Book Review: Aspiration: The Agency of Becoming

John Schwenkler

Aspiration: The Agency of Becoming, by Agnes Callard (Oxford University Press), £52/$69

Analytic philosophers' accounts of intentional action and practical rationality have tended for a while to fall along certain predictable lines. We begin with the description of an agent who has a certain set of mental attitudes — beliefs, desires, intentions, and the like — and then see practical deliberation as a matter of putting these attitudes together and drawing out their entailments, and action as the further process that results from this drawing out. This general picture has the advantage of fitting comfortably with both classic decision theory and a deeply entrenched version of philosophical naturalism that takes changes in a rational animal to be produced in just the same way as changes anywhere else in nature. Hence, according to this picture, the standing psychological states that rationalise an action or belief are also supposed to *cause* it, given the appropriate incoming stimulation, in much the same way as the internal state of a chemical compound determines the reactions that it will participate in.

Recent philosophical critiques of this received picture of agency have usually focused on only one or the other of the aspects just mentioned. On the one hand, philosophers inspired by the work of Gilbert Ryle and G.E.M. Anscombe have challenged the idea that a person's practical reasoning can be set apart from her actions in the way that this picture supposes, arguing instead that we should see action itself as an exercise of practical reason. Such theorists have, however, tended to characterise this form of reasoning as strictly instrumental, a matter of moving from antecedent desire to an action that is supposed to satisfy it. On the other hand, in the work of Edna Ullmann-Margalit and L.A. Paul, among others, we find criticisms of this narrow conception of practical rationality that tacitly accept the separation of an agent's reasoning from what she eventually does in light of it. For these philosophers, the phenomena of "big decisions" and "transformative experience" show that philosophical accounts of practical deliberation need to make room for the possibility of reasoned choices to transform one's desires in a direction that one doesn't antecedently endorse. Left intact, however, is the assumption that such deliberation culminates in a simple *decision* to be changed, from which the subsequent transformation unfolds according to its own internal principles.

The argument of Agnes Callard's *Aspiration: The Agency of Becoming* is directed against both of these assumptions simultaneously. Callard's central thesis is that there is a form of human activity, which she calls *aspiration*, and a form of reason for action, which she calls *proleptic*, that have been unfairly neglected in analytic moral psychology. Early in the book she illustrates the phenomena of interest by appeal to the title character of Plato's *Alcibiades*, who is torn between his commitment to a political career and his desire for the fruits of Socratic wisdom. Another more familiar example is that of a person who takes classes in music appreciation, and works to keep herself

awake and attentive while attending symphonies, not because she enjoys listening to classical music but because she is trying to make herself into the kind of person who does. We cannot, Callard argues, make good sense of cases like these except by appeal to the conceptual categories that are introduced in her book.

Here is why not. According to the received picture of practical deliberation, when a person makes a rational choice to act in some way she must have some standing desire that this action is supposed to be a way to fulfil. And according to the received picture of human agency, change in a person's values is always something that merely happens to her, and not itself an activity that the person engages in. ("Not *itself*", because we can actively do things that have the effect of changing our values, as when one takes a drug that reduces the craving for alcohol or cigarettes. But Callard argues that aspiration is different from this: it is not a matter of acting on oneself so as to change one's desires for the sake of something else that one desires already.) Aspirational activities are themselves ways of bringing it about that one has the very desire that these activities are motivated by — a desire that, by hypothesis, the aspirant does not already have.

Callard makes a powerful case that this conceptual framework is necessary and well suited to characterise the phenomena of active, self-directed transformation at the core of her argument. She also uses the framework to shed new light on a number of questions that have already been discussed at length by philosophers, including ones about the nature of *akrasia* and the possibility of being morally responsible for the person one becomes. And all this is done in a gorgeous style and with an attention to lived detail that is unfortunately missing in most philosophical work. My expectations for this book were very high coming in, and it exceeded them by a wide margin. I recommend it highly and look forward to reading the work that will come in its wake.

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