

Transformative Activities

Agnes Callard

Nov 12 2017

Contents

I. Transformative Activity	5
(1) Temporal Profiles.	7
(2) Active vs. Passive	8
(3) A Learning Activity	10
II. Elena and Lila	13
I. Another Kind of Example	13
II. Competitive Friendship	13
II. Aspirational Competition	15
III. The Ogre of The Neighborhood	16
IV. Competition as Escape	17
Bibliography	20

“Would she always do the things I was supposed to do, before and better than me? She eluded me when I followed her and meanwhile stayed close on my heels in order to pass me by....Maybe I should erase Lila from myself like a drawing from the blackboard, I thought, for, I think, the first time. I felt fragile, exposed, I couldn’t spend my time following her or discovering that she was following me, either way feeling diminished. I immediately went to find her. I let her teach me how to do the quadrille.” (Ferrante, p.142)

In this passage of Elena Ferrante’s *My Brilliant Friend*, the protagonist Elena describes her frustrations with the fact that she feels consistently bested by her friend Lila. This moves her to consider severing ties with Lila—but instead Elena decides, once again, to scramble to catch up with Lila. Despite the fact that Elena is the one who receives a higher education, she feels that “...I knew little or nothing. She seemed ahead of me in everything, as if she were going to a secret school. I noticed also a tension in her, the desire to prove that she was equal to whatever I was studying.” (p.160) Lila, too, is scrambling to catch up to Elena.

My Brilliant Friend is the first of four novels describing the lifelong friendship between Lila and Elena. In the various pursuits that become central to their lives over the course of the novels—reading and writing fiction, learning ancient (Greek and Latin) and formal (computer) languages, designing shoes, fomenting political unrest, romance and childraising—each is impelled forward by the thought that she is falling behind the other. These pursuits are transformative, in that the women gain an acquaintance with what it is like to do something of a different kind from anything they have done before, something that changes their preferences, attachments and values. And these new lives are not foisted on Lila and Elena by their environment. Far from it: at each point, Lila and Elena must fight the tide of cultural, familial and economic pressure persistently pushing them in the reverse direction. Elena and Lila not only undergo transformative experience, but are also agentially responsible for those transformations.

And yet it is hard to find, in the roughly 2000 pages Ferrante devotes to describing these transformations, the critical choice points that figure so centrally in the philosophical literature on transformative experience. The choices that Lila and Elena make in relation to the people they become do not qualify as what L.A. Paul has called “transformative choices.” Look back at the passage I quoted in my opening, in which the decision to undergo a transformative change—to be taught to dance—is presented as an afterthought. Elena is not asking herself whether she wants to have the experiences and preferences of someone who knows how to dance. Her attention is, as always, on Lila. And this is typical of the various transformations that the women experience: though they go on to lead radically different lives, each always has the other in view. I propose to examine their relationship as a case-study in a distinctive—and distinctively competitive—form of transformative experience.

I begin with a taxonomy of transformative experiences, dividing them into what I call “revelations” and “activities.” While most of the examples of transformative experience in the philosophical literature are examples of transformative revelations, Lila and Elena’s transformations are of the other variety. Transformative activities present a different set of puzzles from those already explored in the literature focusing on transformative revelations. They require an agent to act in such a way that she may learn both what she is doing and why. Competition can facilitate this form of learning, allowing us to reach beyond our present set of resources, towards a future persona we do not have fully in view.

This tension is captured in the push-pull of Elena’s relationship with Lila: “I felt fragile, exposed, I couldn’t spend my time following her or discovering that she was following me, either way feeling diminished. I immediately went to find her. I let her teach me...” (quoted above) If we approach the story of Lila and Elena through the lens of the concept of transformative activity, we will find that descriptions such as this one afford us access to the inside of transformative experience, which is say, to what it feels like to be in the process of transforming oneself into a different kind of person.

I. Transformative Activity

In a *transformative revelation*, an agent elects to undergo some process which promises to provide her with new phenomenal knowledge, and perhaps also new preferences, desires, and values. Edna Ullmann-Margalit calls such a choice, “opting,” and says that “The opting juncture is a point of discontinuity, or break, in the opters’ biography and personality.” The decision to become a new kind of person constitutes a dividing line between the person you were (cognitively or conatively) and the person you will be. As an illustration, consider Paul (2014)’s guiding example of the decision to become a vampire. The person in question elects to be bitten, and the bite transforms her into someone with a host of new experiences and desires: the desire for blood, an aversion to sunlight, excellent fashion sense, etc. Paul and Ullmann-Margalit approach the topic of transformative experience through the question of what it would be to make such a momentous choice in a rational way. For this reason, the literature on transformative experience has focussed on examples of transformative revelations. But not all transformative experiences are transformative revelations.

