**A User’s Guide to Failing Well**

**Abstract**

While grit has received significant philosophical attention, failure has not. This paper fills the gap in the literature by explicitly providing a straightforward account of what it is for an agent to fail. In section 1, I provide what I call the Plan Account of Failing (Plan Account for short). The account focuses on when an individual agent fails and consists of three components: (i) a plan to bring about some state of affairs S, (ii) an attempt to bring about S, and (iii) the fact that S does not obtain. In section 2, I consider the upshots of components (ii) and (iii) for attributions of failure and when it is appropriate to celebrate failure or at least find ways to mitigate its sting. In section 3, I consider the upshots of component (i). In particular, I consider how our ability to specify our plans and to place them in a hierarchy of plans connects to recent discussions of grit provided by Morton and Paul (2019) and Rioux (forthcoming). The overall picture is that we may have more control over how we fail and to what extent it matters than we may have initially thought. We can learn to fail better.

**Introduction**

Lindsey Jacobellis was about to win a gold medal in snowboard cross at her first Winter Olympics in 2006. Unfortunately, she prematurely celebrated by grabbing her board on a jump off the last hill of the race, falls, and ends up winning silver. At just 20 years old, she felt like she not only failed but let her country down.[[1]](#footnote-1) Despite winning numerous world championships for the next 16 years of her career, Olympic gold eluded her. But rather than let these failures define her, she returned to her fifth Olympics in 2022 at the age of 36. Jacobellis finally struck gold not once but twice with a celebratory grab during the final moments of her second gold medal run to boot.

While the above is a paradigmatic example of grit, a topic getting much deserved philosophical attention recently, I propose we take a step back by examining where Jacobellis’s 16 year journey to Olympic gold began: failure.[[2]](#footnote-2) Granted, few of us are world-class athletes but many of us do have valuable pursuits and plans. Unfortunately, we can’t always get what we want. Some of our plans end temporarily or even permanently in failure. Given that failure is a ubiquitous though often unwelcome part of our lives, it deserves more philosophical attention than it has currently received.[[3]](#footnote-3)

This paper fills the gap in the literature by explicitly providing a straightforward account of what it is for an agent to fail. Though the account I provide should be relatively uncontroversial, I aim to innovate by systematically detailing its upshots for how we can celebrate or mitigate our failures, how we can attribute failures to ourselves, and how we can persevere in spite of our failures. In short, insofar as we cannot avoid failing indefinitely, this paper is my attempt at giving a guide for how to fail well.

Here is the road map. In section 1, I provide what I call the Plan Account of Failing (Plan Account for short). The account focuses on when an individual agent fails and consists of three components: (i) a plan to bring about some state of affairs S, (ii) an attempt to bring about S, and (iii) the fact that S does not obtain. In section 2, I consider the upshots of components (ii) and (iii) for attributions of failure and when it is appropriate to celebrate failure or at least find ways to mitigate its sting. In section 3, I consider the upshots of component (i). In particular, I consider how our ability to specify our plans and to place them in a hierarchy of plans connects to recent discussions of grit provided by Morton and Paul (2019) and Rioux (forthcoming). The overall picture is that we may have more control over how we fail and to what extent it matters than we may have initially thought. We can learn to fail better.

**Section 1** **The Plan Account of Failing**

My account of failure is focused on cases where an agent aims to realize some state of affairs but does not bring it about. Failures of this kind reflect (at least to some degree) the ineffectiveness of a deliberative agent in setting and executing her plans. As a result, my discussion will not directly address a number of related issues.

First, I am not concerned with cases in which we attribute failures to agents regardless of whatever plans they set. For example, though there is a sense in which we say that someone has failed to live by a moral code even if they never planned to do so, I will not try to explain that here.[[4]](#footnote-4) Second, I will not be providing an account of group failures. Third, I will not try to provide a fully developed account of blame or praise as related to succeeding and failing. Fourth, the cases in discussion will assume that the plans discussed are genuinely valuable and that there are no morally decisive reasons that would count against pursuing them in the ways to be discussed. This bears in mind that some valuable plans can involve goods that require significant resources or abilities to secure that are not equally available to all. This paper will not directly address the important social and political issues involving the pursuit of those goods – issues that deserve more careful attention elsewhere.[[5]](#footnote-5)

*1.1 The Plan Account of Failure*

In the Plan Account, an agent fails just in case the following obtain:

**Plan Component**: The agent plans to bring about some state of affairs S.

**Attempt Component***:* The agent attempts to bring about S.

**Fact Component**: S does not obtain.

*1.2 The Plan Component*

The Plan Account captures the idea that failures indicate (at least to some degree) an agent’s ineffectiveness in bringing about something they intended. For our purposes and to simplify matters, we will adopt Bratman’s (1999) suggestion that intentions are plans. Granted, there is disagreement about whether intentions should best be understood as plans as opposed to some other mental state(s). I favor appealing to plans because they best illuminate the contents of our intentions and how our intentions are structured and related to one another. Furthermore, unlike mere goal states, plans are capable of motivating an agent to act in ways that would realize its object (Velleman 2007). That said, the reader is free to adopt another account of intention so long as it contains the features to be discussed.

