AGNES CALLARD

Aspiration

The Agency of Becoming

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ASPIRATION

Introduction

I. OVERVIEW: REASONING TOWARD VALUE

(a) How We Got Here

We can all think back to a time when we were substantially different people, value-wise, from the people we are now. There was a time when we were not even aware of the existence of some of the people, activities, institutions, and ideologies that now figure centrally in our lives. Maybe we had different political views or no political views at all; maybe we used to be religious, or used not to be; maybe we now feel deep ties to a place that is spatially, culturally, and linguistically far from where we grew up; maybe we find our interests and concerns resembling those of our parents more than we ever thought they would. We care about many things that we once did not care about. How did that change come about?

In accounting for the genesis of our new values, we often have occasion to mention the effects on us of forces outside our control, such as a fortuitous coincidence, an influential mentor, an inspiring locale, a tragic loss, a bitter betrayal, a domineering parent, the emergence of an innate facility, the process of getting older. Nonetheless, none of these sorts of factors can amount to the whole story. A mentor cannot implant a love of music; the betrayal cannot, of itself, create a devotion to independence; coincidence cannot produce love; being in a culinary mecca cannot make one into a chef; talents do not develop themselves. There is no doubt that our parents, friends, and romantic partners influence us deeply, but they do not fashion us. We have a hand in answering the question as to what things in the world are important to us, and our answers need not be, and typically are not, arbitrary or random. Agency, as distinct from mere behavior, is marked by practical rationality. Insofar as becoming someone is something someone *does,* and not merely something that happens to her, she must have access to *reasons* to become the person she will be. Giving a philosophical account of how it is possible for value-acquisition to be a form of practically rational agency is the project of this book.

This project faces a difficulty: people do not seem to be able to *choose* or *decide* to have different values. A decision or choice is an act of the will that prefigures, accompanies, or is a constitutive part of some single action. The transition from indifference to love cannot typically be effected by way of deciding: no matter the strength of my will, it does not seem that I can muscle myself into suddenly caring. To be sure, the path to valuing sometimes includes momentary expressions of commitment: the moment when you say "I do," or sign the adoption papers, or buy the one-way plane ticket to a foreign country. But these moments are themselves only part of the story, punctuating a longer process. Coming to value something tends to represent a deep change in how one sees and feels and thinks. Acquiring a new value often alters the structure of one's priorities by demoting or even displacing something one valued before. Such changes take time, over the course of which one has done many different things in the service of value-appreciation. The later actions are shaped by the small changes that the earlier ones have engendered in such a way as to allow someone to slowly develop new priorities, concerns, and attachments. The process as a whole exemplifies a distinctive form of practical rationality, one not structured by a single moment of intention or decision at its inception; the rationality of the agent I seek to describe changes and indeed solidifies over time, as the agent becomes increasingly able to respond to the reasons for action associated with her new values.

(b) Valuing and Aspiring

We have a rich vocabulary for the many forms that positive practical orientations can take: in addition to valuing, we speak of desiring, wanting, loving, approving of, being attracted to, caring about or for, endorsing, preferring, being identified with, seeing as valuable, feeling impelled to, etc. Setting aside other differences between such terms, we can group them roughly into two psychological strata. There is a shallower stratum to which "desire," "urge," and "attraction" often belong, and a deeper stratum—one that runs closer to the heart of who the person in question is—to which "value," "endorsement," and "identification" usually belong. These terms are quite flexible, and context can suffice to make clear that, in a given case, the urge in question is a deep one, or the endorsement a superficial one. One marker of whether a given term, in a given context, runs shallow or deep is whether we're inclined to preface it with "mere"—*mere* desire, *mere* attraction, etc.

I will have occasion to refer to both kinds of practical attitudes over the course of the book. When I speak of "values" the reader can be sure I am picking out a deep practical orientation. Beyond this, I am disinclined to invoke a technical vocabulary that would reliably mark the difference between, e.g., loving chocolate and loving one's child. For I would have to either artificially relegate such a term to a specific stratum or introduce a term of art to cover the lower stratum; and the risk of messing with natural language is that of becoming alienated from intuitions about the phenomena one is trying to describe. I prefer to speak loosely and colloquially of agents wanting, desiring, etc., and allowing context to clarify whether the practical orientation I am describing represents what really matters to the agent or is a case of *mere* wanting.