In what I will call a *transformative activity*, the agent actively works to become a new kind of person without undergoing a break in her biography. So, for instance, learning a foreign language can be a transformative experience, affording a person access to a different way of thinking and conducting one’s life. This sort of case seems to lack the “point of sharp discontinuity” that Edna Ullman-Margalit takes to characterize the transition from the “old person” who enters the transformative revelation and the “new person” who exits it (p.159). The student does not change much in the first month or even year of French class. And how different she becomes depends on how far she is willing to take it. Does she: take second and third and fourth year French? start reading French novels in French? major in French? visit France? move to France? attempt to assimilate to French culture? Such a person may, at the end of the day, have acquired new knowledge and preferences—the knowledge of what it is like to be French, and preferences characteristic of French people. She has undergone a transformative experience unlike that of becoming a vampire.

Let me illustrate my distinction with a pair of cases. The first I take from Paul: deciding to taste durian fruit. “The Durian is known to have a foul smell but a delicious flavor. I’ve never tasted a durian, and because I’ve never tasted one or anything like one, I can’t know what it is like to taste one—that is, I can’t know what a durian taste like.When I taste it for the first time, by becoming acquainted with this taste, I’ll undergo an epistemically transformative experiences, and gain new knowledge, the knowledge of what it’s like to taste durian.” (2014, p.15) Paul’s attention here is on

the fact that one cannot know what durian fruit is like until one has eaten it. But it is also true that one cannot *but* know what it is like once one has placed it into one's mouth. The knowledge of what the fruit is like is, as it were, inflicted by the fruit on our taste buds.

Contrast the tasting of durian with becoming a wine connoisseur. Tasting the note of cherry in some wine is an transformative experience: before one has had this experience, one does not know what it is like for wine to have notes of cherry. Nonetheless, this experience is not something that simply happens to (most) people. I have drunk many glasses of wine, and doubtless some of them had notes of cherry—but I have never tasted it. The would-be-connoisseur works to become such as to appreciate the subtle flavors and distinctions in wine—she takes classes, discusses wines, attends tastings, and, perhaps most importantly, she consciously attends to and tries to analyze her own experience each time she has a glass of wine. The Durian eater's transformative experience takes the form of a revelation, whereas the wine connoisseur's takes the form of an activity.

Not all examples are as clear-cut as the ones described above. For example: into which category should we place becoming a parent? Paul's description suggests that she takes the transformation in question to be a revelation:

“The intensity and uniqueness of the extended act of carrying the child, the physicality of giving birth....results in a dramatic change in one's physical, emotional and mental states. The experiences are also very intense for involved fathers. It is common for fathers to date their changed phenomenal state from the moment they saw or held their newborn.” (2015, p.156)

If, by contrast, we see parents as having a hand in both whether and how they grow into the role of parent—working to change their preferences and tastes in the direction of those befitting a parent, potentially culpable if they never manage to grow into the role— then we will see becoming a parent as a transformative activity.

Likewise, consider the example of becoming blind. Paul (2014, p.70) gives blindness as one of those conditions that would be transformative for a sighted person: sighted people do not know what it is like to be blind . Her discussion as a whole treats the experience of losing or acquiring a sense modality (or aspects of a sense modality, such as color vision) as revelations. But consider this description from the diary of John Hull, a theologian and disability activist who recorded his own experience of going blind in his forties:

“As one goes deeper and deeper into blindness, the things which once were taken for granted, and which were then mourned over as they disappeared, and for which one tried in various ways to find compensation, in the end cease to matter. Somehow, it no longer seems important what people look like, or what cities look like. One cannot check at first hand the accuracy of

these reports, they lose personal meaning and are relegated to the edge of awareness. They become irrelevant in the conduct of one's life. One begins to live by other interests, other values. One begins to take up residence in another world. I think that I may be beginning to understand what blindness is like." (p.192)

This entry is from October 1985, by which time Hull had been blind for two years. And yet he is only "beginning to understand what blindness is like." Hull's experience of coping with blindness is that of working his way into what he called "deep blindness"—abandoning mental images and even spatial concepts such as "here" and "there" so as to learn to think in a new way. Hull's understanding of deep blindness as an ideal is not universally shared by those who become blind later in life: other journeys into blindness have featured the heightening of visual memory and visual consciousness¹. This divergence illustrates the point in question: it is not the loss of sight per se that transforms these people, but the way in which they react to and grow into their new, sightless, life. Becoming blind can, at least for some people, be transformative activity².

It may be that the right way to understand becoming a parent or becoming blind is as involving both transformative revelations and transformative activities; or it may be that these changes are more like revelations for some and more like activities for others. But the question is an intelligible one in any case: it makes sense to ask, is such-and-such a transformation a revelation or an activity? And the answer makes a big difference: coming to taste durian fruit and coming to taste the note of cherry in wine are very different sorts of transformations. This distinction seems to mark a real difference. But what exactly is it that differentiates a transformative revelation from a transformative activity?