Return to the Plan Component. It tells us that an agent fails to bring about some state of affairs S only when they have formed some plan (even if initially inchoate) to bring S about. To better understand this condition, let me say more about what plans are and what states of affairs are.

Following Bratman (1999), we can characterize the mental state of having a plan functionally. The idea is that when forming a plan to bring about S, an agent is committed to bringing about S. This involves generally not re-evaluating S, taking the necessary means to achieve S, and not adopting other plans that would be incompatible with bringing about S.

Next, consider the notion of a state of affairs. For our purposes, I will not attempt to state a detailed metaphysics for states of affairs. Instead, we will assume that a fully specified state of affairs consists of the instantiation of some set of properties at a specific location and time. In other words, we can fully specify some state of affairs S as a set with three elements such that S = {{p}, l, t} where S is the name of the state of affairs, {p} is a set of properties to be instantiated, l is a location, and t is a time. This is liberal enough to include plans to realize states of affairs that involve an agent instantiating some property (e.g., being a successful athlete) or an agent’s performing certain actions (assuming that actions are just instantiations of properties by agents at some place and time).[[6]](#footnote-6)

Before proceeding to the next component, let me highlight two details that will be relevant to how we should attribute failures to ourselves and to others.

First, when forming a plan to bring about a state of affairs, we need not have a complete characterization of that state of affairs. In other words, when making plans with some state of affairs in mind, we can omit elements of {{p}, l, t} that fully specifies that state of affairs. For example, suppose I plan to be a celebrated writer. I can form a plan to be a Pulitzer award winning writer by my fortieth birthday or I can broadly plan to realize a state of affairs where at some indeterminate point in the future I become a celebrated writer. We may still count as planning (even if minimally so) when the object of our plan lacks specificity and we have not fully considered the specific means to realize its object.

Second, our plans can be hierarchically structured such that we may have an overarching plan that shapes various subplans. This generates a plan hierarchy. Suppose Lindsey Jacobellis’s overarching plan is to win an Olympic gold medal in 2022. That plan gets fleshed out with subsequent subordinate subplans which may have their own subordinate subplans, and etc. For example, she has to first win a spot on the U.S. Olympic team which requires her to be at a certain level of physical fitness which requires her to have a specific strength and endurance routine, and so on.

These two details will be crucial in section 3 when we consider whether we should set plans with more or less specific states of affairs and how we should weigh the impact of our successes and failures.

*1.3 The Attempt Component*

In addition to forming a plan to bring about S, an agent must also *attempt* (even if minimally so) to bring about S in order to count as failing to do so when S does not obtain.[[7]](#footnote-7) In the cases of failure under consideration, an agent is unable to bring some state of affairs about despite an exercise of her agency. Failing is not just a mental phenomenon that involves the mismatch between some desired state of affairs in one’s mind and that state of affairs not obtaining in the external world. Such a mismatch can be found in merely wishing that S (e.g., that Stalin never existed) and S not obtaining. Yet, that would clearly not count as failing to bring about Stalin’s non-existence. Borrowing from Anscombe (1963), when we fail, it’s not the world that fails but *we* who fail to change it.

To reinforce the idea that failing requires an attempt, note that its opposite (i.e., success) does presume an attempt.[[8]](#footnote-8) If I plan to bring about S but make no attempt to do so, even if S obtains, I will not count as having succeeded at bringing about S. For example, if I plan to restock my fridge with groceries but then proceed to do nothing but sit on the couch, even though my partner ends up restocking the fridge unbeknownst to me, I clearly do not count as having succeeded at stocking my fridge. My desire is fulfilled not because I have succeeded at anything. Success is attributed to an agent for the effective exercise of her agency to bring about the object of her plan. Likewise, failures are attributed to an agent for the relative ineffective exercise of their agency.

That said, according to the Plan Account, an agent could fail to bring about something that it is impossible for her to bring about. For example, an agent can plan to realize something that is impossible to bring about because it is not within her abilities, or the state of affairs is metaphysically impossible. She could still attempt to execute the plan but fail to realize it. This counts as failing on the Plan Account. However, the normative significance of failures will depend, in part, on the objective value of the state of affairs to be realized, to what extent it was within the abilities of the agent to realize her plan given the circumstances, and how important that plan is relative to that agent’s other plans.