Our interest is, for reasons I will elaborate later in the chapter, specifically an interest in the rational process by which we arrive at new elements in the deeper stratum. Grasping new values is hard for us because, to paraphrase Augustine,[1] our hands are already full. Without denying that parents and teachers may play an important role in such a process, we might nonetheless characterize it as one in which one habituates or educates oneself. It is a mark of being old enough to engage in such an activity that one already has interests, concerns, and projects that can serve as obstacles to acquiring new ones. Gaining a value often means devoting to it some of the time and effort one was previously devoting elsewhere. Sometimes one's new value requires complete divestment from an old value, for instance when a former pleasure-seeker turns herself toward asceticism. Even in cases where our old value-outlook does not specifically contradict our new one, we often experience the effort of coming to apprehend value as a struggle with ourselves. Leisurely self-contentment is ruled out for someone who sees herself as being in a defective valuational condition. Grasping new values is work.

The name I will give to the rational process by which we work to care about (or love, or value, or desire . . .) something new is "aspiration." Aspiration, as I understand it, is the distinctive form of agency directed at the acquisition of values. Though we do not typically come to value simply by deciding to, it is nonetheless true that coming to value can be something the agent does. The explanation of how we come to value, or to see-as-valuable, so many of the things that we once did not is that we work to achieve this result. The aspirant sees that she does not have the values that she would like to have, and therefore seeks to move herself toward a better valuational condition. She senses that there is more out there to value than she currently values, and she strives to come to see what she cannot yet get fully into view.

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[1] "God wishes to give us something, but cannot, because he sees that our hands are already full." Cited in Schillebeeckx (1969: 242).

The work of aspiration includes, but is by no means limited to, the mental work of thinking, imagining, and reasoning. If a callow youth gets an inkling of the value of classical music or painting or wine, and wants to come to appreciate these values more fully, it will not suffice for him to think carefully about these things. He must listen to music or visit museums or drink wine. Let me offer a few more examples, some of which may strike the reader as more familiar than others. If one aspires to be a doctor, one goes to medical school. If one aspires to be more attuned to values of healthy living, one might become a member of a gym and transition one's eating habits toward vegetables and whole grains. If one seeks to appreciate some person, one might invite him for coffee. If one aspires to be religious, one might spend more time at one's church or synagogue or mosque—or, in another kind of case, one might deliberately stay away from those places in an effort to (re)connect with God on one's own terms. If one's goal is to value civic engagement, one might explore community activism. We aspire by doing things, and the things we do change us so that we are able to do the same things, or things of that kind, better and better. In the beginning, we sometimes feel as though we are pretending, play-acting, or otherwise alienated from our own activity. We may see the new value as something we are trying out or trying on rather than something we are fully engaged with and committed to. We may rely heavily on mentors whom we are trying to imitate or competitors whom we are trying to best. As time goes on, however, the fact (if it is a fact) that we are still at it is usually a sign that we find ourselves progressively more able to see, on our own, the value that we could barely apprehend at first. This is how we work our way into caring about the many things that we, having done that work, care about.

The English word "aspiration" is a good, if not a perfect, label for the concept I aim to explicate. Since I use the word to describe the process of rational value-acquisition, I end up emphasizing certain of the ordinary language features of the word and de-emphasizing others. For instance, we often speak of someone's aspiring to some career, as I did a moment ago when describing an aspiring doctor. In this kind of context, we may think that such a person's primary hope is to acquire the skills and qualifications that further enable her to secure an extrinsic reward such as status, money, or parental love. The aspirant, as I use the word, doesn't aim exclusively at any of these things. To be sure, she wants to go to medical school, to pass her exams, to succeed in her residency, to gain a position at an excellent hospital. Perhaps she even wants to please her parents. But her desire for all these things is a secondary manifestation of what she really wants, which is to provide the kind of medical assistance whose particular nature it is the job of her medical education to convey to her. Though she takes herself, before attending medical school, to have some understanding of medicine, she (knows that) she will only really grasp the specific good she is seeking to bring about by way of engaging in the work in question. (Consider the variety of medical professions: anaesthesiologists, obstetricians and psychologists provide very different kinds of help to people. The full understanding of the kind of medical assistance each provides is the province of the experienced practitioner, not the first-year medical student.)

A medical student whose final target was money, the approval of her parents, or social status would not count as an aspirant in my sense; I discuss this distinct phenomenon, which I call "ambition," in chapter 6. The ambitious medical student is not seeking to acquire a value: she takes herself to have full access, even before entering medical school, to the value of having money, the approval of her parents, or social status. She does not hope that medical school and residency will teach her the value of these things. She hopes only that they will help her satisfy the values she already has. She has too much access to the value in question to count as aspiring toward it. More generally, the word "aspiration" is sometimes used to describe any kind of hope or wish or long-term goal to bring some result about. These agents will not count as aspirants in my sense, unless the sought-after end is one whose value those agents are also seeking to learn.

