Agnes Callard: Aspiration | Who Shaves the Barber? #54

William Nava

July 17, 2019

Contents

There's something puzzling about intentionally acquiring a new value: if we don't already have the value, what motivates us to acquire it? This is best understood through an example: a young student takes a music appreciation class in order to learn to appreciate the value of classical music. She doesn't already appreciate the value of classical music—if she did, she wouldn't need the class. But if she doesn't appreciate its value, why take the class? The class is hard work, after all: she must spend hours listening to music that she doesn't yet appreciate!

Philosopher Agnes Callard calls this kind of intentional value acquisition 'aspiration'. In this interview, we discuss a number of issues surrounding aspiration: how it is possible, how it begins, why one cannot aspire to be a gangster, and perhaps most surprisingly, how aspiration accounts for how we can author of our own lives. Along the way, we discuss the nature of motivation, future-to-past normative grounding, and the immortality of the soul. We end with a quick discussion of the value of public philosophy.

Visit **http://williamnava.com** for more info!

Special thanks to Jackie Blum for the podcast art, and The Tin Box for the theme music.

Click here for the full list of episodes!

Sources:

Aspiration: The Agency of Becoming (book)
Agnes Callard (YouTube channel)
Is Public Philosophy Good? (first in Prof. Callard's public philosophy series at *The Point* magazine)
Angry Rainbow Mermaids (Prof. Callard's blog)

Topics discussed:

`https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qM9p8RmKroc`

Intro to Agnes Callard

William: All right, so welcome Agnes Callard. Agnes is a professor of philosophy at the University of Chicago. She's recently, somewhat recently, written a book called Aspiration, The Agency of Becoming, which will be the main thing we'll be talking about today. Agnes, let me start by actually just letting you give a bit more of your autobiography. What aspects of philosophy have you focused on? What has your career as a philosopher been like so far?

Agnes: I would say my work has been divided pretty evenly between sort of contemporary ethics, moral psychology on the one hand, and ancient philosophy on the other hand, Plato and Aristotle. I tend to just bounce back and forth between the two of them, so whichever one I'm working on, I'm dreaming about working on the other. And I've been doing that since... I was an undergrad. I went to grad school at first in classics and did more kind of Greek and Latin stuff, and then switched to philosophy. But that was sort of the beginning of the bouncing.

William: Okay. Was your love for philosophy initially sort of sparked or ignited by Plato and/or Aristotle?

Agnes: Actually, no. Kant.

William: Really.

Agnes: Yeah, and I still love Kant. But as a high schooler, I did debate, Lincoln-Douglas debate. And I noticed that people, I wasn't very good at it. I usually lost. But I noticed that some of the people who were succeeding were quoting from this thing, philosophy. Like they had those, you know. So I went to the Barnes and Noble and I bought like one of each in the philosophy section. And I read through them. So there was Plato, there was Aristotle, but then at some point I got to Kant. And I wasn't actually that impressed by anyone up until Kant. And I just thought Kant was right about everything. I was really surprised that there was philosophy after Kant. Like I thought he just answered all the questions. And this was just the groundwork, okay, that I read. But from that point on, every debate I did, every, for arguments for both sides, it would be quoting Kant. It didn't matter what, like, you know. And I still have my old edition of Kant in which I've underlined things like what can be used to quote for what conclusion. So yeah, I was completely obsessed with that. And when I went to college, I was going to be a physics major, but I was like, but I'm also going to study Kant because that's, but I didn't really, It wasn't until later that I became interested in like philosophy outside of Kant. And I wasn't a philosophy major as an undergrad either, so.

William: Okay. I also just want to throw in there that outside of your academic work, you've somewhat recently been doing what in one of these articles you called public philosophy. So you have this series on the point of articles ostensibly on public philosophy. Like the first one is very directly about public philosophy, and I guess others are somewhat related. And you've also, I guess, somewhat recently as well, started posting these events that you hosted at your school on your YouTube channel,

which are really cool. If anyone wants to hear three hours of a philosopher and her philosopher ex-husband discuss the philosophy of divorce, I don't know where else you're going to find that. Yeah, that was a really great discussion.

Agnes: Thanks.

William: So yeah, and we may get to some of the public philosophy stuff a bit later, but first I want to focus on your book, Aspiration. So I guess just sort of set the scene. What's like the two-minute pitch of what aspiration is and why it's a kind of puzzling phenomenon.

What is aspiration?

Agnes: So aspiration is value learning. So it's when we learn to acquire new values. And the reason it's puzzling is that the sort of steps we have to take to acquire those values, we have to like do things often that are difficult or unpleasant. And so we have to be motivated, right, to acquire them. And the reason why we're doing what we're doing the end goal is to, is the value in question, like having that value and appreciating it. But insofar as we don't yet have it, we don't yet appreciate it. And so what's puzzling is what could ever motivate us to do all that work? So if you think about like an example that I use a lot in the book is, you know, someone who wants to appreciate classical music, right? And so suppose they go through all this effort, they go to concerts, they're kind of bored at the concerts, they take music appreciation classes, And it's like, why are they doing all that? And the answer is like, for the sake of the intrinsic value of music, but they don't appreciate it yet. So that's sort of the puzzle, is how can you ever be motivated by an intrinsic value that you don't yet grasp?

What aspiration is not

William: So I thought it might be useful to actually kind of start by talking about some of the things that maybe could be confused with aspiration to sort of like narrow in on the phenomenon. Because I think, when the book starts, it starts to, it seemed to me, at first to be about a kind of an interesting but somewhat esoteric topic. And as it developed and I more grasped what it was that you were really talking about, I realized it was actually something really, really fundamental to being a human being. So I guess I want to start almost by just trying to narrow in on this phenomenon. So there's a few things that you contrast it with. So at some point in the book, you talk about this thing called self-cultivation, which might sound a lot like aspiration, but you say it's not. You also talk about ambition. Can you kind of go through some of those things that are like surrounding aspiration, but are not it?

Agnes: Yeah, sure. So in a case of self-cultivation, you make some change in yourself where in advance what the value is of changing in that way. So suppose that I want to be healthier. Like I want to eat healthier, right? And so I might take a bunch of steps to get myself to eat healthier. And But I know already in advance exactly what I stand to gain by eating healthier. I already appreciate that value, right? And so I'm not learning to appreciate eating healthier. I'm just, in effect, changing my habits. And there's no paradox about that because we can explain what motivates me to take those steps by the value that I already appreciate.

William: And what was the case with ambition?

Agnes: Right. So in the case of ambition, I want to say, ambition in a way is like a larger scale version of self-cultivation. So I I want to be a certain kind of person, let's say like a famous person or a wealthy person. But I think I already know what's good about being that kind of person. I know that in advance. I'm not engaged in the process of learning that. And so I might be making what, in some sense, seem like large-scale changes. But they're not, the changes that I'm making and the changes in my fortunes and in what I undergo don't represent an occasion for value learning for me.

William: Okay, so in both cases, what makes it not count as aspiration is that you already kind of, you already know what the value is. Okay, There's another kind of surrounding case I kind of wanted to discuss, and that is the case of the, and it sort of seems to me sort of related to ambition. That's the case of the aspiring gangster. So just as an aside, I started reading that part of the chapter, and within a paragraph, I was like, oh, the main character from Goodfellas. And then a couple of pages later, you did actually a quote from him. So I was like, yay. so excuse the siren. There's always at some point in the interview where I have to say, excuse the siren. So yeah, so the main character from Goodfellas, at the very beginning of the movie, says, you know, something like, as far back as I can remember, I always wanted to be a gangster. And he talks about it in the way that sounds like like something that he's aspiring to, actually. That's almost like a word that might come to mind when you describe the way he talks about it. But you say, no, you cannot aspire to be a gangster. Why is that?

Agnes: Good. So here we get into... I don't know, I think maybe the most, what I think of as the most controversial claim in the book, it's the one that I came to last in the writing of the book, and I thought it was absurd, and I kept trying to argue against it, and I couldn't, and then I just gave in, which is that you can only aspire to something if that thing is good.

William: Okay.