(1) Temporal Profiles.

The most obvious difference is temporal. Hull's journey into deep blindness extends over years. If one must learn and grow into parenthood, that will take years or perhaps decades. Learning to taste the notes of cherry in wine may take weeks or months. Transformative revelations are comparatively speedy: being bitten by a vampire, feeling one's unborn baby kick, tasting durian fruit, seeing color for the first time—all of these events happen in less than a minute.

I do not think we can ground the distinction solely on speed. Granted, it is hard to picture a human being completing Hull's transformation in seconds. But that seems to

¹ See Sacks 2003.

² Likewise becoming sighted, the problematic nature of which is the subject of a large literature. Ackroyd, Humphrey and Warrington describe a patient who chooses to return to living as a blind person after having her sight restored: 'Seeing,' far from being a rewarding activity, had become a tiresome duty for her, and left to herself she soon lost interest in it." (p.116) Thanks to John Schwenkler for directing me to this material.

be a feature of human psychology and physiology, not a feature of the structure of the activity. These activities essentially take time, but they do not essentially take years as opposed to minutes. Nor is it true that transformative revelations are, of necessity, sudden. Imagine a slow-acting vampire poison: the vampire bites you, and one month later you (slowly) develop an aversion to sunlight, the next month a taste for blood, the next month your senses sharpen, etc. You become a vampire over the course of a year. Even though you come to know what it is like to be a vampire slowly, over the course of a year, the transformation remains a revelation.

Why? We might suppose that the explanation is as follows: over the course of that year, you are not working to learn to become a vampire. Becoming a vampire is something that happens to you, rather than something that you do. This suggests that perhaps the difference between the two kinds of transformation corresponds to that between agency and patiency.

(2) Active vs. Passive

The proposal is as follows: in transformative revelations, you are transformed by what happens to you, whereas in transformative activities, you yourself do the transforming.

Ruth Chang observes that in the cases described by Paul and Margalit, the fact that the person consented to the transformation is incidental to the transformation that takes place. Consider the vampire example. What does the transformative work is the event of being bitten; the bite transforms a person in just the same way regardless of whether she has consented to it. She calls these “*event-based transformative choices*.” Let us explore whether Chang’s contrast class—what she calls *choice-based transformative choices*—corresponds to transformative activities.

In *choice-based transformative choices*, “the making of the choice itself transforms you.” Chang holds that by performing the very act of choosing to have a child (as opposed to remaining childless), or choosing to vacation on the beach (as opposed to the mountains), you change yourself into a person who has reasons she didn’t have before: “...suppose you commit to some feature of the beach vacation, thereby making it true that you have most reason to go on the beach vacation. You change ‘who you are’ in this small way by creating for yourself a new reason you didn’t have before. You are now, to that small extent, a beach person rather than a mountain person.” (p.280)

It may be that sometimes the very act of choosing generates reasons to follow through—this certainly seems true of cases in which the choice coordinates the activity of multiple people. This does not, however, seem to be what is happening in a transformative activity. The transformation into someone who grasps a reason to, e.g., choose this wine on this occasion, is not made simply by *choosing* to become a wine expert.

Likewise, Hull did not arrive at deep blindness by decision, but by rather over the years of reflecting, conversing and writing about what he was experiencing. Did he preface this reflecting, conversing and writing by deciding to become deeply blind? No: because his grasp of deep blindness was itself a product of reflecting, conversing and writing on his condition. But even if he had, that choice couldn't have transformed him in the relevant respect. Suppose a newly blind person, influenced by Hull's book, decides to become deeply blind. That decision does not, by itself, transform her into someone who is deeply blind. It may, if Chang is right, give her reasons to become deeply blind, but the relevant change is yet unaccomplished at the time of decision. She doesn't become deeply blind just by deciding to.

Let us, then, set aside choice-based-transformative choices. Could there be another way to use the distinction between agency and patiency to distinguish transformative revelations from transformative activities? Consider the following proposal: in the case of transformative revelations, agency is restricted to an initial moment of decision, whereas in the case of transformative activities, the subject is at work throughout her transformation. After presenting her neck to be bitten, or placing the durian fruit in her mouth, or having unprotected sex, the agent has only to sit back and wait for the transformation to take place. Her becoming a vampire, or acquainted with the taste of durian fruit, or pregnant is not, after this point, her own doing. It is something that happens to her.