I will also restrict the term "aspirant" at the other end of the spectrum, by withholding it from people who have *too little* antecedent access to any value that they might acquire. It is not a stretch of the English word "aspirant" to describe a young adult who sets out for Europe to "find herself" as an aspirant. She won't count as an aspirant in my sense, however, unless there is something more specific she is trying to find.[2] Adventures are not typically aspirational, and a sign of this is that they rarely feel like work.[3]

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[2] In my paper "Liberal Education and the Possibility of Valuational Progress" (Callard, forthcoming), I identify a form of aspiration that may be an exception to this rule. Colleges and universities provide aspirants with the kind of support that makes it possible for a person to aspire even if she possesses only an aspirational goal as vague and schematic as that of "becoming someone" or "learning how to think" or "self-discovery."

[3] I develop this idea by contrasting aspiration with Talbot Brewer's "dialectical activities" in chapter 6, section II.

The aspirant is trying to change herself in some particular dimension; she is not merely open to changes that might come. She grasps, however dimly, a target with reference to which she guides herself.

It is not always easy to determine how much of an antecedent grasp of value someone has or to ascertain how much of a grasp someone would have to have in order to count as an aspirant. I won't offer any guidance for assessing borderline cases, though I will discuss why this is a difficult problem and why such assessments may presuppose specialized knowledge of the value in question (see chapter 2 part IV). My point here is only that my use of the word "aspirant" is philosophically charged in such a way as to pick out all and only the cases in which the project of becoming someone is also the process of appreciating the values distinctive of becoming that kind of person.

Aspiration is rational, purposive value-acquisition. In the second part of this introduction, I offer a case study of an aspirant taken from Plato's *Symposium*. Alcibiades' closing speech gives us access to what it feels like to struggle to be better than one is, and Plato's presentation of that speech makes it possible for us to assess the rationality of Alcibiades' attempts at value-acquisition. My discussion of Alcibiades presupposes that there is such a thing as a rational pursuit of one's own fundamental values; the book goes on to defend this claim. Before turning to Alcibiades, I now briefly outline the structure of that argument.

II. OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS

Throughout this book, I describe myself as "giving an account" or "presenting a theory" of aspiration. As this outline will make clear, the work of the book is somewhat more rudimentary than those descriptions might suggest. The topic of aspiration lies at the crossroads of three sub-areas of ethics: the theory of practical rationality, the theory of moral psychology, and the theory of moral responsibility. In each of the three areas, the concept of aspiration emerges as a problematic one—it is difficult to see how aspiration can be rational, how it can be psychologically real, and how it is possible for someone, via aspiration, to "create himself." I aim to identify those elements of the received framework in each field that foreclose the possibility of aspiration and to propose emendations that would accommodate it. This book describes what an aspiration-friendly theory of rationality, moral psychology, and moral responsibility would look like. In addition, by way of motivating my emendations, I explain the payoffs available, in each area, for making the required changes. The theory of aspiration must begin somewhat earlier than the theory of a phenomenon that does not require such emendations. It must begin with an explanation of how it is so much as conceivable that human beings aspire.

(a) Rationality

If aspiration is to be an exercise of human agency, aspirants must be responding to practical reasons of some kind. Behavior qualifies as agency insofar as it exhibits the distinctive intelligibility of being a response to reasons. "I do what happens," as Anscombe said (1963: 52), but only when what happens happens for some reason. There are, however, problems in identifying the reason on which the aspirant acts. In chapter 1, I explore two recent attempts to account for aspirational activity within the framework of decision theory. If that project fails, then it might seem—as one of the authors in fact concludes—that the process of substantive value-change simply cannot be rational. I argue instead that it has a distinctive rational form that is not the rationality of deliberation, calculation, preference, or decision.

In chapter 2, I discuss the special practical reasons peculiar to aspirants, which I call "proleptic reasons." If someone takes a music class in order to come to appreciate music, her behavior does not serve a current end of hers in the same way it would if she got a cheeseburger because she was hungry. In the second case, she already has a desire for food; in the first, she is trying to have a desire for music. The reasons of aspirants are not, to use Bernard Williams's ([1980] 1981) term, "internal reasons" to which an agent can expect complete access if she deliberates correctly from her current motivational condition. Internal reasons are reasons that answer to one's current set of motives. When we reason from them, we reason about how to get what we already want. If we want to understand how substantive value-change is possible, we will have to introduce a new kind of reason, one directed not at satisfying wants but rather at generating them.