Agnes: And that's because learning is factive. So I can't learn something unless the thing is actually true, right? Learning is like knowing or remembering or seeing, like perceiving, right? So I can think that I perceive something, even if I don't actually perceive it. I can have the illusion of it, I can have a representation of it. But if I say I see something, then I'm saying, that's vertical, then I actually take myself to actually

see it. And if you say, she saw this, then you think I saw it, right? And same with remember, right? So if I say, he remembers the time when he went to the beach, I'm committing myself to the fact that he actually did go to the beach, right? So learning is factive in the same way. And so what I sort of realized through thinking about aspiration is that it really is a kind of learning, like strictly speaking learning in the sense that it's factive. And what that means is that when I describe someone as an aspirant, either myself or anyone else, then I'm committing myself to the fact that they're actually learning something, which is to say that there was actually something there that they had to learn. So there had to actually be a value. And so that's actually why I use the classical music example. In order to write the book, I have to use examples, right? And if my theory is correct, it's only aspiration. It's the thing that the person is aspiring to is actually good. So my reader, I need a common ground with them, right? I need examples where I'm pretty sure they're going to acknowledge that thing is something good. And classical music is kind of a good common denominator. You know, personally, I don't actually like . But it's like, everyone kind of agrees. But I think it's good, so that's all we need. Like, I think it's good for people to appreciate it. Okay, so now the thing with the gangsters, it's not good to be a gangster. Gangsters are like bad murderers. And so you can't aspire to be one because it isn't good. Now, if you thought it was good, then you could think of yourself as aspiring, and you could even think of someone else as aspiring. You'd be wrong, according to me, because I don't think being a gangster is good, right? So I think you can't aspire to be a gangster because you're not actually learning anything because there isn't actually any value there. Now, what are you doing? Well, you think you're aspiring, kind of like thinking you remember something when you never actually underwent it or thinking that you know something you don't actually know, right? And I think that then if we say more, like, we need to get into, to figure out exactly what's going on, we need to get into more detail. So, like, one thing is you might just be deluded. You're sort of, like, what you really are is somebody who is learning to be a killer, right? And you've dressed it up in a bunch of fancy language and sort of like propaganda that you've inherited from your culture. And that's not stuff that you learned. It's just stuff that was, in some sense, like, imposed on you, right? It's a bad value system that you absorbed. Or it could be that, like, you know, you weren't exactly aspiring to be a gangster, but there was something you were aspiring to be, and you associated it with gangster, right? It was something like, a kind of independent stand-up person who supports his family or something, right? And you mistakenly sort of connected that up with being a gangster. And like one test of that would be when you kind of got old enough to see what it really was to be a gangster, which way did you go? Were you like, oh, well, no, that's actually horrible. And that's not what I was after. then maybe really you were aspiring all along, but you just mislabeled what you were aspiring for as gangster. Or if you're like, okay, I guess I'm going to do those things, then it's like, no, you never were aspiring. You were in some sense turning yourself into something bad, but it wasn't an aspirational project.

William: Is it possible to like err in the aspirational project? So I'm envisioning in the kind of situation you just described, like maybe you actually are aspiring to be whatever the good version of gangster was that you just described. And, somewhere along the way through just, I don't know, bad information or maybe just giving into temptation, maybe, some akrasia, you just, take a few steps that push you in the direction of really becoming a gangster. Now, it seems clear that once you go far enough down that line, you're certainly no longer aspiring to be that like good, whatever, family leader or what have you. But it doesn't seem to me like that necessarily entails that you never were aspiring. And maybe that you just went wrong in the process.

Agnes: I think that's right. So absolutely. I think that Right. It depends on how we describe that choice point, right? So one way we might describe it is that you faltered or fell or screwed up at that point, in which case, up until that point, you actually were going the right way. I was sort of imagining the choice point as revealing what you wanted all along, but one didn't think of it that way. That is, one can really is erring with respect to where you were going. And so, yes, I think in that, I think it's definitely like, you know, aspiration is something where maybe there's an end point, but the whole time you're making progress, right? And you could stop it at any point and you will have gotten that far. And so you, for example, might have gotten that far in your progress towards being a kind of like independent standup person who supports his family. And then you got twisted towards, you know, something else. But that's not to deny that you made that progress. Yeah.

William: Why did you find that it was important to I mean, you said that you almost tried to argue the other way, and you found that you kind of had to. What was so difficult about just letting aspiration be, I mean, you said it was, sorry, I'm now remembering that you said it was because learning is factive. Yeah, subscribe to that. You actually already answered that.

Agnes: Unless someone would say about it. I didn't, because the learning is factive thing came later. Like, this is what made me realize that it really was a kind of learning. So it's the other way around. The way that it happened was, I assumed that there was such a case. And so I'm like, I tried to write the chapter in which I explained that there's two versions of the gangster, the aspiring gangster and the ambitious gangster, right? And I kept trying to tell the story. So like, here's the story of the ambitious gangster. All he's trying to do is blot. Now here's the story of the aspiring gangster. And they kept sounding like the same story. And I'm like, oh, I must have screwed that up. Let me try again. And I kept trying to do it. And then I tried it with other things. I'm like, let me try other bad things. And every time I would pick a bad thing, the stories would come out sounding the same. And I realized that the reason that they were coming out the same is that the thing that I would have had to grip onto to get the aspiring gangster story going is the idea that they were sort of like making a certain kind of valuational progress. But the fact that I myself didn't believe there was any value there, I couldn't tell that story, so to speak. It's like I didn't have the narrative resources because I didn't believe in the story I was telling. And so what

that made me realize is that Like it's not so much, it's true that you can't aspire to something unless it's good, but also you can't see someone as aspiring unless you see the thing as good.

Moral skepticism and aspiration

William: So let me give you a kind of weird skeptical scenario to try to like, but just to challenge this a little bit. So suppose there's something that most of us think is good, but it's really not. I mean, let's, this seems plausible, like we're right, sort of by we, I mean the general consensus, let's say, it's like right about like, I don't know, 95% of our basic sort of moral intuitions. But there's some things that we feel pretty sure about that it turns out we're wrong.

Agnes: Yeah.

William: It seems that in that case then, you would have, if somebody were aspiring to that kind of, to that value, the one that we're wrong about, that it would just look and feel to everyone like that's an aspirant and that person would feel that way as well. if you found out about that person, you'd say, yeah, that could be an example in my book. But in fact, that would not be an aspirant. Correct. Is that just a bullet you're willing to bite? Like that's just how it is.

Agnes: Yes. So I think that one thing is like, there's a general, that's the, The problem of moral skepticism, right, is a more general problem. That is, forget about aspiring. Now there's the question, what about when we think things are valuable and they're not actually valuable? Can we be wrong with respect to value? I think the answer is yes, we can be wrong, right? And then it's like, but how do we know whether we're right or wrong? It's like, that's really hard. We might not know. We might, like, in some sense, it might look for all the world to us like we're right, but we still might be wrong. I think that is possible. And so now, if that's possible, right, then I think in a way, then of course, any concepts that are dependent on that, like aspiring would be in a way dependent, right? It would be trying to learn one of those things, is going to be infected with the same problem. And I guess I think that insofar as you believe in the existence of such problems, you should believe that they're to be solved at the level of the completed state before they can be solved at the level of the aspirant, if you see what I mean. Like, if there are problems about whether some value is really a value, whether you're really in a good condition if you care about classical music or something, the place to go first is like the classical music expert and see whether they are in any position at all to see that they might be deeply mistaken or something. And I think if we think even that person can be mistaken, then for sure the aspirant can, because the aspirant is like a confused version of that person. right? So the aspirant is just on their way and just learning. And they're, I mean, this is just the tip of the iceberg of all the ways in which it's possible to be sort of confused and mistaken as an aspirant. They're characteristically confused and mistaken people. So it's not that hard

of a bullet for me to bite. And I think that, you know, insofar as we have these kind of skeptical worries, and then we want to ask ourselves questions about like, almost like, sort of like epistemic vouchsafing, how can we test or know or whatever. We should be asking those questions about the completed person rather than the aspirant.

William: That makes sense. I think the reason that it strikes me as a little bit harder to accept, you know, that person is not an aspirant than it is to just accept that, you know, we were just wrong about some value. Is that the, is that, is that, I guess there just seems to be something so odd about the fact that aspiring is this process. And so, it takes place over a long period of time. And so it really looks like something. It's like very distinctive. by the time you finish your book, you get a feeling like you really know this like character of the aspirant, And so it seems like it seems very intuitive to me to think, oh, I think something's good. I do it. I was wrong. I did something bad. Where it seems like weirder to think like I'm watching this person for like 10 years and they look like an aspirant and yet the whole time they really weren't. That just seems like a little harder to accept intuitively.

Agnes: I see what you mean, but I think that's just because you're thinking of living under the value as something that takes a moment rather than a lifetime, right? But I mean, imagine spending decades of your life obsessed with classical music or something, right? And then it's like, it turns out that was nothing. it's part of it is that it's sort of an artifact of the way we tell the story of the aspirant, which is like, they spend all this time and then they get to the point, but it's not like that it ends there, right? It's like that's the beginning of them caring about the thing, which will be as well be extended in time and in a way which is much more, in a way, fixed. It's like, that's the point at which they are saying to themselves, I now know what's valuable about this thing, right? And the fact that they can be wrong about that. in a way should be much more disturbing to us because it's like the aspirin doesn't take themselves to know, but this person does take themselves to know. And I mean, I think you're right that like there is something weird about the thought that the whole time that you took yourself to be aspiring, what you were really doing was in some sense ambition of some kind. That is, you were turning yourself into something, but that thing wasn't coming into any better contact with the sort of value nature of the world. But I think that's just exactly what's true if we look from third personally, like in a movie like Goodfellas. Like this person sort of sees themselves as engaging in a kind of self-cultivation of like grasping something and there's just nothing there. And we can see that and they can't and they're sort of deeply mistaken. So, you know, I do think that like most of the things that people pursue have something to be said for them. One has to reach for the example of the mafioso or something. It's not like that's all over the place. But nonetheless, yeah, I do think that one can be mistaken even over a long period and imagine oneself to be engaged in a certain kind of activity and in fact be engaged in a different kind of activity.