In a transformative activity, the agent is at the helm of her transformation for its duration. If, at any point during her transformation, she stops doing what she is doing, her transformation likewise comes to a stop. Moreover, she controls the form it takes: the way in which she is transformed is guided by and responsive to her activity. Consider someone learning to become a music lover. If the agent drops out of her music appreciation classes, stops listening on the way to work, and cancels her concert subscription, her musical development will come to a stop as well. She will thereby put a stop to the process in which she develops new musical tastes, comes to appreciate new features of music she has already heard, and forms new music-related desires. Becoming musically transformed is not something that happens to you—it is something that you do. If you stop doing it, it stops happening.

In a transformative activity, the transformation is conditional on activity throughout, rather than being independent of their activity after some initial stage. Call this the 'activity-dependence' criterion. Can we use this criterion to distinguish transformative revelations from transformative activities? I don't think so, for we can construct a transformative revelation that is activity-dependent. Let me, once again, ring some changes on the vampire story. Imagine that, in addition to being slow-acting, the vampire toxin is also one that can be counteracted by what the bitten person does. So, for instance: if she wears sunscreen she will never develop sun-sensitivity, if she becomes a vegetarian, she never develops a taste for blood, if she makes affectionate physical contact with a non-vampire she never attains immortality. In order to become a vampire, such a person would not only need to wait for the toxin to take full effect, but

she would also need to cooperate: eating meat, avoiding sunscreen and hugs. So long as each of the relevant changes has a counterpart activity, the transformation will be thoroughly activity-dependent. The agent's input will not be restricted to an initial moment of consent, but extend throughout the transformation.

And yet, I maintain, becoming a vampire continues to be a transformative revelation rather than a transformative activity. Even though the revelation has been spread out over time, and regulated by the person's consent throughout, it is not active in the relevant sense. But what exactly is that sense? In a transformative activity, what the agent does to transform herself it to reach out and grasp after the value or experience that is the target of the activity. Hull's agency—his reflection, and talking, and writing—is directed at learning what blindness is like, and what is good about it. Likewise, the person who is learning to appreciate music or wine is acting so as to understand the experience or value at the heart of the relevant activity. This might lead us to place *learning* at the heart of transformative activity. Can we differentiate transformative revelation from transformative activity by using learning as a criterion?

(3) A Learning Activity

Transformative activities are learning processes: learning how to be blind, or what the virtues of wine consist in, or why one should listen to classical music, or what it is to be a parent. But a transformative revelation is also a learning process. The eater of durian fruit, or newly-transformed-vampire comes to know something she did not know before: what it is like to be a vampire or taste durian fruit. And the reason she initiates this process (and, if necessary, sustains it) is precisely that she wishes to acquire the relevant kind of knowledge³. So both kinds of transformation are learning process.

All transformative experiences involve entering into a condition in which one knows what it is like to, e.g., care about one's children, taste a new food, enjoy music, be immortal. At the end of every transformative experience, the agent has learned something. But consider two different forms that learning can take. In a transformative revelation, what the agent does to facilitate the learning is not itself a case of learning. A transformative activity, by contrast, takes the form of inquiry. Every part of it is learning. It is the difference between learning by being informed and learning by figuring out.

We are now in a position to draw the relevant distinction between transformative activity and transformative revelation. Both kinds of transformative experience satisfy these two criteria:

³ Or so Paul maintains: “[In transformative choices] we choose between the alternatives of discovering what it is like to have the new preferences and experiences involved, or keeping the status quo” (2014, 122).

(1) The Agency Criterion: the person chooses or enacts or sustains or engages in the transformation. She transforms herself⁴.

(2) The Learning Criterion: the person acquires knowledge of what something is like. She comes to have a new experience.

In a transformative revelation these criteria correspond to separate elements of the story. The agent's doings and her comings-to-know are not identical. So, for instance, what she does is submit her neck to be bitten, or avoid hugs. Those actions are not themselves identical to her (growing) awareness of what it is like to be a vampire. Her disposal of sunscreen and vegetables, or retreat from an oncoming hug are not themselves learning experiences. They only facilitate the eventual, or perhaps concomitant, grasp of vampiricity that the toxin wreaks upon her. What she did and what she learned were different. She acted in order to learn. Her acting was not itself learning.

In a transformative activity, the doing and the learning, are not distinct from one another. Whatever the agent was doing in order to bring it about that she become X-ish was identical to her learning to be X-ish. This is why the transformation—her coming to learn what music, or deep blindness is like—must stop if she stops working. Her doing is her learning.

Paul and Ullmann-Margalit have explored the question *why* should one perform the action-component of a transformative revelation: why should one have unprotected sex, or present one's neck for biting, or eat a durian fruit. Notice that, in these cases, there is no attendant question about *how* one does these things. One can successfully put a durian fruit into one's mouth, get bitten by a vampire or have unprotected sex without knowing what one is getting out of those actions. The separation between the action-component and the learning component ensures that performing the relevant action doesn't itself call for the knowledge the person is trying to acquire.