For example, suppose a foolhardy person plans to end world hunger on their own. They will fail. Though the goal is valuable, such a failure would not reflect negatively on an agent’s abilities though it may reflect negatively on their plan selection. On the flip side, we can consider agents who competently execute valuable plans that are highly unlikely to be realized due to a lack of resources or active hostility towards their pursuits (e.g., Malala Yousafzsai becoming an Oxford graduate and Nobel Peace Prize winner). Their successes may be even more normatively significant when compared to similar successes by those who didn’t face the same obstacles.

*1.4 The Fact Component*

Finally, in order for an agent to fail to bring about S, it is not enough for the agent to just believe that S has not obtained. It has to be the case that S has in fact not obtained. Likewise, even if an agent mistakenly believes that S has not obtained despite her attempts, if S has obtained, then she has succeeded. In short, the Plan Account does not make an agent infallible about self-attributions of failure or success. [[9]](#footnote-9)

For example, suppose that Xi’s overarching plan for her academic life is to be a well-respected philosopher publishing important papers. She would feel content if she achieved this. However, she has grown up with severely misguided prestige envy. Xi falsely believes that achieving her overarching plan for her academic life requires being a professor at a top five program and publishing only in top five generalist journals. She has not achieved this. Nonetheless, she is a tenured professor at a highly regarded program, is well-respected, and publishes papers that are frequently cited as advancing the literature. Given these facts, it may well be true that Xi has succeeded in realizing her general academic plan in life. Unfortunately, her misguided prestige envy and unawareness of her scholarly impact leads her to mistakenly think otherwise.

Granted, the factual component may set a fairly strict standard of whether an agent has succeeded or failed. But note that the normative significance of failure is a separate matter, one that we will discuss in the upcoming sections. To preview, it may be rational to celebrate our failures and to also mitigate their sting. We may also have some direct control over their normative impact as well.

**Section 2 Celebrating Failure and Mitigating its Sting**

Let’s now consider the upshots of the Plan Account. We first focus on the Attempt Component and the Fact Component for how we can celebrate failure or mitigate its sting. Since my primary focus in this section is to show how we can make lemonade when life hands us lemons in the form of failures, I leave it to the reader to consider how the Plan Account may sometimes entail bad news regarding our failures.

*2.1 Upshots of the Attempt Condition*

Start with the Attempt Component. First, the degree to which failing shows that we are ineffective agents will depend, at least in part, on the effort we put into the attempt. When we have (i) only made a minimal attempt at realizing our plans (e.g., not devoting significant resources or time in executing a plan, etc.) and (ii) that plan can be easily executed at some other time, it is typically rational for us to dismiss the failure or at least not to take it seriously.

On the flip side, no matter how detailed our plans are and the tremendous effort we take to implement them, some states of affairs are just harder to bring about and more dependent on factors beyond an agent’s competent attempts. For example, rescue workers and front-line medical professionals plan to save lives but whether they do so or not will depend on factors that can confound even the most careful preparation (e.g., whether scarce medical resources are available, whether there is an unforeseen influx of patients due to a pandemic, whether there is a war, etc.). When these agents fail, though it is reasonable to be disappointed because the stakes are high, we can nonetheless recognize that their failures do not necessarily reflect negatively on their effectiveness as competent professionals.

Second, we might think that all failures are unfortunate or bring about net disvalue. Admittedly, not getting what we want can generate disvalue. However, the attempts we make, even if they do not bring about the state of affairs we planned for, can be valuable in their own right. The result may even bring about overall net value. To see why this is so, consider Bradford’s account of achievements. As Bradford writes, “insofar as a process is difficult and competently causes some product or other, this fulfills my account for the so-called failure *itself* being an achievement” (Bradford 2015, 172). On this account, failures can be valuable even though we don’t get what we want because they demonstrate the exercise of a practical agent’s capacities to competently bring about something through a difficult or challenging process.

To illustrate, suppose Xi planned to get her first academic monograph published in her top choice publisher by the end of next year. By the following year, she has competently produced a fantastic monograph ready to be evaluated by her first-choice publisher. Unfortunately, and bizarrely, the first-choice publisher rejected the monograph on the basis of extremely unreasonable referee reports. The book ends up going to the next best publisher and receives rave reviews. Xi’s plan, as originally conceived, does not come to fruition. Strictly speaking, she has failed. Yet despite her failure, she may nonetheless celebrate. Xi has succeeded in bringing about a fantastic monograph that gets published.

Granted, one might think that our praise of Xi’s achievement despite her failure comes from the fact that Xi ends up getting the monograph published at a great publisher after all. This still fulfills her initial plan to some extent. That said, suppose it gets published by a much lower tiered publisher or does not get published until much later. I still contend that the completion of the monograph is nonetheless an achievement. It counts as a valuable achievement as it is the product of a difficult process done competently by the agent.