William: Yeah, that makes sense. And actually, you know, though I said it didn't, the aspirant seems more puzzling to me than the person who just, let's say, makes a

bad choice. It doesn't seem more puzzling to me than the person who, without aspiring, but just, maybe having already gone through aspiration, as you said, spends 30 years, like, seeming and looking like they're doing this really great thing, and then, it wasn't great. Like, that seems, that seems to be the same kind of weirdness, let's say. It doesn't seem extra puzzling for the aspirant in that case.

Proleptic reasons and motivation

William: So, can you, so this might come up. And anyway, it was kind of interesting, just on a tunnel. Can you talk a bit about proleptic reasons?

Agnes: So in general, we think of people as having reasons for the things they do, right? And that's part of how we pick out actions, at least nowadays in sort of philosophy of action, moral psychology. An action is something that's done for a reason, practical reason. And so the question is like, what's the aspirant's reason for engaging in aspiration? So what's my reason for taking a classical music class? And my thought is that in the book is that the person has a funny kind of reason for engaging in the aspirational activity. It has, it's a kind of double reason. So like on the one hand, we want to say, well, look, their reason for taking the class is like the intrinsic value of music, which they want to appreciate. Like the value that they're after, the good that they're after is that. But that can't just straightforwardly be said to be their reason in the way in which it could be if they were already someone who appreciated classical music, because they don't actually appreciate that. And so it doesn't actually motivate them, right? It doesn't, like, it's not that it, doesn't motivate them at all in any way, but it doesn't motivate them in the way in which it will motivate them once they fully grasp that value. And so what's characteristic of aspirants is that they sort of have some kind of more immediate and proximate kind of grip on the value of what they're doing that they know isn't quite right. Like it's not really accurate. But it sort of it sort of gets them through the early period. And one example would be like, I mean, there are lots of examples of like self-incentivization. You can be like, well, if I listen to this piece of music, I can like eat this candy bar or something. But I think the ones, the examples I like the best are examples like, you know, say you're, Say you're just learning ancient Greek, right? And you have to read, this is, I had to do this in grad school, read like 20 pages of Homer for tomorrow, which is like a lot. And it's going to be exhausting and it's going to be kind of boring and really, you know, it's just going to take you hours and hours. And you might go and like read it in a coffee shop. And you might hope that like the people around you see like, here I am reading Homer in Greek. where it's like, that's pretty impressive. And, they'll maybe they'll be impressed by me and how much of an intellectual I am and my sophistication and my education and all of that. And like that pleasure, I can sort of like harness that pleasure and use it to kind of pull myself along. And I know, like, it's a little, it's the sort of thing where it's kind of embarrassing to admit it, right? Why is it embarrassing to admit that

that's what you're doing? Because you know that's not a really good reason, right? You know, in fact, that it isn't really fully your reason. You're not just reading this in order to impress people at the coffee shop. But that's not irrelevant. There's a reason why you're in the coffee shop and not somewhere else, right? I can't really work in libraries. In my whole grad school, I didn't work in a library. And I would always work in coffee shops. And it puzzled me for a long time because coffee shops are not that conducive to work. But so I noticed something, which is like, if you're in the library and you're working, and then you look up, like when you're not working, right, you look up, you look around, what do you see? You see everyone being studious, except you who's looking up, right? Every single time you look up, you get this negative reinforcement of like, I suck, everyone else is working hard. Of course, there are moments when I'm working and they look up, but I don't notice those moments, right? Whereas in the coffee shop, I'm sitting there and I'm reading and I look up and like, what's everyone else doing? Like chatting with their friends and having fun and look at me, I'm like reading Greek, right? So like even if they don't notice me, I get this kind of positive reinforcement. I think aspirate, it's characteristic of aspirants that they need things like that. their reason for action has this kind of what I call a kind of proximate face, which is like the thing that they are now in a perfectly good position to appreciate, the taste of this candy bar, the impressing the people at the coffee shop, et cetera. But that kind of stands in for this other value that they're reaching for, of appreciating the intrinsic value of the thing. And they themselves it's neither right to say, oh, all they really care about is the candy bar, nor is it right to say all they really care about is the intrinsic value. What they're kind of doing is using the one as a stand-in for the other.

William: I mean, presumably, like, if they wanted a candy bar, they'd just go eat a candy bar, right? Exactly. But they're doing this weird thing with it because they do want this thing that they don't really kind of know what it's like yet. So I guess this gets into what seems to me like one of the recurring problems in the book is this idea that, how do you grasp this reason that by definition you don't have yet, right? How are you motivated by this reason that you don't really have yet? And so yeah, I guess, you know, you said one part of it, which is that you kind of create these stand-in reasons. But there still just seems to be something kind of puzzling in that, okay, like let's talk about a specific action. You know, I go and I like listen to the piece of music or what have you. Like you might want to say, well, you know, if in this particular action, which would, you know, you're motivated by the candy bar, then you're not being a good aspirant. You're being what you call in the book, like, I think a bad student, you know, who's like being here for the wrong reasons. But like, if to the extent that there's more than that, you do actually do grasp the thing. So there just seems to be like a dilemma that seems, it seems hard to escape. So tell me more about how it is that you actually managed to break through what seems like these two, these two options, neither of which seems right.

Agnes: Good. Yeah. So I think you're, I think you have your finger on something, which is that there's something unsatisfying about just saying, well, it's these two things smushed together when you can't really smush them together. And I guess I would say that the way in which they're smushed together is that it's important to the story that I'm telling in the book that what the proleptic reason is rationalizing is like, yes, it's an individual action, but it's an individual action taken in the context of a larger stretch of activity, right? So there's like a time period of, you know, months or years where sort of like at the early part of that time period, you're much more, you tend much more to be like only be able to be motivated by things like the candy bar. And by the end of it, you tend much more to be able to be motivated by the intrinsic value of music. But it's degrees the whole way along, right? And I think that the thing that makes it right to say that you acted on a proleptic reason is that your whole acting, however long it takes, but it's going to have to be extended in time, okay? Your whole acting, that could just be listening to music or it could be a month or whatever, is governed by a kind of attention to the value that you're trying to appreciate. You're actively trying to appreciate it, right? So you're not just sort of like trying to get a kind of satisfaction.

William: Right, you're not just like turning on the music and then just like waiting without really paying attention so you can get the candy bar later, right? Like that's not a good aspect.

Agnes: Right, and so the thought is that over the time that you're listening, and again, this is gonna be more true if you pick a longer stretch of time, you're actually coming more and more to appreciate that value because you're actually trying to do that. That is, you're attending to it and you're not satisfied with your current level of appreciation. And so what I think the proleptic reason is supposed to capture is this sense that you yourself are not happy with the reason that you have. You're trying to have a different reason all along as you're acting or something. like that. You're actively engaged in the process of changing what reason you're acting on.

William: Yeah. So here's another thought. I think you addressed this in the book, but so here's a thought. Maybe I don't appreciate the music yet, but I really, like, I'm fully sold that appreciating music is great. So I know that I don't appreciate, that I really don't appreciate music, but I don't need any convincing that appreciating music is good. I already have that belief 100%. I just know I can't really appreciate it yet. Can't we just say that a belief like that is what's motivating me without having to take a recourse to proleptic reasons?