In a transformative activity, the "how" question looms just as large as the "why" question. When one is learning by doing, what one is learning is also what one is doing. This means that transformative activities involve doing what one does not yet know how to do, for reasons one does not yet grasp.

Consider: how does one become a wine connoisseur, or deeply blind, or a classical music aficionado? In each case, one does so by performing the relevant activity: tasting wine, not seeing (at all!), listening to music. The problem is that these activities represent both means and ends. How am I to come to listen to music—to really listen—if that involves (really) listening to music? It would be different if I were in some kind of vampire scenario, and someone said to me "push this button and you will be injected with a serum that turns you into a music lover." I might, in the manner of Paul and Ullmann-Margalit's agents, agonize over *whether* to push the button. But I at least know how to push a button: you just move your finger onto the button and press.

⁴ Because both Paul and Ullmann-Margalit ask the question of what it would be to rationally choose to become transformed, they set aside those cases in which a person has no say in becoming transformed.

What I do not know how to do is (really) listen to music. I can sit there while the music is playing, but that's not the same thing as really listening for the right things, in the right way. Likewise with wine-tasting. I learn to taste by tasting.

Transformative revelations require me to do something for the sake of an end I do not yet grasp; transformative activities require me, in addition, to do so by way of an activity I do not know how to do. A number of questions arise about the intelligibility of acting without knowing what I'm doing nor why I'm doing it. First, about the rationality of such activity. If one's agency extends all the way to the new condition, one must have a some kind of reason for pursuing that condition. What kind is it? Second, there are questions about the moral psychology of transformative activities. The agent of such an activity finds herself conflicted between engaging in an activity whose point she doesn't understand, and falling back on the many goal-oriented activities that *do* make sense to her. How does she motivate herself to continue? Finally, transformative activities raise metaphysical questions as to how a person can make herself into something she is not: how does the theorist of transformative activity avoid the paradoxes associated with the concept of self-creation?

I discuss these questions in Callard (forthcoming); here I raise them only as indications of the *sui generis* character of this kind of transformative experience. In what follows, I will not attempt to defend but rather to illustrate the concept of transformative activity.

II. Elena and Lila

I. Another Kind of Example

The examples of transformative activity given above have all been: examples of (a) adults transforming themselves into people who differ (b) in relatively superficial ways from the people they were before while located (c) in environments hospitable to the transformation. If a musical appreciation or viniculture class is on the table as an option for you, the world is going out of its way to pave your transformative path. I want now to consider a case of transformative activity in which (a) children and teenagers are (b) radically remaking their identities (preferences, values, experiences) in an environment that (c) actively resists those efforts. In this second kind of case, the person is likely to have such an attenuated grasp of where she is going that we have trouble seeing her as headed there at all.

The simpler examples of transformative activity described in the first, taxonomical part of this paper are helpful in clarifying the concept in question, but the messier case to which I am about to turn is better able to showcase the power and promise of this bit of conceptual machinery. Nascent rationality is often misclassified either as irrationality or as non-transformative rationality. We tend to feel that we must choose between understanding someone as passively transformed by what happens to her, or as antecedently committed to the (putatively newly chosen) values and experiences. Either she is changed or she doesn't (really) change. The concept of transformative activity gives us a way to read the messy and misdirected moral psychology of the young, confused learner as a window into the phenomenon of radical self-transformation.

II. Competitive Friendship

I return to Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend*. At the age of 5 or 6, Elena and Lila often play with their prized possessions—two dolls—side by side, each girl pretending to ignore the other. Their friendship begins not at the moment they decide to share dolls, but right afterwards: as soon as Lila gets her hands on Elena's doll, she throws it down into a dark cellar. Elena doesn't express surprise, or cry, or protest. Instead, she does the same to Lila's doll. "What you do I do," says Elena. This exchange sets the tone for a lifelong rivalry.

The competition between Elena and Lila structures their relationship from start to finish, serving as the narrative frame of the novel: Elena, in her sixties, discovers that

Lila has both vanished and eliminated every trace of herself in her home, to the point of cutting herself out of photos. “She wanted not only to disappear herself, now, at the age of sixtysix, but also to eliminate the entire life that she had left behind. I was really angry. We’ll see who wins this time, I said to myself. I turned on the computer and began to write— all the details of our story, everything that still remained in my memory.” (Ferrante, p.23)

