also investigate agents who have developed the virtue of practical judgment and consider whether there are empirically effective ways to teach this virtue to others.

Finally, if the capacity to execute one's intermediate policies requires us to better respond to the justifying and requiring weight of our reasons, more philosophical work needs to be done as to what grounds this distinction in normative support. Doing so will help us develop ways to better respond to our practical reasons and to better balance our long-term ends with more immediate opportunities as well as external obstacles. In sum, if we want to live well-rounded lives, we need to investigate ways to develop our practical judgment.²⁶

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