Agnes: I think in some cases, yes. So in one part of the book, I sort of talk about the theory of valuing, like, so what is it to value something, right? And what, you know, here I'm following kind of the dominant strand of literature, which is to say, to value something is to have a belief or, kind of a cognitive disposition. It would probably be a little more robust than a single belief, but like, a cognitive sort of disposition to, think that the thing is worthwhile, valuable, et cetera. And then a conative disposition to engage with the thing, like desires basically. And then also like a kind of emotional

disposition to have emotional responses that like, you know, you'd be sad if the thing were destroyed or something like that. And coming to value something is the project of acquiring one of those, right? One of those complexes that is valuing itself as a complex disposition. Now, one way that could happen is you 100% have the belief part, right? You have everything you would need to believe that something is valuable, but you just don't yet have like the motivational disposition or the affective disposition. And, I guess I think, to my mind, that sounds more like a case of self-cultivation in that on some level, like you grasp the value, right, perfectly well, but you're just not all of your responses are in tune with that. And maybe what that brings out is that the cases that I'm interested in, the cases that I'm going to call aspiration are cases where actually those 3 dispositions are not so separable from one another. So it's like, if you take me, do I grasp that classical music is valuable? Do I think it's valuable or do I need convincing? Well, I think, like on the one hand, I'm like, yeah, sure, it's valuable, of course, obviously, right? But like, suppose you wanted somebody to give a lecture about the value of classical music. Don't pick me. I won't give a good lecture, right? So, and I think that says something about my cognitive disposition in relation to the value of classical music. And so what I'm inclined to say is that, I think a lot of the time when we say, yeah, of course, I know it's, I believe it's valuable, there what we're really referring to is not the belief component of valuing, but we're just referring to the belief that something is valuable, which is slightly separate, right? So I can believe that tons of things are valuable that I don't value. right? So because the set of things in the world that are valuable is huge and the set of things I can value is pretty small. And so I tend to think here, I think there's not actually a lot of determinacy in where the literature is, but I tend to think that it's not true that the belief component of valuing is just the same thing as the belief that something is valuable. I tend to think, no, your belief as to the value of something becomes sort of enriched and kind of infiltrated by the cognitive, sorry, the conative and motivational, the conative and affective dispositions that kind of teach you how to attend to the value of it. So that the question of whether you enjoy classical music is not entirely separate from the question of whether you appreciate its value or value it or believe that it's valuable. None of those seem to be totally separate from one another. And so insofar as those things are tied together, then you're not going to be able to leverage your way in by just getting the belief component fully and then using that, right, to get the other ones, which is sort of like what you were suggesting. But I think if you could, that would look a lot like self-cultivation.

William: That makes sense. So it sounds like you're raising a kind of like a distinction, which you raise a few times in the book of like a second order desire or belief, right? So in this case, you know, the belief you kind of have this separate or second order belief that it's valuable, but you don't like, you're not, you don't believe in the value itself. Is there any reason to think that a second order kind of belief or appreciation of that sort, like the kind that you have with classical music, right? Which is

like, yeah, sure, of course. Is there any reason to think that is not, that is just like less likely to be motivating?

Agnes: So I think that second order desires, there was a period in like, I don't know, the 90s or something where they seemed super important because of Harry Frankfurt. And that, the thought was, well, we can't make do with just a belief desire picture of like what a human being is. something that just acts on its beliefs and desires, that's not even really a person. That might be like an animal of some kind. But we need something that is going to allow you to separate, like, which are the desires that you, know, that actually represent who you really are and what you really care about, and which are the things like urges and ocratic impulses and et cetera, right? And Frankfurt thought, oh, well, what I'll do is we'll introduce second-order desires. You know, what do you desire to desire? And like the desires that represent the real you are the ones that are sort of have the stamp of approval from the second-order level. And so it's like, if I'm addicted to drugs, but I wish that I weren't, then I have a second-order desire not to desire the drug, right? And so then that would be a case where that's like not the real me. Now, you raise the question about the efficacy of second order desires. And I think Frankfurt doesn't talk much about that, about this psychological question in effect, right? And my sort of suspicion is, they're not going to be very efficacious, except insofar as there is a corresponding first order desire that they can sort of harness, right? So like, suppose that I, that's often the way we do it, right? So suppose that I want to make sure that I, oh, I don't know, I exercise, say. And so what I do is I make an appointment with a friend that I would be embarrassed to break.

William: That is in fact how I exercise.

Agnes: So I want to want to exercise, but the problem is that I don't have the 1st or desire to exercise, right? And so why don't I just muscle myself into it and be like, self, have this desire. It doesn't work, right? But what I can do is be like, look, let me meet you. That's so my second order of desire is that kind of wily and clever. It operates that way, right? It has less kind of just straight up oomph, but I can set myself up into situations where then I've kind of set up the incentives for myself in the moment such that I now have first order of desire not to let that person down. And so then I can be driven by a different first order desire. So I think the place where second order desires really have most of their efficacy is in ahead of time in allowing you to construct situations in which your first order desires will take you where you want them to take you.

William: So how does that, how does let's say you did use that kind of technique. How does that fit in with the sort of theory of aspiration and how one is motivated? So I guess the reason I brought up the efficacy of 2nd order desires is that I'm, you know, there's something kind of tricky and hard to grasp about proleptic reasons. And so it's natural to think like, well, can we do without them? And that was one thought is like, well, if Maybe the 2nd order, if you have enough of a second order belief in the thing, that would be enough to motivate you, even though you don't have the first order.

Agnes: It would be, but it wouldn't motivate you to aspire. It would just motivate you to do the thing, right? So I think the difference, one thing you might think is, one thing you might want to do is learn to appreciate the value of exercising, like learn to take joy in it, right? Another thing you might want to do is just exercise. If you were trying to do the first thing, then always just motivating yourself by second-order desires that set up the incentives for you, that wouldn't get you there, right? It might facilitate it in the sense if you still within the activity trying to come to appreciate it, right? But it's sort of like you were just getting through it every time. But that might be good enough for you. I think that quite often where we don't hold ourselves to the aspirational standard, like it may be that I don't need from myself that I will appreciate or enjoy or love exercising. It may be that all I need for myself is that I'll do it. And so I think that second order desires can produce the right sorts of actions, but they don't produce the kind of value learning that aspiration is sort of aimed at.

William: This reminds me of something else I wanted to ask you, because I think what you're saying is right. And the one thing I wanted to say is that this kind of second order trickery can sometimes maybe get you started on an aspirational journey. So, and I thought it's specifically because of the exercise example. So, you know, I would say when I started to exercise, which was kind of, this is kind of recent, so it's like, potentially the beginning of an aspiration journey. We'll see. But I think it was mostly things like that. Like, man, I think I'm supposed to do this. Like, all right, my roommate does it. Like, all right. But then having gotten myself to just go that way, I'm now getting like inklings of like, oh, maybe this is like actually like cool for itself, you know, just like inklings. And so that just makes me think like that sort of thing could be the beginning of an aspirational journey. Which just actually makes me want to ask...

Starting to aspire and the direction of self-creation

William: One thing that comes to mind right away, like when I started reading your book, is just like, if your theory is right, how does this get started? Right? Like how do we first land on, like how do we first land on an aspirational journey given that, you know, at the beginning of it, you really have like, oh yeah, almost no grasp at all of the thing that you're aspiring to.

Agnes: Yeah, that's true. So I think that aspiration gets started. We usually don't start it. So if you want to know, like, if you think about something that you're aspiring to do, it's already the case that you've come into some contact with the value somehow, right? So if it's like, if I'm thinking about taking a music appreciation class, I mean, I've probably heard some music, right? And I probably already have some, maybe very small, amount of appreciation for it. If I'm thinking about learning ancient Greek, right, I probably read some ancient Greek stuff translated into English. And so, like, I have some thought about what, or maybe I learned another language. And, you know,

I'm thinking, like, I see the value of learning a foreign language, but, you know, I'm thinking, oh, but an ancient language would be different, right? So, I think that it's a funny feature of aspiration that if you look at an aspirational sort of like journey, the agent's role in terms of like how much agential activity and control they have over the process increases as you get to the end point. So it And most of the things that we aspire to really deeply, they begin in our young childhood when we had absolutely no control at all, right? But it's like we aspire to have a certain kind of moral appreciation of the world and of other people and to be good people. Did we get that started? No, our parents did, right? And we would be nowhere if somebody else hadn't seen to it that we come into some kind of contact with moral values, right? But that's not to say that our parents made us into, people who appreciate morality. They gave us a chance to do that by getting it started for us. So I tend to think that we don't exercise a lot of agential control over the early parts of the process. And that can take the form of other people exercising agential control, or it can take the form of accidents. Of just, you're in some situation, I had a friend who, she was never into food and didn't care much about food. And she was, she spent, in high school, she spent like a year in Osaka, Japan. And it was this incredible culinary culture. And she like became a foodie and, started cooking all stuff. And it was just like this accident that she was in this place. So I think that's, you know, you can just be in a place. where there is something and it kind of sparks something in you. But I think what's really important to me is to see that those kind of early sparking moments, we romanticize them and we tell them in the story when somebody asks the story of how, like you asked the story of like how did I become interested in philosophy and I told this story about Kant, right? And it's not like that was the moment in which I came to appreciate philosophy. Like that was the moment in which I came to underline quotes in a book and then read them out loud, right? Like that wasn't very good philosophizing. It was like a weird accident, right? Like I learned to read Kant, you know, like If you want to know about me and Kant, ask me about the class I just taught in which I taught Kant. And it's like, now I'm starting to understand Kant. Back then, it was this very vague, weird thing that sort of seemed sophisticated and cool, and maybe could win me debates, which it didn't. I lost. I lost just as much. I think I lost more once I started quoting Kant. So I think that it's important to me, on the one hand, I just want to concede that we don't have a lot of control over the early part of the process. On the other hand, I want to say, I've given you a story that should help you see why that doesn't matter. That's not what the action is.

