

Book Review: Aspiration

Krista Karbowski Thomason
Swarthmore College

2019

Aspiration: The Agency of Becoming

New York: Oxford University Press, 2018, 264 pp., \$65.00

ISBN 9780190639488

People change. They come to value new things and in doing so they become new people. How do these changes happen? In *Aspiration*, Agnes Callard provides an account of the moral agency of acquiring new values. Much of the work that Callard does in the book is constructing the scaffolding for transformative change; she is in many ways exploring this question from the ground up. Although there is literature in nearby places for her to draw on, she has to carve out the space for the question while she answers it. Callard deserves high praise for taking on this sort of project. The topic is philosophically rich, and her book makes substantial headway in mapping the terrain of the agency of becoming.

The book is divided into three parts, which Callard thinks form the “crossroads” for aspiration (9). Part I deals with the practical rationality of the process of acquiring new values. Part II describes the moral psychology of aspiration, which pays particular attention to the kind of inner conflicts that aspirants experience. Finally, part III addresses the question of how can we be responsible for the sorts of people we become. Here I will primarily focus on the arguments about the rationality of aspiration in part I. In the course of that discussion, I will draw on some of the material from part II. I will close with brief comments about a specific problem Callard raises in part III.

Callard begins by describing the challenge of making intelligible the process of acquiring new values. On the one hand, the process of self-transformation seems irrational. For example, someone who is deciding to become a mother can’t know ahead of time what it will be like. In fact, it seems unlikely that someone who doesn’t yet have children can ever really appreciate the new values that she will take on and the new person she will become once she has children (45–46). As a result, choosing to have children seems a bit like walking off a cliff: one simply goes over the edge and hopes for the best. On the other hand, people clearly do deliberate about whether to adopt new pursuits, make career changes, and appreciate things they do not yet appreciate. We think of people having a “let’s go for it” moment after a long process of deliberation (62). How should we make sense of this tension?

To solve this problem, Callard proposes that “large transformations in people’s lives are rational, though their rationality is not best captured through the framework of decision-making” (54). First, Callard argues that it is false to think agents must appreciate fully the values that they will have when they begin or accomplish their transformations. People who decide to become parents don’t walk a cliff. They imagine, fantasize about, or try to learn things about parenthood. They likely watch or interact with children with an eye to seeing what being parents would be like (59). This process can involve conscious deliberation, but it is also a gradual one that can include fits and starts as well as smooth linear transitions (57). The climatic “let’s go for it” moments

are “embedded in a longer transformative journey” (63). But it would be false to think that the “let’s go for it” decision itself is the once-and-for-all transformation.

In order to properly capture the nature of rationality involved in aspiration, Callard introduces the terminology of “proleptic” reasons or agency (72). Acting on proleptic reasons means that “you can act rationally even if your antecedent conception of the good for the sake of which you act is not quite on target—and you know that” (ibid). Proleptic agency is the hallmark of those who aspire. Proleptic reasons are “provisional” in a way that reflects agents’ “inchoate, anticipatory and indirect grasp” of the good to which they aspire (ibid). Agents who act proleptically try to make themselves into the sorts of people who are responsive to reasons the force of which they eventually hope to appreciate. They also act on reasons that have a dual nature: they are reasons that appeal to the people they are now and also reflect the people they are trying to become (73). Callard wants to differentiate proleptic reasons from other, similar types of reasons. For example, proleptic reasons are not the same as reasons of pretense (83). Suppose I want to like yoga. During my yoga class, I pretend that I am genuinely feeling relaxed and rejuvenated instead of confused and uncomfortable. As time goes by, the pretense can become real and I might actually feel relaxed and rejuvenated. Callard argues that such reasons are not proleptic. “Pretending is different from trying,” even though there may be some special types of pretending involved in aspiration (85). Trying to become the sort of person who likes yoga is rational in a way that simply continuing to pretend to like yoga is not.

Here I want to explore a bit further the contours of proleptic rationality. It seems to me that Callard is correct to disentangle the rationality of aspiration from the decision-making model. When we aspire to change ourselves, although we may certainly deliberate whether and how to go about that change, the process itself is not best characterized as deciding to change. The process can be gradual, halting, and indeed not fully intentional. As Callard writes, “Quite often we simply find that we have, for a while now, been aspiring [for example] to be more loving and less spiteful in some relationship. It doesn’t undermine the status of the aspiration as the work of the agent’s own will that there was no moment at which she ‘made a decision’ to engage in it” (146). There is something of an uneasy balance that it seems Callard is trying to strike here. Aspiration is a messy and complicated process, but these features don’t therefore render it unintelligible. Callard seems to want to walk a line between holding that aspiration is rational and accepting that the way in which it is rational does not meet the stricter (and perhaps too narrow) vision of rationality often found in practical reasoning literature. If this picture is right, I am very sympathetic to Callard’s goals. Nonetheless, trying to strike this balance invites questions about how steady we can keep the conception of proleptic rationality.

