

# Against Aspiration

Aspiration is a helluva drug. And some philosophers have,  
sadly, bought into it uncritically.

Kate Manne

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I've been thinking, this week, about the concept of aspiration, and how unbearably middle class it is, in ways not always adequately appreciated by philosophers. Capitalism loves to make us yearn for what we can have, at a suitable price point, notoriously. A bigger house, a "better" car, a more prestigious (as opposed to better) education for our children.

But it's a particular banner day for capitalism when our very selves become a market, as authors like Tressie McMillan Cottom, Jessica DeFino, and Aubrey Gordon have all, in different ways, brilliantly highlighted. We spend over 50 billion dollars annually, in this country alone, on weight loss programs and products. We have our buccal fat excised, only to have fat injected back into our cheeks to create the illusion of youth via facial fullness. We take Ozempic and then get a face-lift when it leaves our thinner faces gaunt and hollow. The beauty industry has never been more booming. We do not appear to have gotten smarter about its predation.

Now, we're seeing a tenuous body positivity exposed as but a cover for a kind of sour grapes/sweet lemons thinking. It used to be that you couldn't realistically do much about your body shape and size, since dieting famously doesn't work, as an increasing number of consumers are coming to recognize. To be more specific, people can lose 5 to 10 per cent of their body weight on any number of diets; but then the weight comes back, inexorably, often with additional pounds for company.

And so we settled for our own bodies. We even vowed to try to like them. Until the specter of weight loss knocked again, promising more like a 15 to 18% loss, to the tune of over a thousand dollars per month—or a little less, if you are willing to entrust your health to a dodgy compounding pharmacy who'll slap together a simulcrum of the semaglutide molecule to which Novo Nordisk holds the patent.

Forget the ethics of this. Forget that you'd thereby be depriving type 2 diabetics of a drug they actually need or can at least benefit from. Forget your own health, and the fact that we have very little idea what these drugs will do to a body in the long term. Forget that, to the extent we do know, they appear to cause serious thyroid and pancreatic problems, even cancer.

Forget the fact that your weight will remain lower for only as long as you keep taking these drugs—and hence paying through the nose for a smaller waistline.

Many of the reports on the use of these drugs—most prominently, Wegovy and Ozempic, weekly injections—make it sound like for the most part a Hollywood phenomenon. It can't be. The nationwide shortages alone, such that even the drug manufacturers have been caught out by the strength of the demand, suggest a much wider uptake. (It's also pretty clear that Hollywood caught the trend from TikTok.) It will get wider and wider still, as stalwart diet companies like Weight Watchers—which rebranded recently as WW, "wellness that works"—announced their plans this week to get in on the new prescription diet drugs racket.

Of course, much of this is just showing what Black feminists like Evette Dionne have long taught us, which is that body positivity, as appropriated and co-opted by white women, is not a robust politics. There is no "there" there, when it comes to liberation.

Still, I find myself wondering: what if we are also addicted to aspiration itself? Drawn in naïvely by the lure of trying to be something, someone, better? And what if we have forgotten to be sufficiently critical of this dreary human tendency?

But wherever there is aspiration, there is a hierarchy and, often, invidious social comparison. I find it absurd that some philosophers have largely managed to discuss aspiration without recognizing these truths. Or 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.



Agnes Callard might say that I am failing to recognize her distinction between aspiration and ambition—the former being the process of rational value acquisition, and the latter being an attempt to get what one really wants, in terms of already realized values. I’m skeptical of any neat distinction in this vicinity; by her own admission, the two states are often inextricably entangled in ordinary human motivation and behavior. More importantly, Callard’s examples of aspiration ought to give us pause here: she introduces her target concept of aspiration by discussing the “callow youth” who “gets an inkling of the value of classical music or painting or wine, and wants to come to appreciate these values more fully.” Her discussion continues: “Let me offer a few more examples, some of which may strike the reader as more familiar than others. If one aspires to be a doctor, one goes to medical school. If one aspires to be more attuned to values of healthy living, one might become a member of a gym and transition one’s eating habits toward vegetables and whole grains.” Every single one of these examples strikes me as one of middle-class striving, in which the “aspirant” (as Callard calls them) seeks not just to ape but to annex a social practice that is premised on exclusion and exclusivity and elitism.

It’s not to say that at least some of these practices can’t be valuable; but they’re valuable precisely when you *already* value classical music (say), and then want to participate in it or understand it deeply—*not* when you don’t actually value it, but seek to make yourself into a Bach buff. (I fell in love with playing piano as a kid because I fell in love with Beethoven, and wanted to reproduce his sonatas, however poorly, in the company of other people who were similarly moved by music; I wasn’t trying to acquire a value for the sake of it.) But understood as aspirational in Callard’s sense, these practices make the practice of valuing itself into a market—the ability to value is something we seek to acquire, to grasp, to capitalize on. Any time we have such a market, a form of cultural and material bourgeois capital, the onus is on us to be more critical and socially self-aware than Callard’s treatment ever contemplates. The next example on her list—“If one seeks to appreciate some person, one might invite him for coffee”—is positively alarming now, in context. It shows that this acquisitive logic fails to draw the line at other human beings.

Two caveats are important here. One, a lot of people living in a lot of difficult social circumstances have reasons to aspire and even be acquisitive, for the sake of upward social mobility. Nobody has illuminated these dynamics better than Tressie McMillan Cottom, who compellingly argued that people facing poverty often have a reason to buy luxury goods and status symbols if they can manage it, for the sake of signaling their non-existent capital in order to perhaps possess a little more of it in the future. A Black woman needed to wear a silk shell rather than a tank top under her blazer to stand a better chance at a better job, in McMillan Cottom’s example. It is actually wealthy white elites who have the luxury of merely looking neat and presentable in the least expensive clothing options (including quirky, thrifted vintage—which takes a surplus of time and a particular body to render feasible).

Of course, even expensive-looking clothing is often distressingly cheap now, thanks to our reliance on (to say the least) highly exploitative labor from people in the Global South. But that's another story, and an increasingly well-known one, thanks to the work of scholars and activists like Aja Barber.

A second point worth making, albeit perhaps a pat one, is that I can certainly sympathize with the lure of aspiration. I am by no means immune to it myself, nor do I mean to call out those caught in its grip in a way that is harshly critical. Maybe, as with other battles, we can think of it like this: I won't condemn you for your choices, and I get that they are hard ones. But let me gently gesture in the direction of people who've made them differently, and suggest there's something truly admirable in their refusal to grasp and claw and clamber in the way capitalism wants us to. There is something gutsy, and courageous, and dare I say dignified, in someone who says: enough. My body is enough. My marriage is enough. Myself, as it is, is enough. More than enough, even. I will invest my time and my money and my energy not in self-improvement but in something larger, something collective, something truly needed—along with the self-compassion that may be required when we give up trying to be an “after” in a glossy magazine spread.

That seems to me the kind of aspiration we can live with, ironically.

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