Third, we sometimes form plans to exercise our capacities to their limit. In such cases, we may even plan to succeed by planning to fail. To illustrate, let’s consider a concrete case of exercising our capacities at their limits. Powerlifters aim to move as much weight as possible over three lifts (e.g., squat, bench press, and deadlift) within set rules. A key part of training for the sport is discovering one’s physical limits. To determine these limits, powerlifters will occasionally plan to do sets of lifts at intensities that will end in a failed repetition. In these cases, powerlifters “plan to fail” but succeed when they do fail. This “planned failure” gives the powerlifter information as to how far they can reasonably push in a competition. In addition, it adds new stimuli necessary for muscle growth and strength gains.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Note that even *unplanned* failure can be welcome because it can also provide positive evidence that the powerlifter is achieving her more general plan of getting stronger. When a powerlifter plans to complete a heavy set of bench presses and fails, this can be a signal that her exercise selection is appropriately testing her physical limits. If she never fails a planned set even on rare occasions, that might indicate that she is not training hard enough. She has room to program tougher workouts that will help maximize her strength gains.

Granted, the case of powerlifting may seem like a highly specific example, but the general structure of the case applies to any number of human capacities that we seek to expand including moral and intellectual ones. So long as the costs of failure are manageable, it may be beneficial for us to plan to bring about states of affairs that could potentially exceed our capacities. It may also be beneficial for us to explicitly plan to fail (at least on the level of subplans) on occasion.

*2.2 Upshots of the Fact Component*

Turn now to the upshots of the Fact Component for mitigating our failures. First, note that the value of one’s planned state of affairs S is relevant for how disappointed we should be when S fails to obtain. Just as there is a fact of the matter as to whether S obtains, there is also a fact of the matter as to whether S’s obtaining is itself good (independent of our desire for S). Thus, one way of mitigating the sting of failure is to re-examine the value of S in hindsight. Of course, we cannot escape disappointment just by retroactively declaring that our plans were valueless whenever we like. It would only be rational for us to mitigate our disappointment in failure only if our re-evaluation of its object is itself rational.

Second, recall that we can be mistaken about whether we have indeed failed. If so, we can sometimes mitigate our disappointment in what might appear to be a failure by noting that it may still be unclear whether we have failed in the first place. This is especially so with plans that are more generally specified involving the distant future (e.g., becoming a celebrated writer in the indeterminate future, etc.). Granted it is not acceptable to try to artificially maintain ignorance in order to avoid discovering our own failures. But note that even when we might think that we have enough information to determine whether we have failed, we may still get it wrong. Epistemic humility may be our ally in sustaining our projects. In fact, something more radical may be the case according to the Factual Component. In agreement with Aristotle, we may not be able to determine whether someone is happy (in the sense of achieving or failing to achieve great things) until *all* the facts are in.

Third, the possibility of error is worth dwelling on because we can be called upon to encourage and correct others who are mistaken about their own successes or failures. Return to our example with Xi from 1.4. As we noted, Xi has a severely misguided case of prestige envy that prevents her from recognizing that she has succeeded in realizing her general academic plan in life. We should try to correct her on the matter.

Of course, a certain level of respect is due to an agent’s assessment of her own failure. We should empathize with Xi’s disappointment if she never gets a paper published in a top five journal even though she really wanted to achieve this by now. Furthermore, the Plan Account does grant that Xi has failed to realize her subplan (e.g., becoming a professor at a top five program, etc.) and that is a genuine loss. But in terms of whether Xi has failed to realize her overarching plan for her academic life, Xi is too hard on herself. Her prestige envy makes her blind to the fact that she has successfully realized her overarching plan. And insofar as having a healthy self-esteem and an accurate sense of one’s accomplishments is an important good, her friends, loved ones, and fellow colleagues should try to convince her that she has in fact succeeded in realizing something genuinely valuable.

**Section 3 The Plan Component and Grit**

Let us finally consider the upshots of the Plan Component. In what follows, we will consider two questions raised by the Plan Component and what practical considerations can answer them. I show the payoff of considering these questions in section 3.3 by connecting them with the recent literature on grit and our ability to persevere in the face of adversity. The upshot will be that we may have more control over how we fail and the extent to which it matters than we may have originally thought. I contend that this control can provide additional resources for the gritty agent to persevere despite various setbacks.

*3.1 The Specificity Question*

Let us start by introducing the first question. Recall that on the Plan Component, the object of any plan is a state of affairs sought by the agent. Some states of affairs can be characterized in highly precise ways involving the instantiation of specific properties only realizable in a particular way at a particular time and place (e.g., winning an Olympic gold medal in snowboard cross in 2022 in Beijing). On the other hand, states of affairs can also be characterized in less specific ways (e.g., I will win a medal at an Olympics, I will be a successful athlete, etc.) or barely specified at all (e.g., I will be an admirable person).