William: Yeah, So that kind of leads into the latter part of the book, which is I thought really, really interesting, which is this whole thing on self-creation. So maybe before getting into it, actually, I want to continue this thing about how we start, right? So I think everything you just said makes perfect sense. Now you're going to argue that aspiration is kind of how we get to create ourselves.

Agnes: Yeah.

William: Right away, given what you've already said, there seems to be something a little bit puzzling about the thought that even if we do take further, like more and more agential control over the process as the process goes on, the fact that we maybe had little to nothing to do with starting it makes it seem puzzling that the whole process was a process of self-creation. So why is that not really a problem for the self-creation story?

Agnes: Yeah, so I think that there are versions, There are ways to tell the story of self-creation where that would be a big problem. And a lot of the standard ways to tell it are like that. So suppose you see self-creation as, well, there's this later self of mine, and my earlier self sort of makes and shapes that self through the decisions of the earlier self. So I decide now who I'm going to be later. And if you want to know whether that later person is a success or a failure with respect to the self-creation project, what you do is you look at the early person and you're like, well, what did she decide? Who did she want to be? So one philosopher talks about this model as promising. It's almost like you're promising to be someone later. In general, the way promising works is that the way you can figure out whether or not you're succeeding or failing at the later time is you have to look at the earlier time, what did you promise? But if you have that kind of structure where the earlier self is sort of shaping and committing to and creating the later one, then you want to know, okay, well, who made that earlier one, right? And maybe there was a yet earlier one who made all the promises and commitments, et cetera, that would lead the middle one now to make the promises that would be the later one. Okay, but now all the work is really being done by that earlier self, right? We pushed, so we're sort of taking a bump in a rug and we're pushing it backwards, right? And we're pushing the source of self-creative authority, backwards, backwards, backwards. And we're not going to be satisfied until we find the first one. Because anyone that isn't the first one is not really responsible or didn't really do the creating. So in that kind of a self-creation story, there is– what we're looking for is the first temporally first cause. And at some point, I didn't use this terminology in the book, but at some point I used to call that way of putting the story archaeological. Because the word archaeological means that the logos is in the arcade, the beginning, right? So it's, there are movies like this. So there are movies where if you miss the first scene of the movie, you're not going to understand anything, right? It's like all kind of playing out of the beginning, right? But there are other kinds of movies where you're watching and you're watching and you don't really get until the end. Somehow the end snaps it all together for you. There, the word we could use for that though, it's a somewhat perverse use of terminology, is that it's teleological in the sense that the logos, the principle of order is at the end, not at the beginning. So the kind of biggest thing I wanna do in that part of the book is to shift the way people are thinking about the logic of self-creation. and to say you don't have to think of it in this archaeological way. You don't have to think of it as that we're always pushing a bump in the rug backward because the true self, the true source of normative authority is always the earlier one. There's a way to set up the story so that you get to sort of like

more and more of the real self as you go later rather than earlier. And if you have set up a teleological story, then the worry that you raised about like, not having control over the early stages is less of a worry. It's just like the movie, right? If it was one of those teleological movies, like you could miss a little bit at the beginning and it wouldn't be a big deal, right? And so the question like, sort of like where is the throw weight of the system? And so what I try to do is set up a theory that allows the throw weight to be at the end. And the way that I do that is by saying that you shouldn't understand self-creation as a process in which you shape or fashion or make commitments that your later self has to live up to. It's more like your later self is in charge of you. Your later self is the one who you're trying to live up to, whose approval you would want if she were around, who in some sense you're seeking to be governed by. Now that means you don't know what you're doing because she doesn't exist yet, right? So what you have to do is take your best guess as to how she will think about the way you are now. But we do plenty of, so to speak, like trying to live up to the standards of people around us. And I think this is another, We can do that even when they don't make the standards very explicit, right? By way of our representations of what we think the standards are that they're holding us to. I think aspirations like that, except instead of some person around you, it's yourself. We're trying to live up to the standards of our future self as we understand them. And as we do that, our understanding of those standards is getting better and better. So we're sort of progressing towards our true self. And it is just true that the early stages of that process are kind of blind and confused and involve a lot of missteps. And so if you want to know, how could that person be responsible for creating this person, this later person? The answer is, well, they're not really. The person who's really responsible is the person at the end.

Future to past normative grounding, ontological commitment, and motion

William: So, yeah, so I found this to be really, really interesting. I guess here's what I want to ask about it. I'm going to try to see how I can put it. So in the book, you address what seems kind of like an obvious concern, which is like, you know, are you saying that literally this future person caused the earlier person, you know, to be this way? And you say, well, no, right? Like it's not a causal thing. We need to think of this like source of moral worth or what have you, not causally, or the source of responsibility or something, not causally. And then So you bring in this stuff about grounding. Which by the way, not, I don't remember how long ago, but I interviewed Kit Fine on this podcast, on ground specifically. So it's cool to have this topic come back. So I guess that made sense to me. So you said something like, there is a kind of normative ground that doesn't have to be, temporally past to future, it doesn't have to be causal. It's just the thing that grounds the normative status, right? It's the thing

that, it's sort of like, you know, this has the value it has in virtue of this, or, you know, or this agent is responsible in virtue of this other thing, right? And that doesn't have to follow the usual causal lines. I guess what I want to ask about it is, it still seems kind of odd to think that something that doesn't exist can ground, even in a non-causal way.

Agnes: Yeah.

William: And so I guess the first thing I want to ask is, are you just okay with that? Like some non-existent things can ground, or do you think that the future self in some kind of way already exists? How do you address that?

Agnes: Good. So I think that what I want to understand, like the work that the grounding is doing is that the future self is the source of the standards by which we assess the earlier self. So it's exactly the opposite of the promising case. So in the promising case, the earlier self makes a promise. And if we want to know whether the future self is succeeding or failing, we need to look back in the past and see what the earlier self promised. So it's like, if I promised I would be here and talk to you earlier, then now I'm succeeding. Whereas if I promised I would pick someone up at the airport, then now I'm failing. You can't tell whether I'm succeeding or failing just by looking at me now. You have to also look at me earlier. Now, in the case of aspiration, it's the opposite, right? I mean, in the sense, temporarily opposite. It's like, I'm doing something right now. And then it's like, am I succeeding or failing? Am I doing well or badly? Well, the only way you can know that is by looking at my later self and asking her, right, what are the standards for assessing this earlier person? So in retrospect, I can tell. Now, but you're like, yeah, but, you know, what about me right now, okay, before I've become that person? My answer is, yeah, I can't really tell that well. That is, we don't have a really good access to those standards. And so the project of assessing whether I'm succeeding or failing can't be done very well. And so that's part of why aspirants are so confused and mess up so much. And it's why they do things like ask mentors and ask for help and just screw up. It's because they don't have really good access to the standards by which they should be assessed. But they do have some access. Now, how is it that they have any access at all, you might wonder? And the answer is that, so it's a learning, right? As I say, it's a learning process. And wherever you are in the process, you've done some of it, right? So you have learned something. And that means you have some grip on those standards. And so I think that what you're doing when you engage in any form of self-assessment is you're using the grip that you have, but you're also filling it out with the idea, yeah, but this isn't really a full grip of it, right? That is, you don't quite trust whatever it is you have. And so what you're using to assess yourself insofar as you're doing that is whatever you have plus a sense that that's incomplete. that's not going to yield really great results. It's going to yield sort of just middling okay results that hopefully will be enough to get you a little bit better.

William: Okay. But what about, let's so, I think what you said makes sense. It's addressing kind of how you assess, right? But I guess what I'm asking about is like,

I guess ontologically. Right, so right now, I'm an aspirant. That's something, I hope. And presumably, if I try to assess how well I'm doing, I can't really assess it very well because I don't have access, I don't have full access to the thing. I'm confused and messing up. That all makes sense to me. And yet, regardless of how well I can assess the situation, something's going on. And it seems like what's going, a big part of what's going on is that there's this future self that setting some standards and I'm trying to grasp those standards and match them and I'm doing whatever, however well I am, but I'm trying. I guess maybe let me put the question this way. When we say in the current situation that I'm being motivated by standards, grounded in the future self, and we refer to a future self, are we speaking kind of metaphorically or are we saying like right now there really is in some sense like this future self that is sourcing the standards, however well I may have access to them?

