Enough Is Enough

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In a post yesterday on her evocatively titled Substack, "More to Hate," the popular feminist philosopher Kate Manne took up "very painful stuff": Agnes Callard's account of aspiration.

The occasion: Rachel Aviv's recent profile of Callard in the *New Yorker*. Aviv focused her account on Callard's divorce from one philosopher and remarriage to another, and Callard's own attempts to philosophically investigate it. To understand her own experience of falling in love, Callard drew on Socratic accounts of eros, and proposed that the projection and idealization of early infatuation is not a delusion to be overcome but rather a mutual call for growth, for self-transformation. Erotic attraction opens the possibility for "radical change," Aviv quotes Callard saying. "Becoming a wholly other person," she says, "is not out of the question. There is suddenly room for massive aspiration." Reflecting on her marriage over a decade into it, Callard admitted that living up to her philosophical convictions "has been so much harder than I thought it would be. To change—but also just to be in love, like, to relate in a really loving way to another person." Once you start trying, she reflected honestly, "you come up against all of your limits." Along the way, Callard took up her personal concerns in professional capacity and has explored the possibility of aspiration-born transformation in a book of the same title. In *Aspiration: The Agency of Becoming*, Callard asks how it could be rational to try to engage in transformative activities, given that justifications for engaging in such pursuits might only be available to us once our transformation is complete.

The lively public response to Aviv's profile inspired Manne to revisit Callard's original account of aspiration. It is "very painful," Manne tweeted, that the discipline of philosophy has "enable[d]" Callard to write her "well-regarded" book and that "the same social and historical oddity of our discipline" has made "a disastrous profile like that possible." What is so "painful" and "disastrous" about Callard's thought? Her championing of aspiration without accounting for all of the pernicious phenomena that go under the same name.

Manne begins her critique by noting "how unbearably middle class" the concept of aspiration is. "It's a particular banner day for capitalism," Manne writes, "when our very selves become a market." The characterization of bourgeois society and culture as "aspirational" is a familiar one, denoting preoccupations with professional striving and upward mobility. But Manne does not limit her critique to a particular understanding of what "aspiration" can come to mean in a particular social context. In her telling, all aspiration is condemnable, all of it the product of bourgeois ideology. All longing for individual self-improvement and self-transformation is a mark of privilege. The implication is clear: working-class people do not or should not aspire to improve their selves and their condition as individuals. But this, of course, is its own form of prejudice. To so crudely constrain the kinds of desires working-class people are allowed to have, as Manne does, is just another instance of elitist condescension masquerading as egalitarianism.

To drive home her argument that aspiration is a regressive ideal, Manne draws a link between aspiration and the social maladies of the day. She transitions seamlessly from questioning the advisability of costly and potentially harmful diet injections and buccal fat removals to criticizing Callard's life choices. It is "absurd," she complains, that Callard discusses aspiration without recognizing "the fact that aspiration is often less a matter of trying to be a better self, and more a matter of securing an upgrade in relation to bankrupt moral values: a thinner body, a fancier degree, and yes, even a younger, more glamorous partner."

Let us put to one side the question of whether amicably separating from a partner one realized one was never in love with and attempting to build a life with another person with whom one feels better matched is anything like getting cheek fillers. For Manne's complaint does raise an important question about contemporary philosophical practices: in particular, about professional philosophers' willingness to ask a certain kind of question (here, whether and how it is rational to engage in value-transformative activities) without delving into the historical development and critiques of the terms they are using (here, aspiration). This is a worthy question, and I would be keen on seeing it thought through publicly and in good faith.

But to counter Manne's local complaint about Callard and her account of aspiration, one hardly needs to resolve that bigger question at all. The demand to address the evils of aspiration can be quickly dismissed on very basic grounds. It is, to my mind, condescending or plain silly to suppose that in our particular historical moment anyone who bothers reading *Aspiration* is in need of a reminder of what is by now a very familiar, indeed banal point: that in addition to struggling with questions like how to choose a vocation, whether to have children or how to learn to enjoy the riches of inaccessible cultural realms, people also worry about how to be thinner, prettier, richer and more popular. It's fine not to find Callard's own question interesting—I confess that there are others I have found more urgent and more philosophically compelling—and the important critique of the pernicious effects of phenomena that go by the name of "aspiration" has its time and place. But to insist that this critique must always be given pride of place marks a failure to understand why readers, especially nonacademic readers, have long found Callard's writing so accessible, relatable and compelling: her willingness to examine her personal confusions and choices with the same thoughtfulness and rigor she would draw on in a reading of Plato, and the presumption that her readers, no matter what class they come from, could *all* do the same.

Manne finishes her attack with some ad hominem insinuations. To prove Callard's bourgeois commitments, Manne examines Callard's examples, which should, she says ominously, "give us pause": a young person who gets a taste of classical art and yearns to cultivate their ability to understand and enjoy it, someone wishing to become a doctor, another who would like to live a more healthy lifestyle. These are all examples of middle-class striving, Manne insists, all depicting attempts to enter social practices "premised on exclusion and exclusivity and elitism." I've already raised my concerns about labeling an interest in our poetic heritage, or the desire to dedicate one's life

to helping people face their finitude and mortality, or maintaining a friendlier relationship with one's physical needs, as somehow inimical to the ethos of the working classes. Working-class kids, too, may wish to discover art, help save lives and eat more nutritious food.

Manne's scrutiny of Callard's examples, however, doesn't rest there. Manne's real sights are set on Callard's next example of aspiration: "If one seeks to appreciate some person, one might invite him for coffee," Manne quotes Callard. This, Manne writes, "is positively alarming now, in context," linking again to the *New Yorker* profile. "It shows that this acquisitive logic fails to draw the line at other human beings." In Manne's analysis, seeking to better *appreciate* another human being and *inviting* them for coffee to do so—a simple expression of the basic human desire for sociability if ever there was one—is cause for concern. Philosophy may have its limitations, but if there's one thing it allows its students to do, it is to identify the failure of arguments by name. The claim that to try to get to know people better by asking them out for coffee is a manifestation of "acquisitive logic" is what philosophers call a *reductio*—short for *reductio ad absurdum*—of a position. It means that the absurdity of an account, when pushed to its logical limits, exposes its overall failure to make any sense.

It is not "the discipline of philosophy" that "enabled" Callard to write a well-regarded book, any more than it is "the discipline of philosophy" that enabled Manne to write hers. The many people highly regarding their work—work that begins with their personal experiences and combines their private passions with their philosophical training to illuminate topics they believe we should all care about—are at least partly to blame. It is up to those readers to decide whom to follow: the one arguing for the possibility of aspiration, the possibility of intellectual, aesthetic and ethical growth, or the one urging us to abandon hope for better things to come; the one busy posting under the banner "More to Hate" or the one baring her heart in public so we may see, too, that there is more to love.

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