This leads us to ask the following question:

**Specificity Question**: At what level should we specify the objects of our plans?

Granted, this question arises even if we aren’t explicitly thinking about failure. That said, thinking about failure in terms of the Plan Account can help us answer this question. To see why, note that the Specificity Question is not resolved by metaphysics alone. While metaphysics may set limits on what can or cannot count as a state of affairs, there remains significant latitude in terms of how specific our plans should or should not be. Instead, the Specificity Question is plausibly settled by *practical* considerations. Absent weighty moral reasons, we may specify the objects of our plans in ways that best serve us. This includes thinking about how the specification of our plans affects our ability to implement them and, importantly, *how they interact with our ability to handle failure.*

Consider the downstream effects on failure first. In some cases, we might want to adopt plans that make it harder for us to fail. This might be useful especially if failure tends to immobilize us or we are aiming to overcome significant adversity. If we specify the objects of our plans precisely, the amount of evidence that one needs to determine that one has failed will typically be less than that needed if the objects were far less specific. This is especially so if the state of affairs is (i) set to be realized at some specific date in the near future rather than the indeterminate far future, and (ii) the properties to be instantiated can only be realized in a limited set of ways.

For example, if I foolishly set an outlandishly ambitious plan to win an Olympic gold medal in snowboard cross in 2022, I do not need much evidence to know that I have failed. I am no Lindsey Jacobellis. The fact that I ended up sitting on the couch watching her win that medal rather than keep up with my half-hearted attempts at snowboarding is overwhelming evidence that I have failed to realize this foolish plan. On the other hand, if I had an ambitious but less specific plan to be a competent powerlifter at some point in the indeterminate future, then it would take much more evidence to determine that I have failed or will fail. For example, unless I know that I have reached the limit of my physical capacities or they will be greatly diminished in the future, I am not yet in position to determine that I will fail at this endeavor.

But as we noted earlier, it may also be good to experience failures both to test our limits and to learn how to respond better to them. Never adopting plans with highly specific states of affairs (even ambitious ones) as their object is not a viable strategy either. On occasion, we should make such plans. If we succeed, that could be highly valuable. If not, we may still gain valuable lessons and grow from our failure.

Consider other practical considerations relevant to answering the Specificity Question. First, we may need plans with more specific objects that are often less ambitious given our relevant skills and capacities. As Bratman (1999) has pointed out, the appropriate level of generality of our plans and the specificity of their objects will often depend on our skills and capacities. For example, perhaps all a seasoned academic needs to do when preparing to give a great job talk is to review her handout. She simply executes without having to form specific subplans as the relevant means come naturally to her. On the other hand, a nervous graduate student giving her first job talk may have to form highly specific subplans every step of the way (e.g., preparing precise handouts, looking up faculty profiles, etc.) to achieve her general plan of giving a great job talk.

Second, it can be useful to have less ambitious and more manageable plans with more specific objects. When writing a dissertation, the successful execution of smaller, less ambitious, and more specific subplans ((e.g., writing a small chunk each day) may help keep an agent on track. Such subplans are also more likely to be executed competently. Each small success gives the agent an additional confidence boost that doubles as positive evidence she will realize the overarching plan of completing her dissertation on time.

On the flip side, adopting plans with less specific yet more ambitious states of affairs as their objects can help organize our activities and provide us with a greater sense of purpose beyond checking off daily tasks. Of course, people may still live decently without ever making such plans. Nevertheless, forming ambitious plans can help forge one’s practical identity and test our capacities to realize difficult (and hopefully objectively valuable) plans.

Wrapping up, an answer to the Specificity Question is not decided by pure metaphysics. Instead, and what is often overlooked, practical factors including downstream effects on whether we fail or succeed can help us determine how we are to specify our plans.

*3.2 The Impact Question*

As noted in section 1.2, plans can be nested in one another in a hierarchy of plans. Note that the way plans are nested in one another do not have to go from highly specified subplans to highly general overall plans. For example, while an athlete might have an overarching plan to realize something highly specific (e.g., winning an Olympic gold medal in snowboard cross at the 2022 Winter Olympics) she may also have an overarching plan to realize something less specific (e.g., be competitive at international snowboard cross events). Thus, whether a plan is more or less specified is not always proportional to how important it is to us or how overarching it is in our plan hierarchy. As a result, the question of how specific our plans should be is not the same as the following question:

**Impact Question:** To what extent should a particular failure matter to an agent or impact her?

Note that by “matter” or “impact”, I mean the normative significance or value of the relevant failure for that agent. This will be determined by some combination of the objective value of the state of affairs that the agent planned for and the extent to which it matters to her in light of all her other plans.

Turning to the question, it is clear that not all failures matter equally. For example, suppose that I plan to meet up with my friend at noon. I originally had a subplan to catch the bus at 10:00 am. I just missed it. That said, I also have a subplan or ‘plan B’.[[11]](#footnote-11) I could take the subway at 10:15 am and still make it on time. I hop on the subway and successfully meet my friend at noon. Strictly speaking, I have failed according to the Plan Account insofar as I have failed to realize the subplan of catching the bus at 10:00 am. But this failure brings little disvalue or negative impact to me. Granted, I might be mildly upset that I was late to catch public transportation once again, but I nonetheless realized the goal that I actually care about. As a result, the failure to realize my subplan should have little to no impact on me.