Surely Callard is right that there is a difference between trying and pretending. But how exactly do we tell the difference between the two? Start from within the agent’s own perspective. If I am trying to like yoga, I might find it difficult to tell whether I actually feel relaxed or whether I’m just telling myself I feel relaxed. This confusion

will be particularly salient for the person in the early stages of aspiration. It will also be more salient for cases of appreciation. Contrast appreciation with taking up a new activity. I want to learn how to do yoga, so I sign up for a yoga class. Going to the class, working on the poses, and trying to correct my form—these are all things that I do when I’m taking up yoga. Although doing all of these things is a precondition for me coming to enjoy or appreciate yoga, none of them is sufficient (as any failed yoga-appreciator knows well). We can be genuinely unclear about whether we are starting to like something or whether we’re just trying to convince ourselves we like something. Given that aspiration involves an imperfect grasp of the good we are trying to appreciate, it seems especially difficult to know when or if we’re on the right track. It also seems true that we can be unsure whether another person is truly aspiring or merely pretending. My friends might be suspicious of my newfound interest in yoga: is she really enjoying this or is she just telling herself that because she thinks this is something she should aspire to? We face a great deal social pressure to have certain aspirations and not others. I ought to aspire to be a healthy person who only desires kale and doesn’t desire donuts. Do I really want to become healthy person or am I just invested in the optics of being a healthy person, given that this aspiration is one I think I’m supposed to have? Aspiring takes time and effort. We often have to learn how to appreciate new things, and we might have only a dim grasp of the good involved. In light of this, it seems aspiring and pretending will not be so easy to tell apart either from the inside or from the outside.

Do these concerns cast doubt on Callard’s claim that aspiration is rational? It might depend on how thoroughgoing this confusion can be. It may be that over time we can come to clarity about our aspirations. I might actually like yoga or I might realize that I was just faking it. But it’s much harder to make this determination—both for ourselves and for others—when we’re in the midst of working toward the transformation. Additionally, it doesn’t seem that we can always rely on the retrospective view to confirm that we were aspiring all along. If the process of transformation is especially gradual and unintentional, I might change, but not necessarily aspire. Suppose, for example, that I start getting up early in the morning to exercise because it’s the only time in my day I can do it. I then start waking up early naturally on days that I don’t exercise, and I find it helps me get a head start on work, so I go into the office. After a while, someone might describe me as a “morning person.” This might seem surprising to me; it’s not something I set out to do. Yet lo and behold here I am—a morning person. Moreover, I might be perfectly able to articulate the values of being a morning person before I realized I was one. I might have started to notice that I had more energy in the morning or that I was in a good mood when I got up early. So, I could have a dim grasp of the good and do things that count as aspiring to the good, and yet not consider myself as aspiring toward it. In order for something to count as aspirational, there has to be some conscious effort, some grasp of the project, and some sense of the progress on the part of the agent. Yet the more of these things we require

in order to distinguish aspiration from other things, the more we seem to rule out the more complex cases.

The concern I intend to articulate here is about how large the set of core cases is that fit Callard's account. I doubt anyone would deny that people sometimes—even often—consciously try to improve themselves and aspire to new values. We set goals and take steps to achieve them. But are these sorts of cases the majority of cases of transformation or are they the minority? Academics and philosophers who tend to be reflective and intentional about their life choices are, I think, prone to assume that these examples are widespread. Throughout the book, it's clear that Callard is sensitive to these kinds of concerns, and she does an excellent job of trying to ensure that the boundaries of her account are not too rigid. This careful work is still, however, part of the difficult balance to strike between providing a unified account of aspiration and acknowledging that there are several noncanonical cases that fall outside of it.

I want to close with brief comments on Callard's discussion of the aspiring gangster. Callard argues that we cannot properly say that people can aspire to be something bad— aspiring is “aspiring to something good” (238). Although it may seem that we could construct an example of the earnest aspiring gangster, Callard argues that we end up telling a story about an ambitious agent rather than an aspiring agent (237–38). The aspiring gangster “can't be aspiring because there is no ‘there’ to aspire to” (240). Aspiration must presuppose that there is some value to which the agent aspires, but for the gangster there is no such value (*ibid*).

Callard's point is that it's hard to articulate the good in being a gangster that doesn't just amount to power or wealth. Of course, the presumption here is that power and wealth aren't goods—at least not the sort to which we aspire. I'd like to evince some skepticism about this somewhat conscripted conception of goods or values. Callard is right to think that we need some coherent notion of goods in order to explain aspiration, and assets like power and wealth just seem to stretch the meaning of the term too far. But we run into the danger of moralizing our goods too much. In 1975, in an interview with *Sounds* magazine, Motörhead lead singer Lemmy Kilmister said that Motörhead “would be the dirtiest rock ‘n’ roll band in the world. If you moved in next door, your lawn would die.” Is it possible for Motörhead to aspire to be the dirtiest rock ‘n’ roll band in the world?

On Callard's view, it will depend on whether we can make sense of the value of being the dirtiest rock ‘n’ roll band in the world. Kilmister wanted Motörhead to have the loudest, fastest, and raunchiest sound. We can imagine Motörhead working toward this goal— turning up their amps, practicing to play faster, and revising their songs to raunchy perfection. Motörhead doesn't aim to be the best rock ‘n’ roll band in the world; they want to be the dirtiest. I take it that it's difficult for people to appreciate how “being the dirtiest rock ‘n’ roll band in the world” is a good. Obviously it would take work to articulate the good involved, but I think trying to articulate that good in a way that doesn't moralize it is a worthwhile project. One of the advantages of Callard's account is that it tries to accommodate the varieties of our experiences. It would be a

strength of the account if it could accommodate a more pluralistic conception of the values we aim for as well.

Anyone interested in practical reason, moral psychology, and moral agency will enjoy *Aspiration*. The questions I've raised here are merely meant to probe the boundaries of Callard's excellent account in the hopes of continuing the interesting conversation she has started. Her book is an example of all the best qualities of moral philosophy, and it makes a significant and lasting contribution to the field.

The Ted K Archive

Krista Karbowski Thomason
Swarthmore College
Book Review: Aspiration
2019

Essays In Philosophy. Volume 20, Issue 1. DOI: 10.7710/1526-0569.1625.

<www.works.swarthmore.edu/fac-philosophy/555>

Correspondence: kthomas2@swarthmore.edu

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

www.thetedkarchive.com