Agnes: Good. So I don't think it makes a lot of sense to say right now there is a future self. I think it's almost like a contradiction in terms, right? Or I mean, rather, It's sort of like one of those sea battle problems of determinism. But I suppose I think, yeah, I definitely wouldn't metaphysically want to commit myself to that. It's more like this. Insofar as I see myself as aspiring, I do envision a future self. I project a future self, and I use that to aspire. So there are two questions here. There's a psychological question and a metaphysical question. Let's stay strictly in the metaphysics for a minute, right? So right now, you wanna know, am I an aspirant or not? And we don't know what's gonna happen in the future. You might know what's going on in my head with respect to the future, but we don't know. We just got up till now. Okay, so first of all, notice if we're asking about right now, we're asking about a moment. And so really, I think the only question you can ask there is, have I aspired up until now? That is, take me now and then look at my past and is there like an aspirational, or sorry, that's not the only question, let's say that's a question. And there, there's no problem, right? Because now I'm the end point and you can assess me in the past with respect to me now and you can see that I've been aspiring, right? But you want to know, no, but like, am I continuing to move up? Right? So there, I think there's something really deep here at this point, which Aristotle gets at in book six of the physics about motion. So aspiration is a kind of motion, like a learning, right? It's a kind of change. So if you're aspiring, you are in motion. You are in the process of changing, right? Which is not the same thing as changed. That's one of the big distinctions Aristotle wants to draw. He wants to say, there was like a.

William: Little glitch. You said it's not, yeah, you made a distinction and one of them didn't come through. Can you repeat?

Agnes: Yeah, I'll repeat it. So there's being in the process of changing, and then there's having changed.

William: Okay, yeah.

Agnes: So like right now, if we think of me with respect to the past, then you can think of me as an end point of a change process. And I have changed from a year ago when I was less of an aspirant than I am now, say. But I'm now in the condition of

having changed. But that's not the same thing as saying I'm changing. Aristotle thinks there's no such thing as changing in the now. What he means is you can't change in a moment or in an instant. That's his big solution to all of Zeno's paradoxes.

William: I was about to say, this is kind of sounding like the arrow.

Agnes: Exactly, it is, okay? And so Aristotle's solution to Zeno's paradoxes is to say that time is not composed of moments only. That is, there are two inhabitants of time, two kinds of inhabitants. One is moments, like now, And the other is periods of time. So change can only happen in a period of time. It can't happen in a moment. And a period of time is not composed of moments, according Aristotle. Okay, so I think that you cannot get anything like aspiration on the table unless you're talking about a period of time. That is, that's like asking, is something moving in a moment? And it's like, suppose you're watching a movie, right, and you freeze framed it to just a moment, and you're like, is the guy moving in that moment? He's like this. It's like, you don't know, he might have been doing this, or he might have just been doing this, right? There's going to be no way to tell. You only have the freeze frame.

William: Yeah, maybe you didn't pause it, maybe he's like, you know, just doing that in this part of the movie.

Agnes: Exactly, right? And Aristel's like, yeah, there's no principal difference there because you can't move in a moment. Moving takes time, okay? Takes extent of time. I think aspiration takes time in the same way. If you're asking me, is there aspiration happening? You can only ask me that if you point to an extent of time. That extent of time has to have an end point, and it has to be extended back beyond the end point. Then you want to know, well, metaphysically, how do we know if that's aspiration happening? I'll tell you, look at the self at the end point. Use it as a standard for judging the thing up until then. What I'm telling you is like, if somebody is asking themselves, but right now, am I, aspiring and that the future stuff doesn't exist yet? I want to say, yeah, that question. That doesn't make sense. That's like asking right now, am I moving now? There's no answer to it. You can ask whether I have moved right now, because you can look at where I was in the past and say, oh, my position is different. And so you can say I have moved. I'm now in the condition of having moved. I'm in the state. You can be in that state in an instant, according to Aristotle, but you can't be moving in that state. And so. Once you give me the sort of metaphysical apparatus that I need to pick out a case of aspiration, which is going to involve time, that is the metaphysics of aspiration requires extensive time, then I'm going to be able to point to an already existent self that has the standards.

William: Interesting. So, okay, I have an inkling of how to try to push back on this, but I think that actually you already have an answer, but let me just say it anyway. So let me not ask about now, but let me ask about this week.

Agnes: Okay.

William: This week I'm going to take some like aspirational, you know, some actions that like, you know, I confusedly hope are in the aspirational, part of the aspirational journey. And so I want to ask like metaphysically, right? What is the

thing? that is grounding, is grounding this normatively. And so I think in line of what you just said, would you just sort of respond by saying like, whatever it was like the range of time you picked, like it's a week, you can just pick like the last moment in that time, in that range, and like that's where, that's what we can say?

Agnes: Yeah, exactly. So what we'll do is we'll take this. So suppose it's Monday to Friday. We take your Friday self and we use him to assess over the course of the week. And basically aspiration is learning. So if you aspired, you learned something. And that guy, he knows the most of all of yous, right? And so he is in the best position to like say what moments along that path were successes and what were failures, right? Because he can use what he's learned to make that assessment. And that's the standard that we use. And now, like, you know, if you're still going to keep on going, then it may be that like, a month later you'll get an even clearer picture, right, by asking the fat self. It'll be correction. But if we just sort of, all we're talking about is the learning that happened in that week, then yes, the source of the standards by which you assess the aspiration is the end of the week.

William: So here's why I'm still kind of puzzled on this. So I don't want to ask about how it is that I can assess. I want to ask the source of the, actual source of the standards, right? So let's say like this week, I take some actions in the direction of my aspirational journey. And it turns out that this week, I do a pretty poor job. And by Friday, I'm actually kind of in worse shape. and the journey along the journey than I was when I started, but I'm still along that journey. And like, if we were to be able to see down 10 years, it turns out luckily or, you know, happily my journey is successful. It would seem then that like, we can use My Friday Self to assess how well I did this week, but we can't use My Friday Self as the answer to what was the, what was the ground of the norms that were grounding this process? Sorry, I think I used the word grounding in the most part of that sentence.

Agnes: Well, look, I think that's right. You're sort of giving with one hand and taking with another, because you're like, well, I aspired over the course of this week, but I actually went back over the course of this week. But then there was this longer time, over a year. And those were the real norms at the end of that year. And now I want you to use the Friday self. And it's like, but you just told me that the process actually took a year and not a week. And so, I want to use that guy at the end of the year. That is, they're like, of course you could, you could carve it off and just consider the week, but then you better have done some aspiring over the course of that week. And then we better forget about the rest of the year because we're not, we can't talk about both of those at the same time.

The value of aspiration, the good life, and the immortality of the soul

William: Okay. Yeah, no, that makes sense to me. So thank you for, Indulging me in that. was kind of my, like, that wasn't my favorite, like, sort of little bit of the book. I was like, oh man, I really wanted to struggle with that. I have, okay, I have a maybe a kind of odd question. So, and it starts, let me start actually with this question. We've addressed the fact that what we aspire to has to actually be good. Is aspiration itself good?

Agnes: I think that, so that's a harder question and it's the kind of question where you always have to say sort of compared to what, right? Is it good compared to being in the end state? No, it's worse. Just like learning is better than knowing, right? But is learning good? it depends on what you're learning. I mean, learning, as long as you're learning something, you have to be learning what's true and there's some value in that. But you could be learning how many blades of grass there are in the field. And if you're learning the truth about that, you are learning, but it's not very valuable, right? So then aspiration. can only be as good as the value that you're actually learning. There must be some value there, or we wouldn't call aspiration, right? But it can only be as good as that value, and it can't be as good. Like, it can only be less good as that, right? Because it can only be less good than... Basically, it's like all learning can only be a little bit less good than knowing, because it's for the sake of knowing.

William: Right, that makes sense. So, so that answer makes perfect sense. Here's why I asked. And it had to do kind of, this was one of a number of reasons that I was initially motivated to read your book, is that I have been, so I have no, like, I know ethics literature like very, very little. So I haven't, it's not really anything that I've like read on or anything, but obviously I think about it. I want to live a good life. And so I just kind of, just and asking myself, very broadly, what's a good life? Like, how do we assess what that is? It struck me that a lot of the, what you might think of like the easy go-to answers are just like, they just seem obviously wrong to me. Like, just like, pleasure, even like enlightened pleasures, like, come on, like that's not what, that's not a life, just like feeling some good things. So as I've tried to think about it, And I've tried to, I've tried to make it sort of personal, like how do I sort of approach like the value of life myself? And it has struck me, I've been just sort of like dealing with this intuition that part of what's good about life is actually that you go through transformational experiences. It has struck me that is actually itself a good thing. And so this spoke the agency of becoming. I was like, all right, this seems like it's kind of maybe can touch on that. And I mean, having read, having just finished a book, I don't really have any thoughts on this, but I'm just, I just have this question, which is just like, could some, could we use the theory of aspiration in some way to act to ground a kind of bigger theory of like, of the good life? Like, can we say something about how

to aspire or conditions of aspiring or something that would get us toward something insightful about just like living well. I don't know, do you have any thoughts on that?