So how might we answer the Impact Question? The above example suggests at least two principles that determine the impact or weight of one’s failure:

**Hierarchical Proportionalism**: The degree to which a failure matters should be proportional to where it stands in the hierarchy of one’s plans.

**Indispensability Proportionalism** The degree to which a failure matters should be proportional to the degree to which it is indispensable to realize one’s most general plans.

Illustrating their application, since the subplan of taking the bus at 10:00 am is subordinate in my plan hierarchy (i.e., subordinate to my overarching plan of meeting my friend at noon) and executing it is dispensable for realizing the latter plan, I should not place much weight if I fail to bring it about.

But there is a further complication even with these principles held constant. The hierarchy of plans can shift as our overarching plans shift. Once overarching plans can now become subplans lower in the hierarchy and can become potentially more dispensable. Failing to execute these subplans may now make less of an impact.

Consider basketball star Lebron James. Perhaps James’s overarching athletic career plan early in his career was to win an NBA championship. It took him 11 years into his professional career to win his first in 2012. We can imagine that his 2007 and 2011 losses were huge setbacks given the two principles above. But at the time of writing, James has won four NBA championships. At some point in between 2012 and the time of writing, we can imagine that his plans begin to shift towards an even bigger ambition: to be the greatest basketball player of all time. Curiously, by adopting this overarching athletic career plan, winning the NBA championship any given year is both lower on the hierarchy of plans and slightly more dispensable. Failing to win the championship now may matter less than it did earlier in his career. On the flip side, Chris Paul, one of the best point guards ever to play in the NBA, has yet to win a championship at the time of writing. If his overarching athletic career plan remains to win at least one NBA championship, each failure to win at this point matters more since Paul only has a few more chances left in this late stage of his career.

If the above is correct, then the impact of a failure, though somewhat subject to luck, is also subject to an agent’s selection of her overarching plans. Depending on whether James and Paul abandon their present overarching plans in favor of less ambitious ones lower in their plan hierarchy or even completely different plans, the negative impact that certain failures should have on them (e.g., not winning an NBA championship this season) can be reduced or increased.

But note again that the metaphysics of states of affairs alone will provide little guidance for how someone should adopt or not adopt certain overarching plans. Again, absent decisive moral considerations, which plans we adopt will be determined by how they best serve us – including whether we want to mitigate or increase the impact that certain failures will have on us. We will consider whether it is rationally permissible to adjust our plans in this way in the next subsection.

*3.3 Planning and Grit*

In the two previous subsections, we pointed out that the specificity of our plans and their place and dispensability in our plan hierarchies can affect (i) the kind of evidence that we need to attribute failures to ourselves and (ii) the negative impact or value that a particular failure should carry for us.

What I will do now is to show how our previous discussions have direct application to two recent discussions of grit by Paul and Morton (2019) and Rioux (forthcoming). If correct, the gritty agent may have additional tools that she can employ within rational limits in order to persevere in the face of setbacks.

*3.3.1 Paul and Morton – Grit as Epistemic Resilience*

Paul and Morton contend that gritty agents are able to persist in the face of failure because they have “a kind of epistemic resilience in the face of failure, injury, rejection, and other setbacks that constitute genuine evidence that success is not forthcoming” (2019, 175).

They point out that pragmatic considerations can raise or lower the epistemic standards that agents can rationally apply when assessing whether success is forthcoming. By adopting a higher epistemic threshold for the belief that success is not forthcoming, gritty agents require much more evidence to believe it. As a result, they are able to persist even in the face of significant adversity. Such adversity would convince a less gritty agent with a lower epistemic threshold to abandon their plans.

Paul and Morton’s view identifies an important source of grit. Nonetheless, it does depend on a somewhat contested thesis called epistemic permissivism (e.g., that one and the same body of evidence can rationally support a range of different doxastic attitudes).[[12]](#footnote-12) I happen to accept this thesis. That said, our discussion of the Specificity Question can help us understand another source of perseverance for the gritty agent.

As we pointed out in section 3.1, agents have some latitude in terms of the plans they can rationally choose. Note that if an agent picks an overarching plan that includes properties that can be instantiated in any number of ways in some indeterminate future, then it would require significantly more evidence to be convinced that she would not realize this plan. If so, then rather than invoking epistemic permissivism or shifts in evidential standards with respect to some proposition, a gritty agent, just by selecting certain plans rather than others, can make it the case that her belief in future success is more epistemically resilient.

Now, one might object that what we celebrate about gritty agents is not that they choose to have vague plans that they can nonetheless hold onto in the face of failure. Instead, we seem to celebrate gritty agents who have highly specific plans and nonetheless persist in realizing them.