Their competitiveness often turns so bitter and hostile as to verge on sadism. At one point, Lila, whose parents forbid her from having a higher education, tries to sabotage Elena’s chance at one. At another point, Elena considers sabotaging Lila’s marriage. They steal one another’s lovers and belittle one another’s achievements. In an emotional scene in which their elementary schoolteacher expresses regret to Elena over not having pushed harder to secure Lila an education, “as if the teacher were realizing that something of Lila had been ruined because she, as a teacher, hadn’t nurtured it well. I felt that I was her most successful student and went away relieved.” (p.277) And yet, although each of them goes on to marry and have children, their relationship remains the central fact of each of their lives. And this not in spite of but *because of* the element of antagonism between them, which turns out to be the fundamental source of creativity and vitality for each: “I soon had to admit that what I did by myself couldn’t excite me, only what Lila touched became important. If she withdrew, the things got dirty, dusty.” (Ferrante, p.100)

Intense competition—especially between women—characteristically elicits both salacious interest and facile opprobrium. It functions as foil to the supportive, mutuallyaffirming relationship that standardly serves as a model for female friendship. Elena and Lila’s passionate, lifelong antagonism may even strike the reader as a pathological or a diseased form of human relationship. I want to try to show you that we can see what is going on between them differently, if we look at it through the lens of transformative activity.

And we should *want* a different way of looking at them. As I mentioned at the opening and will go on to discuss in more detail, Elena and Lila’s competition manages to bears extraordinary fruit in an otherwise barren landscape: it fuels their creative, political and intellectual endeavors in a community that pushes them to be anything but creative, political and intellectual. If pathology is defined in terms of the impediment to human functioning, it has to be admitted that, on balance, their relationship serves the development and actualization of their capacities more than it hinders them. So it would be good to have a theory of how and why this is so.

I propose that their competition provides both the motivation and means for pursuing goals that would otherwise be outside the girls’ field of view. Competition answers the “how” question: do what Lila is doing, only better. And it answers the “why” question: do it because Lila is doing it. Competing with someone is not the only way of doing what you do not know how to do¹ but the claim I will explore in the rest of

¹ In pp.135–142 of Callard 2016 I discuss six other ways.

this paper is that it is *a* way of doing so. Each girl is, for the other, the answer to the question: how does one transform oneself when one lacks the resources to do so? How does one do what one does not yet see as good, for a reason one cannot yet appreciate?

II. Aspirational Competition

When Lila loses interest in competing against Elena academically, the nature of Elena's academic interest changes as well: "...since Lila had stop pushing me, anticipating me in my studies and my reading, school had stopped being a kind of adventure and had become only a thing that I knew how to do well and was much praised for." (Ferrante, p.187)

It is important to distinguish what I will call the "aspirational competition" that characterizes Lila and Elena's relationship from two other forms competition can take. When Lila loses interest, Elena does not stop competing academically. Nonetheless, that competition devolves into something more instrumental. She competes in order to secure a good—praise—to which competition happens to be the means. She competes not in order to learn how to do something new ("a kind of adventure"), but because there is something she already "knew how to do well." We instrumentalize competition when there is some good that we want, and, as it happens, we must compete to secure it. If, for instance, you and I both want the same job, we may have to compete for it. It is a mark of the nonaspirational character of this competition if I respond in a purely positive way to the discovery that you, having been awarded an even better job, have withdrawn from the contest².

Aspirational competition is also distinct from the competition that is part of intrinsically adversarial undertakings, such as sports (teams or individuals compete against one another), elections (candidates competing against one another), and courtroom trials (prosecution competes against defense). It is an intrinsic feature of those activities that success entails surpassing another. That feature is strikingly absent from, e.g., the activity of learning ancient Greek. It is not competitive in the way that running a race is competitive.

If we think back to the most competitive periods of our lives, our minds are likely to settle on some part of our schooling. Why is school such a competitive place? The goal of becoming educated, is, on the face of it, totally unrelated to the goal of surpassing one's classmates. And yet many of us find it natural to approach any group learning environment—be it a math class or a yoga studio—in a competitive spirit. In the moment, it feels to the learner as though what really matters is getting the highest grade on the math test, or lifting one's leg a fraction higher than one's neighbor. But it is not satisfying to get the highest grade by some oversight on the teacher's part, or if the height of your leg is due to the fact that you are standing in an elevated

² For a discussion of the broader category of non-aspirational phenomena into which instrumentalized competition fits—I call it "self-cultivation"—see Callard forthcoming (Ch.1, part III).

spot. We want to *really* beat our competitors—which is to say, to beat them in such a way that our victory is a sign of our excellence at math or yoga. But why, in that case, don't we go straight for the brass ring, and aim at excellence in math or yoga irrespective of who we 'beat' in the process? The answer must be that, as newcomers to the appreciation of math and yoga, we have not yet transformed ourselves into the people for whom that brass ring is squarely in view. In those cases, it is by way of our competitors that the relevant form of excellence shows up as an object of pursuit.