Agnes: Yeah, so I think that I have two thoughts. Like I have the more ambitious thought and the less ambitious thought. So the less ambitious thought is I do think that aspiration is a really important part of living well because I think that aspiration is how we get like values and values are the They're basically who we are, right? But in particular, it's how we get them for ourselves, right? And so like it may be that to some degree, we have certain kinds of valuational responses that are acculturated or the products of our environments, but human life wouldn't be worth much if those were the only kinds we had. And aspiration is like our chance to find those things for ourselves. And so I think like, you know, It's the fact of aspiration means that we aren't, well, it means that self-creation is possible, and that makes human life a lot more valuable than a life in which you're only created by other people and then create future people to be like the people that created you, essentially. That's the unambitious answer. The more ambitious answer is kind of, there are like 2 models of aspiration, I think. I don't talk about this in the book. But there's an Aristotelian model and a Platonic model. The Aristotelian model says, look, you aspire for a while until you've acquired the value in a pretty good form, usually when you're like around 30, say. And then you're done, right? You've done your, you may not have it perfectly, but like whatever you've got, that's what you've got. And now it's time to actually just use those values that you worked so hard to acquire. And the Platonic model is like, no, you just keep aspiring forever. After you die, you keep aspiring. You get reincarnated, you keep aspiring, right? Basically, you're, you know, life is a kind of eternal process of trying to become God, basically. And From Marisol's point of view, that's like really self-indulgent because it's like, well, your whole life is about you and the kind of person you're going to become. Shouldn't you at some point be like, okay, I did enough of that. Now let me do some good for other people, found a colony, come up with laws, you know, whatever, right? And Plato's like, no, what's the point of any of that? The whole point of any of it is the people and the people should be as good as possible. And you're one of those people and you should try to be as good as possible. And whether or not you have the, if you have the Platonic view, then I think you really think of aspiration as being very valuable, because you think of it as being the fundamental human endeavor. And you don't really think that the point of aspiration is to stop aspiring and use the values the way that Aristotle does. And so there's something very appealing about that, about that kind of Platonism. But there's also something very metaphysically committal about it, because I think you can't be a Platon, or, yeah, I think you can't be a Platonist of that kind without believing in the immortality of the soul. I don't think it makes sense. So that's Plato and Aristotle disagree about that. It's their most fundamental disagreement, right? Aristotle thinks when you die, your soul's gone because your soul is just the form of your body. And Plato thinks, no, your soul is immortal. And in fact, you get reincarnated, but ideally you'll stop getting reincarnated and you'll just live separately in the aisles of the blessed and be

like basically God. And so if you think of your soul is immortal, then the idea of a kind of impossibly long aspirational project is like no problem, right? But if you think of it like, you know, 80-year lifetime, then it kind of seems like, well, you spent all this time trying to become someone, at the end you just died. And so I think that like the really ambitious theory of aspiration, at least I find it hard, I'm torn between these two theories. Like sometimes in my romantic moments, I'm a Platonist.

William: Are you a Platonist in your romantic moments because you're willing to go along with the immortality of the soul or because you doubt that that's actually necessary to be a Platonist?

Agnes: No, because I'm going to go along with it. I haven't seen a way of thinking that without thinking the soul's immortal. And sometimes I think the soul's immortal. Sometimes I'm like, how could a human being be the sort of thing that could die? You know, like if you think about There are lots of other people who have had that intuition, even if they haven't called it the immortality of the soul. I mean, like Cartesian dualism is essentially committed to the immortality of the soul because the soul is not a thing. How could it be destroyed, right? I mean, that's kind of Plato's thought in the Phaedo is like, what are you going to do, cut it in half? Like if it's not the kind of thing, if it's an immaterial substance, then it can't be damaged, right? So so sometimes I'm drawn anyway to the idea of the immortality of the soul, like where my thought is. The very idea of the soul as the sort of thing that could die is like a categorical mistake. That's what Plato argues in Theo. But then other, you know, Aristotle's view, I'm never really drawn to materialism, but Aristotle has a very interesting, like non-dualist, non-materialist alternative that I sometimes feel like I understand and I sometimes don't. But metaphysics is, for me, kind of shaky grounds. So I'm not saying I have very strong views. That's why I can be blown around on this point. As I say, materialism is the one view that I don't tend to be drawn to very much. But I can kind of go back and forth between the other two. And yeah, whether how I think about aspiration kind of depends on that.

William: Interesting. So, I mean, okay, so I want to see I want to better understand why the platonic attitude to aspiration wouldn't be possible without being committed to the immortality of the soul. So let's say that I, yeah, so I have this idea that I just want to keep, I just want to keep aspiring, right? I don't want to like just get to a point where I've gotten the goods and then used them, you know, and I mean, I'm not sure what that would look like practically. Maybe it would literally look like the moment, I one day find myself listening to classical music and I realize, I get it. There's no mystery here. This is wonderful. I'm not listening to classical music anymore because I need to go like aspire to something else now. Goodbye classical music. Journey finished. I guess that seems kind of silly, but I guess that's sort of like the caricature or like extreme of what it would mean to continue, one, to just continue aspiring.

Agnes: Sorry, I think that's not quite right there. That's not clear. I think that would be selling Plato a little bit short. I think it would be more like you never achieve

that because there's always something more in classical music. So it's not that you give up on classical music, but it's that you keep trying to appreciate it more and more.

William: Okay, so I think in the book you talk about someone who talks about dialectical Okay, yeah. So that's how it kind of sounds like that, right? Like the idea is that the things you aspire to are just inexhaustible in terms of how much more you can just keep trying to learn them. Yes.

Agnes: And I think Talbreuer's view is close to Platonism, but it's more optimistic. It's like a really optimistic form of Platonism where sort of like I already really, really, really appreciate classical music, but I can come to appreciate it even more and even more. It just goes on forever how much I can get out of it, right? And that's like, and that's the way he thinks about love and it's the way he thinks about philosophy. Like there's certain cases where you're kind of, it's kind of always gets richer and deeper and more awesome. But that's not what Plato thinks. Plato thinks like you spend your whole life and you still haven't appreciated like the bare minimum, right? So it's like, It's like Socrates dying. He's like, I still don't know anything. I'm still aspiring, right? So the question is whether sort of this process is 1 where you feel like you have a pretty good grip on the value and now you're getting even more, or whether you feel like you're just basically totally insufficient and at the very, very, very beginning stages, even as you die. And, you know, the like Plato's Platonism is of the second kind. And so that's why it sort of seems like it would be, it would be sort of impossible ethically to sustain yourself in that.

William: Because it also seems that if you buy into this, into the Platonist idea, then you, unlike the usual case of the aspirin or the case of the aspirin that you discuss in the book, like this is an aspirin who in a way can be pretty sure he will not actually achieve the thing he's trying so hard to achieve.

Agnes: Exactly. And that's exactly right. So it's like a futile aspiration in this case. It's going to look futile to you. I think that's right. That's why it seems impossible. It's because it's like Socrates being like, hey, let's go for knowledge. We know we won't achieve it. Right. It's like, why even go for it if you know you won't achieve it? And Socrates is like, well, this is just the beginning. You know, I'll get reincarnated. And then like, you know, I'll Yes, et cetera. So if you think of it as part of a million-year project or something, and the fact that you're not going to really get anywhere in this lifetime is not that big a deal. But if all you have is a lifetime, then it just looks like you're wasting your life. It's futile because you're not making progress. Because you end your life ignorant.

William: Okay, cool. So that makes perfect sense. Now let's say I want to back away from from Platonism, but still want to have some picture of aspiration being kind of like fundamental to living a good life, not just like how you learn things. Could I have a sort of less caricatures version of what I described in which you actually have a disposition to embark on aspirational journeys and to the extent where most of your energy is just, most of your energy on something is likely to dissipate once you realize that you've passed the aspirational journey. Is that, does that still seem, I guess it still

seems kind of, it still seems kind of odd. Sorry, I'm thinking through this as I'm saying it. Do you have any thoughts on that?

Agnes: Yeah, you know what it seems like? It's like when kids super, super want a toy and they're obsessed with getting it and they finally get it, whatever, I want the next toy. So it's like ideally that's that isn't what it's like you wanted to come to a BJ classical music. Now you do. Well, forget that. Let me go learn something else. I think that the sort of optimistic picture. So first of all, I just think like, so I think people are most aspirational in the ages of like, I don't know, 15 to 30 or something like that. And yeah. And it's that part of your life when you are leaving the sort of orbit of your parents and establishing your own life. And once you have established that life and you're married and you have kids, then you kind of, and so part of it, but not to say you can't still aspire in certain dimensions, but I think less so. So that's one thing for me. That's where sort of Aristotle kind of rings true, that like, yeah, there's a part of your life in which you're doing this. But it's still, I think it's really, that's not just to say, oh, it's how I got where I am. Like, I could have gotten there some other way, right? The fact that I aspired is what makes it the case that I got there. And that these are my values. And that's really important. And so I don't think, you know, I said I had the sort of ambitious, the ambitious answers, the Platonic one and the unambitious, but the unambitious one still gives aspiration a really big role in your life. Like your life wouldn't really feel like it was yours and it wouldn't really feel like it had meaning if you hadn't aspired. And I think with respect to a lot of the things you value, yes, you are still, like the Talbot point can still hold, right? So this kind of cheerful Platonism where it's like, yeah, but I'm still appreciating philosophy more and more, even if I already appreciated quite a lot and I can be sort of quite happy with the progress that I made, so I'm not a Platonist. But I can still aspire to appreciate it more. Yeah, I think he's right about that. It's just that I don't, that's not what I see as paradigmatic aspiration. That's kind of like, you're just getting more and that's great. But a real aspiration involves a sense of deficiency, you know, and of this being an insufficient state and a kind of essential pain, I think, and shame and sort of self-regulation that comes along with that. And so, I think like, yes, you can still do that in other respects, but a lot of what you're doing on the more Aristotelian model is kind of making use of the values that are now your values because you're the one who acquired them.