Two points are worth considering in response. First, the ability to select the specificity of our plans is *one* source or tool that a gritty agent can appeal to in order to persevere against adversity. It is definitely not the only source and might not be equally useful to all agents. That said, there are rational ways in which we can select plans that can keep motivating us to succeed.

For example, if Lindsey Jacobellis’s only overarching plan with respect to her athletic career is to win an Olympic Gold Medal, she may have quit after her fourth disappointing appearance. Instead, successful athletes often plan to perform the best they can on any given day or focus on more general plans rather than to focus on a particular outcome. Having only a particular outcome in mind for a specific event and focusing too much on it can have the adverse effect of immobilizing an athlete and preventing them from succeeding. This is one potential cause of “choking” in athletes. For example, despite being a gold medal favorite or at least a medal contender in several events at the 2022 Winter Olympics, Mikaela Shiffrin “choked” by crashing out of three ski events (something completely out of the ordinary given her consistency) and failed to get any medals. Thus, it can be rational, at least in some cases, for an agent to adopt more general plans.

There is even empirical evidence to support this point. According to a study by Howe (2019), those who have a higher general mental ability perform tasks better if they adopt less specific do-your-best/learning goals as opposed to more specific performance-oriented goals. On the other hand, those with a lower general mental ability may actually perform better with more performance-oriented goals. If so, then perhaps what contributes to an agent’s grittiness is not just the shifting of her evidential standards but *the skillful selection of plans that can maximize her ability to succeed.*

Second, it’s not clear that we only reserve the “gritty” moniker for agents who realize highly specific plans. For example, the plan of becoming a competent and respected professional in one’s field is not itself highly specific, but we may nonetheless praise an agent as gritty when they achieve their overarching plan through hard work in the face of setbacks. Furthermore, examples of grit can often focus too much on highly specific and difficult to realize plans (e.g., winning an Olympic Medal, becoming a member of the Supreme Court, winning the Nobel Prize, etc.) that can only be realized by the exceptional few in highly specific ways. This can distort the fact that displays of grit need not be limited to those who are exceptional and plan to achieve highly specific plans. For the rest of us, realizing more general plans that are nonetheless ambitious and difficult to achieve relative to our resources and abilities can also merit praise. Again, we have no reason to think that it is generally irrational for us to place such plans at the top of our plan hierarchies.

*3.3.2* *Grit as Practical Hope*

Turn now to another recent discussion of grit. According toRioux (forthcoming), a potential source of perseverance for gritty agents is practical hope. For Rioux, “practical hope centrally involves an attention-fueled, risk-inclined weighting of two competing concerns over action: when facing the decision of whether to persevere, hopeful gritty agents prioritize the aim of choosing a course of action which might go very well over that of choosing a course of action which is very likely to go fairly well” (1).

Drawing from Buchak’s (2013) account of risk-weighted expected utility, Rioux points out that the gritty agent need not change her epistemic standards or the value that she attributes to each outcome. Instead, the agent’s practical hope adjusts the expected utility of each outcome by adjusting her risk function in ways that generate a higher risk-weighted expected utility for the outcome that is less likely but is highly valuable over the outcome that is more likely but less valuable.

Rioux may be right (though the idea that risk attitudes are themselves rationally permissive in the same way that doxastic attitudes are is also contested). That said, I want to consider another way in which we can affect the weight of outcomes. Rather than altering the risk attitude towards an outcome or the epistemic probability of an outcome, we can change the utility/value of that outcome for us by altering our overarching plans and thus the hierarchy of our plans.

We noted how this can be done when we considered the Impact Question in 3.2. There, we pointed out that the impact of realizing or failing to realize a plan will depend on its dispensability and position in our plan hierarchies. If so, then gritty agents may choose to adopt a new overarching plan or to upgrade a subplan into an overarching plan depending on the level of impact they want a particular success or failure to have on them. For example, if an agent can only be properly motivated if they put all their eggs in one basket, then they can make the realization of that plan more impactful by making it their overarching plan or find ways to make it indispensable towards realizing whatever their overarching plan happens to be. On the flip side, if an agent wants to reduce the impact of a potential success or failure with respect to some subplan, they could find ways to make that plan more dispensable relative to another overarching plan. For example, Mikaela Shiffrin still has many years of her career ahead of her. Failing to medal at the 2022 Winter Olympics is ultimately dispensable if she thinks in the long term and adopts the overarching plan of becoming the most decorated skier in Olympic or world cup history. Case in point, Shiffrin went on to win her fourth overall world cup title just a month after an admittedly personally disappointing Olympics.

Granted, one might object that agents should not alter their plans whenever they like in order to reduce or increase the value or impact of a particular failure or success. Perhaps rationality requires that our plans be relatively stable or that we do not adopt new plans or abandon old ones too quickly in light of successes or failures. Conceding that constantly changing plans may go poorly for an agent, what she can do instead (and borrowing from Rioux’s idea of an attention-fueled practical hope) is to temporarily shift her attention to different levels of her plan hierarchy depending on the circumstances she faces.