(b) Moral Psychology

There is a characteristically aspirational form of angst. In order to bring out what is distinctive about the aspirant's inner strife, it will be helpful to contrast it with two well-recognized sources of psychological conflict: that of a hard or tragic choice and that of a recalcitrant or rejected motive. In the case of a hard choice, an agent may find it difficult to select among her options. Perhaps the values are incommensurable, or perhaps she simply does not want to give up any of the relevant goods: even getting what is better overall involves a substantial loss. Such an agent feels pained at the loss of whichever options she lets go of.

This kind of pain is quite different from that of a recalcitrant or rejected motive. Consider the unwilling addict. She is moved by forces that she views as in some way external to her will. Her motivation to take drugs is not accompanied by the corresponding evaluative judgment to the effect that she ought to take the drugs. The case of the addict is typically taken to be an instance of the more general phenomenon of alienation from affective conditions such as pathological fears or bouts of uncontrollable rage. Such a person might feel that there is nothing to be said for feeding her addiction (or fueling her rage or accommodating her phobias), but she is moved to do so by inner drives she cannot control.

The phenomenon of aspiration opens up a third way of being torn. Though she looks forward to a time when she will no longer find operas boring, the aspiring opera-lover does not currently find her boredom external or alien. It is all too clear that the indifference she feels really is *hers*, which is to say, it represents a point of view that she identifies as authentically her own. This is exactly why she (sees that she) needs to work to see things differently.

Nor does the aspiring music-lover find the choice between love of and indifference to music to be a "hard choice." She is oriented toward the one condition, and away from the other, in such a way as to make the decision an easy one. She does not feel uncertain, nor does she feel that by coming to love music she is choosing between two things, her love and her indifference, both of which are really important to her. Nonetheless, coming to love music can be difficult. Someone who is working at it will often feel torn. I describe this form of conflict, which I call "intrinsic," in chapter 3.

In the fourth chapter, I address the well-known puzzle of akrasia (weakness of will), as to how it is possible for a person to act against her better judgment. I begin by articulating a standing problem with analyses of akrasia since Davidson: they force us to choose between saying that the akratic agent did not (really) know that she should have done otherwise or saying that she did not act willingly. Effectively, the agent is depicted either as not having fully decided the issue between her two options—it was a hard choice—or as having been overwhelmed by a form of motivation that is alien or external to her. I argue that a better account of akrasia is available to those who understand it as an instance of intrinsic conflict.

An aspirant reasons toward value, aiming to resolve her intrinsic conflict by grasping some value more fully. But she must also, sometimes, reason *from* the defective grasp she currently has—we cannot wait to make use of our values until such time as they are firmly in our possession. Agents who attempt to deliberate from a shakily grasped value while in the throes of intrinsic conflict are susceptible to akrasia. Akrasia, on my account, is a result of the fact that we sometimes need to make do with the value-grasp we currently have, however imperfect it may be.

While aspiration may be philosophically neglected, akrasia cannot claim to be. Those who puzzle over how it is possible to act against one's better judgment, are, I argue, grasping a tip of the aspirational iceberg. It is worth noting, however, that my analysis of akrasia is, in an important sense, freestanding from the rest of the book. One needn't accept that akratics are intrinsically conflicted in order to embrace my account of the role of intrinsic conflict in aspiration; rather, the direction of support goes the other way. In applying the framework of intrinsic conflict to the paradoxical phenomenon of akrasia, I aim to illustrate the explanatory power of the theory of aspiration.

Manlius and was adopted as a motto by Phillips Exeter Academy. On one interpretation, the phrase asserts that what happens in the early years has a substantial impact, positive or negative, on the later unfolding of that life. Perhaps this is all Manlius meant to say; perhaps he was simply pointing out that beginnings are important. But once we are operating in the educational context into which the founders of Exeter Academy imported the phrase, it seems fair to append to the motto the clarification that the most important beginnings are those that, in an aspirational sense, hang from the end.

III. A CASE STUDY: ALCIBIADES

As the chapter overview suggests, the very possibility of aspiration has been neglected in the philosophical literature on rationality, moral psychology, and responsibility. The effects of this neglect are visible not in any overt claim that such a thing is *impossible*, but in certain subtle ways in which the space of possibility has been narrowed in each of the three subfields discussed in the preceding section. The theorist of aspiration finds herself pointing to something in the middle of what we might have taken to be an exclusive dichotomy between making a decision to change and being changed by one's environment; between the unwilling addict's alien motivation to take the drug and a form of motivation that one wholeheartedly embraces. In the face of the standing assumption that there is a principled distinction between a process of discovery and one of creation, she points out that the aspirant's value-discovery is at the same time her self-creation. She is forced to stretch the existing concepts into a new dimension by pointing to *degrees* to which one sees a reason, or has a value, or inhabits some point of view.

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