The choice of competitor reflects its aspirational character: in a math class, you might set yourself against the best student, so as to become as good as possible. But if she happens, unlike you, to be a mathematical genius, you might find yourself ignoring her scores and competing against someone in your league. One also chooses competitors on the basis of one's own interests and passions—if math is not my subject, I might be relatively uncompetitive in that class, but fiercely so in music or science. You are competing against whoever will help you become better, in whatever you (are coming to) want to become better in. Insofar as you engage in aspirational competition, you see your competitor as a rope by which you pull yourself up by your bootstraps. She is the door in the valuational room that would otherwise trap you into being stuck as you are.

III. The Ogre of The Neighborhood

Consider the event that cements Lila and Elena's friendship. Early in the novel, the two girls make the unthinkable decision to confront the "ogre" of the neighborhood, the terrifying Don Achille. They have been forbidden by their parents from speaking to or even looking at him: "regarding him there was, in my house but not only mine, a fear and a hatred whose origin I didn't know." Convinced that Don Achille has taken their dolls from the basement into which each threw the other's, Lila and Elena ascend to his apartment to demand their return. Elena reports:

"I had forgotten every good reason, and certainly was there only because she was. We climbed slowly towards the greatest of our terrors of that time, we went to expose ourselves to fear and interrogate it." (Ferrante, p.29)

When Elena speaks of herself in the singular ("I had forgotten..."), she sees no reason for proceeding. Her point of view makes confronting Don Achille an impossibility: "I thought that if I merely saw him from a distance he would drive something sharp and burning into my eyes. So if I was mad enough to approach the door of his house, he would kill me." When she thinks for herself alone, approaching Don Achille is not an option on her deliberative horizon. But when she adopts the "we" together with Lila ("we climbed," "we went to expose"), she gains the ability to move towards what she sees as certain death: "At Don Achille's door my heart was pounding, I could hear it

in my ears, but I was consoled into thinking that it was also the sound of Lila's heart." (Ferrante, p.65)

Together, they summon the courage to violate the law of the neighborhood, and overcome the fear that is their cultural inheritance: "We were forbidden to go to Don Achille's, but she decided to go anyway and I followed. In fact, that was when I became convinced that nothing could stop her, and that every disobedient act contained breathtaking opportunities." Lila leads the way, and the need to keep up with her makes it possible for Elena to decouple her own fear from the attendant impulse to flee. The girls become able to feel fear without being driven by it, and this puts them in a position to look *at* the fear, to "interrogate it".

How do the girls secure this distance from their fear? One might suggest that Lila constitutes, for Elena, a symbol of the possibility of freedom from the neighborhood. But I think this way of putting their relation is too abstract and etiolated. In order for Lila to symbolize freedom, Elena would have to have an independent grip on freedom, and then see Lila *as* that. Lila is closer to a conduit than a symbol. She doesn't merely *represent* "breathtaking opportunities," rather, engaging with her constitutes the opportunity in question.

In order to be working towards her future self, Elena must, in some sense, be in conversation with the person she will become. In the next section, I will explain why her relationship with Lila is the form that that conversation takes.

IV. Competition as Escape

To be such as to care passionately about being the best at math or yoga is to already be attuned to potential transformations in those areas. It is a mark of privilege to have those possibilities present themselves—even if they do so only opaquely, in the form of your inclination to compete against a fellow-student. A person who is inclined to aspirationally compete over math or yoga has already been, to some degree, set up for transformative activity. She has been raised to see that there are avenues of value available for her to explore. Elena and Lila live in an impoverished neighborhood of post-war Naples: their childhoods are structured by violence, sexism and the expectation that they will walk the paths trodden by their own mothers.

When, against tremendous familial and cultural pressure, Elena manages to complete middle school, she assumes she will begin working. Her teacher insists, "...you have to go on studying." Elena is genuinely perplexed:

"I looked at her in surprise. What was there left to study? I didn't know anything about the order of schools, I didn't have a clear idea what there was after the middle school diploma. Words like high school, university were for me without substance, like many of the words I came across in novels." (Ferrante, p.123)

Elena doesn't, at this stage, have a way of grasping the value of an education—she doesn't grasp that it is her way out of the neighborhood. But she *does* see Lila that way:

“As a child I had looked to [Lila], to her progress, to learn how to escape my mother.” (Ferrante, p.322) Elena’s competition with Lila is about escaping into something she can only get the faintest glimmer of, namely the possibility of living a life unlike the only one she has been presented with: “...something convinced me, then, that if I kept up with [Lila], at her pace, my mother’s limp, which had entered into my brain and wouldn’t come out, would stop threatening me. I decided that I had to model myself on that girl, never let her out of my sight, even if she got annoyed and chased me away.” (Ferrante, p.46)

Lila, like Elena, “was struggling to find, from inside the cage in which she was enclosed, a way of being, all her own, that was still obscure to her.” (Ferrante, p.295) Each girl yearns to escape the strictures of the world into which she has been born. Lila, whose parents forbid her from post-elementary schooling, aims to do so by remaking her environment: “Did she (Lila) want to leave the neighborhood by staying in the neighborhood? Did she want to drag us out of ourselves, tear off the old skin and put on a new one, suitable for what she was inventing?” (Ferrante, p.46) Elena, by contrast, leaves the neighborhood by leaving the neighborhood, and higher education—at the end of the *My Brilliant Friend*, she is headed to University—is her ticket out.