Consider how a subplan can temporarily function as an overarching plan or vice versa. For example, suppose that James’s best playing occurs under pressure where the stakes are highest. If so, the most effective way for him to win the finals is not to think about his legacy status or some other general plan. Instead, it may well require him to focus all of his limited attention on winning the game at hand as if it were his last. Every game of the finals is a must win. This attitudinal shift can make the subplan of winning the next game function temporarily as his overarching plan and thus increase its stakes in ways that actually bring out the best in James’s playing. On the other hand, if James does not thrive under pressure, then he may benefit by adjusting his attention differently. Once the finals are over (win or lose), James may then return to considerations of his legacy and either see the win as taking him one step further or find ways to learn from the loss to propel him into the next season.

Granted, some forms of attention shifting may be irrational and may even be considered as a form of problematic “goalpost shifting” or excuse making. But note that the literature on sources of grit already recognizes that grit can be irrational in some cases anyway (e.g., some ways of lowering your epistemic standards or altering your risk tolerances are irrational). That said, not all instances of attention shifting has to be irrational or problematic. Whether it is will primarily depend on two factors. One factor is whether there are decisive moral reasons against goalpost shifting (e.g., doing so can harm others, etc.). A second factor is whether an agent ends up frustrating their own plans of weakening their capacities as practical agents when they goalpost shift. If neither factor applies and the agent actually benefits and becomes more effective when they are able to shift their attention to different plans on their plan hierarchy, then goalpost shifting may be a beneficial tool that can be rationally employed.

Summing up this entire section, we considered the Specificity Question and the Hierarchy Question raised by the Plan Component of the Plan Account. We pointed out that how we specify our plans and how we determine the impact of our failures and successes are not determined by metaphysics alone but also our practical considerations. We then tied this discussion to the recent literature on grit to show that the gritty agent has additional overlooked resources that she can rationally employ to help her persevere in light of setbacks.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, I proposed a straightforward account of what it is for an agent to fail: the Plan Account. My plan was to systematically develop its implications for how we can celebrate or at least mitigate our failures. I have also shown how the proper choice of plans (in light of their downstream effects on whether we fail and the impact of failure) can provide an additional rational resource for the gritty agent to persevere in light of setbacks. If I succeed in these tasks, this may constitute the beginnings of a user’s guide to failing well. If not, I hope that my failure will nonetheless be a valuable achievement even if its value is to point us to better accounts of failure yet to be written.

[Word Count: 8759]

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1. See https://www.forbes.com/sites/jimclash/2022/02/28/lindsey-jacobellis-tells-her-beijing-story-one-of-the-greatest-olympic-comebacks/?sh=4fa51cca7aa4. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Morton and Paul (2019) and Rioux (forthcoming). Rioux also discusses how accounts of hope given by Calhoun (2018) and Martin (2014) relate to grit. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Xhignesse (2020) for a discussion of failed attempts in art and Bradford (2015) for discussion of failure as the opposite of a successful attempt. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Such attributions of failure may serve as a mechanism for moral accountability or getting an agent to adopt certain plans that they should have adopted according to the attributor. See Finlay (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For discussion, see Wallace’s (2013) discussion of the “bourgeois predicament”. Also see Morton and Paul (2019) for discussion of whether grit can be rational in the context of resource restricted or adverse environments. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For an example of this view, see Xu (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. I will assume that it is constitutive of planning to bring about S (as opposed to merely desiring that S) that one proceeds to attempt to bring it about. That said, I will not try to give a detailed metaphysics of attempts here. For that, see Yaffe (2010). Broadly speaking, I think they are mental or physical actions that are properly guided by our plans. The following discussion will not depend on any further complications regarding the metaphysics of attempts other than the two that I state below. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For a much more detailed discussion of what it is to achieve and the value of achievement, see Bradford (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Xhignesse (2020) for additional examples and discussion beyond what is discussed below. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Granted, one might point out that this is not really “planning to fail”. Instead, the agent is just planning to do something else (e.g., getting stronger by generating muscle stimulus through a failed set) or planning to do something while lacking confidence in their own abilities (e.g., completing a set without knowing whether one will finish it). No matter how we label these cases, the point stands that such “failures” may be anticipated and welcome. I consider how plans can be nested in a hierarchy in more detail in section 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For discussion of how ‘plan B’ works, see Paul (2021). Paul points out that we may have a primary plan to A that is relatively unconditional. A plan B is a conditional plan such as ‘if I do not do A, do B’ where the agent has an unconditional intention to make the antecedent false. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Schoenfield (2014) for a defense of the view and Dogramaci and Horowitz (2016) for criticism of the view. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)