The value of public philosophy

William: Yeah, that makes sense. And it may just be that my intuition that like, the value of life is aspiration is that I'm actually 30, and so I've just gone through the period of life where that actually was most of what life was about. So yeah, maybe that's all that is. Great. So as I kind of expected, we went an hour and a half on just aspiration. But it was great. I did want to ask you, I'll cheat and ask you one question

about public philosophy, but still making it about aspiration. You, in your first, in your post about actual public philosophy, you essentially spend most of the post arguing against the value of public philosophy. And then, when raising the question of, well, why are you doing this then, you're much less sort of concrete about your answer. And so my first sort of like, cheeky question is sort of like, do you sort of just think that maybe public, like the value of public philosophy, something that you're actually aspiring to and don't fully grasp yet? Is that sort of part of what you were thinking when you wrote that?

Agnes: Actually, yes. So I was sort of thinking, if public philosophy was going to have any value for me, it wasn't going to have as far as I could tell, it didn't sort of serve things that I already needed, right? So I didn't have a kind of self-cultivation type value, right? So if it was going to be valuable, it was going to be valuable in some new way where, now here it's a slightly complicated case, right? Because it's both that I have to learn it, but it's also that I'm in some sense creating it because the one I'm learning is like my own, you know, I'm writing it, sorry. So I'm doing the writing. I'm in some sense making the public philosophy that I also value. Though I, public philosophy for me extends well beyond like writing columns.

William: Sure, I mean, I certainly consider like the fact that you're, you know, hosting these events and then publishing and then posting on YouTube, like that, that's all part of that, I think, I take.

Agnes: Right. And like, so I think for me, public philosophy has like a couple of different like facets. So one of them is Twitter, which is a really, I think there's a really good philosophy community on Twitter. And it allows you to like actually engage with the public in a kind of back and forth way that I don't get by writing a column. There's being the director of undergraduate studies, which means I run the undergrad program here in philosophy. And that means I interact with students all the time and I'm constantly sort of like talking to them, thinking about... how a program in philosophy should work, right? And that's part of how I came up with night owls. Like here's something we need that we don't have. And that's public philosophy too. That is night owls, but so is just the general thing from which it came, which is like thinking about undergrad education in philosophy and how to make it work. And then there's just like, you know, podcasts or like going somewhere to give a talk. I think that's also public philosophy. So Not all talks, like okay, some talks are really like colloquium talks to, but a lot of the talks I give are, I don't know, this like past year I went to the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin and gave a talk to a bunch of psychologists. And we were sort of trying to come together on like, they were thinking about the stuff I was talking about from a sort of psychology angle and I was thinking about from a philosophy angle. And like for me, that's also public philosophy. So that's quite different from a case we're at, that same trip I gave like a, really narrowly specific ethics talk to like, and that's more like academic philosophy. So yeah, it has like, there are all those different facets to it, but I do think it was around that time when I started writing the column is when I sort of started to think of myself as doing that.

And part of it was like self-regulatory in the sense that I didn't want to just drift into something and not ask what the value of it was and not be making sure that I made it be something good. And so I wanted to be conscious of the dangers. And like the real, for me, the biggest danger with respect to public philosophy is that one doesn't get refuted as much as in philosophy in other contexts where I'm included by being refuted, like teaching, I don't see as being public philosophy. Teaching is much more like just academic philosophy because my students just like come up with objections and like respond all the time. And like that's safe in my mind. But giving a big talk in front of a big audience, no one's really going to refute me, right? And so it's like, how do I keep myself honest? How do I not end up in a position where I just kind of enjoy hearing the sound of my own voice or I enjoy talking to someone else who also enjoys hearing the sound of their own voice, right? Like there's a real danger of that, I think. So that was part of what I was trying to think through is like, what am I giving people if they can't refute me and what am I getting from them if they can't refute me? And it is aspirational and I am still trying to figure it out. And it's like trying at every point to be like, navigate the ship and not crash on the various kinds of rocks of like doing it wrong.

William: So again, still staying on the kind of aspirational theme, do you have a sense of what started you on this aspirational journey? And can you describe, so obviously every aspirant has like this incomplete messy appreciation of the value of the thing they're doing. Like can you describe the value of the thing you're doing as far as you have it so far?

Agnes: That's a really good question. It's a hard one. Yeah, I think it's So how there's, for all the really great philosophers, there's a caricatured version of them. Like there's caricatured Kant and caricatured Mill and caricatured Aristotle and caricature Plato.

William: Do you mean like a caricature in terms of like our conception of them? Kant is the guy who people followed their watches by or whatever, like that sort of thing.

Agnes: But a little bit more with Kant, not the person, but the theory, right? The theory, okay, Kant was the guy who thought you could never lie no matter what.

William: Right.

Agnes: And, you know, who thought you had to apply this like rigorous test to everything you did. And like Mill is the guy who thinks that you should like, you know, make everyone have as much pleasure as possible. And Aristotle is the guy who thinks that you have to have, perform virtuous activities over the course of your whole life. And Plato had these forms and he thought you should try to apprehend them and live in relation to them. So there's like this really simple version of, I think, every great philosopher. And you could think of that as the public philosophy version of that philosopher, because that is the version that the public knows. I mean, to the extent that the public knows the person, they know that. And I think I want to know what is the really simple version of me? Like, what's the really simple thing that I'm going to

someday be able to say? And it's really hard as a philosopher to say anything simple. And there's such a valuation of complexity and argumentation. And I think, oh, that's great, right? Academic philosophy drives me in the direction of the complex. But I think that there's probably some simple idea that I have, and I don't even know that I have it, and Kant wouldn't have known. Kant didn't really do public philosophy, right? So he didn't know what Kantianism was. And I think I would like to know what that is. And I think that if I keep talking to the public and keep forcing myself to produce the simple version, eventually I'll get it.

William: Yeah, that's great, by the way. That's, yeah, I'd never thought of anything like that. That's awesome. So It does then sound though, and nothing wrong with this, but it does sound like a fairly, it sounds like a primarily selfish endeavor.

Agnes: Absolutely.

William: Totally. Yeah. Okay.

Agnes: I think egos make the best altruists.

William: Okay. So you don't feel any, you know, you don't feel very strongly like that a part of your public philosophy venture is a kind of like, involves a responsibility or like duty to impart philosophy on the public in virtuous ways.

Agnes: I definitely feel an obligation not to harm people. So, and I think there are like, it's not as obvious as you might think that you're not harming people when you're doing philosophy. So that's something I'm quite attentive to. And that's why I wrote the first thing. Like the first thing was partly about like, am I harming by doing this? That is, if what I'm doing is giving people the impression of engaging in sophisticated intellectual endeavors and giving them a certain kind of intellectual pleasure that substitutes for actual inquiry, that would be harming them and that would be wrong. So in terms of do I have a responsibility? Absolutely. I have a responsibility not to harm people. And that puts real strictures on how I do public philosophy to my mind that I don't always succeed. But I think my views about how and whether you can help people are much more pessimistic than most other people's, but that's because I believe in self-creation. So I don't think I can make other people into philosophers. I don't think I can make them do philosophy. I don't think I can make them philosophical. I think they have to make themselves all of those things. They can do that by paying attention to me listening and attending and aspiring, but I can't do that for them. And so I can't see the aspiring they do as my work. I can't take credit for it. Like, my job is to try to understand things. And their job is to try to understand things. And like, I think they can help me. And I think I'm not allowed to let them help me and be hurting them at the same time. Whether or not they're helping themselves is kind of up to them as I see it.

William: Yeah, so I guess, I mean, it sounds like an ethical responsibility for other people is of constraint, but not like the motivation, really, in terms of what you're doing. Yeah. Okay, that makes sense. Well, Agnes, thank you very much. This was really great.

Agnes: Yeah, it was very fun. Thank you.

William: And that concludes today's episode of Who Shapes the Barber. Again, I'm William Nava. You can check out other episodes as well as my other philosophical and artistic work at williamnava.com. And if you'd like to subscribe to this podcast, go to williamnava.podbean.com. Thank you so much for listening.

William Nava
Agnes Callard: Aspiration | Who Shaves the Barber? #54
July 17, 2019

<www.youtube.com/watch?v=qM9p8RmKroc>