The transformative bond between Lila and Elena is the object of Ferrante’s attention throughout the novel: “there was something unbearable in the things, in the people, in the buildings, in the streets that, only if you reinvented it all, as in a game, became acceptable. The essential, however, was to know how to play, and she and I, only she and I, knew how to do it.” (Ferrante, p.107) Together, they begin to see the alternative possibilities—alternative values, activities, ways of being—that constitute, for each girl, a way of life. Her relationship with Lila strikes Elena as a game which allows them to escape the strictures of their environment. The idea that they are playing a secret game is a way of inchoately grasping the thought that there could be other rules to life than those they have been taught. The game is a world inside the world; it is a proxy for the world outside the world—the world outside the neighborhood—for which Elena is only beginning to learn how to yearn. The goal of being and beating Lila is the closest Elena can get to the idea of the value of escape, just as getting a higher grade on a test can be the closest that you get to the idea of mathematical excellence.

If we ask, “Why couldn’t Elena straightforwardly work to become different from her mother?”, we are failing to appreciate the difficulty of seeing one’s way out of the only value-system to which one has been exposed. The strictures of the world into which one has been born are, at the same time, the strictures of one’s own mind. Seeing one’s way out of that box is a feat that Elena accomplishes with Lila’s help; it is no wonder that Lila strikes her as magical: “...she took the facts and in a natural way charged them with tension; she intensified reality as she reduced it to words; she injected it with energy....as soon as she began to do this, I felt able to do the same, and I tried and it came easily.” (Ferrante, p.130)

Consider the words Elena associates with Lila in the passages I have quoted here: “power,” “energy,” “tension,” “opportunity,” “intensified,” “progress,” “adventure,” “im-

portant.” Each of those words is a promissory note. Engaging with Lila allows Elena access to progress without (fully) knowing in what dimension she is progressing; it allows her to feel a sense of adventure without knowing where the adventure is headed. Her relationship with Lila is a partial glimpse into the future, one that makes it possible for the cosmopolitan, feminist novelist that Elena becomes to be the work of the clueless, impoverished child who becomes her.

Aspirational competition of this kind constitutes a kind of transformative activity. It is a way of learning how to be different by acting differently. Such a competitor isn’t working to beat her antagonist for its own sake, as in intrinsically adversarial activity. Nor is competition for the sake of something she independently wants, as in the case of instrumentalized competition. The aspirational competitive impulse is directed at a target one doesn’t yet know how to want. In this kind of competition, beating someone is becoming someone:

“I, I and Lila, we two with that capacity that together—only together—we had to seize the mass of colors, sounds, things and people, and express it and give it power.” (Ferrante, p.138)

Bibliography

- Ackroyd, Carol, N. K. Humphrey & Elizabeth K. Warrington, 1974. "Lasting effects of early blindness: a case study," *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology* vol. 26 issue 1, 114–124
- Callard, A. 2016. "Proleptic Reasons," *Oxford Studies in Meta-Ethics* vol. 11.
- _____ (forthcoming) *Aspiration*. (Oxford University Press)
- Chang, Ruth. 2015. "Transformative Choices," *Res Philosophica*, Vol. 92, No. 2, 237–282
- Ferrante, Elena. 2012. *My Brilliant Friend* (trans. Ann Goldstein) (New York: Europa Editions).
- Hull, John. 1990. *Touching the Rock: An Experience of Blindness* (New York: Vintage (Random House)).
- Paul, L. A. 2014. *Transformative Experience*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- _____. 2015. "What You Can't Expect When You're Expecting." *Res Philosophica* vol 92 pp.1–23.
- Sacks, Oliver. "The Mind's Eye: What the Blind See" *The New Yorker*, July 28, 2003 P. 48–59
- Ullmann-Margalit, Edna. 2006. "Big Decisions: Opting, Converting, Drifting." In Anthony O'Hear, ed., *Political Philosophy*, vol. 58 of *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements* pp.157–172.

The Ted K Archive

Agnes Callard
Transformative Activities
Nov 12 2017

Transformative Experience, ed. John Schwenkler and Enoch Lambert (Oxford University Press, 2020). <www.humanities-web.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com>

www.thetedkarchive.com