# Agnes Callard on Aspiration

It’s not ok not to understand what you are doing, to be ignorant of who you are and what your life is about. That isn’t “getting by.” If you think you can get by without philosophy you are flattering yourself, indulging in a fundamental kind of complacency that is native to us all, and from which we vainly seek freedom through travel or wealth or power or sensual indulgence. The only true liberation from it is philosophy. The Big Questions in philosophy—external world skepticism, moral realism or anti-realism, deontology vs. consequentialism, freedom of the will, the existence of God, the problem of consciousness, the—these are all ways of calling into question the basic conceptual tools we use to get around everyday. What it is to ask these questions is to continuously be engaged in refuting your own life, which is to say, looking it squarely in the eye.

All of this is hard to see, because we have built up many defenses against letting arguments into our lives. We think arguments are there for convincing others, not for becoming convinced ourselves; we view being moved by argument as a form of vulnerability or weakness. We don’t see that the beneficiary of the refutation is always and only the one who is refuted. This is what someone misses who asks philosophers to be more productive or supportive or friendly: “why don’t you say positive things, build one another up, improve one another’s arguments instead of tearing them to shreds?” Refuting someone is improving her argument; it is helping; it is building her up. Unless what is meant by “building her up” is: preserving her defenses against argument by supporting the illusion that she is getting by. Philosophers refuse to flatter. (Callard)

**Agnes Callard** is a contemporary Hungarian-American philosopher (her family fled Communist Hungary when she was young) who works at the University of Chicago. She works on topics related to ancient Greek philosophy, ethics, and the relationship between these (e.g., applying and updating the ideas of the ancients to help answer modern problems). In this lesson, we’ll be looking at some of her ideas as they relate to **aspiration,** or the phenomenon of wanting to be a different (and better!) person. In short: we aspire that our future-selves will be somewhat *different* people than our past- or present-selves: for example, they won’t want to eat so much junk food, or have the desire to procrastinate, or check their mobile phones so often. But how does all this work? While Callard has defended/explained these views in many places (including journal articles and a book), the presentation here is based on her interview with Richard Marshall [[1]](#footnote-1).

## The Problem of Future Selves

In order to understand Callard’s positive proposals, it will help to think about some of the *problems* that interest her. Here’s how she describes **The Problem of Future Selves**:

It might actually be easiest to start by thinking of past selves—if we think back, we can recall earlier versions of ourselves who didn’t care about many of the things we now care about. The question is: how did we get from there to here? How did we come to be passionately invested in political activism or motherhood or fashion or classical music or whatever?

Another way of stating the problem might be this: right now, we CARE about things that we used to not care about. This seems perfectly natural if we don’t think about it too hard. However, when we look more closely at it, it is actually a bit of a puzzle. After all, how do we “learn” to care about something in the first place (and how do we learn “not to care” about things we used to care about?)? It is certainly is NOT like “learning a new piece of knowledge.” Instead, it seems like something “happens” to us that makes us somewhat different people than we used to be. Callard notes there are at least two possibilities:

1. *The changes in our values are determined by outside forces (such as changing social groups, jobs, etc.).* If this is the case, there’s no real puzzle, since neither our previous values nor our current values were ever under our control in the first place. *Problem:* This doesn’t fit with most people’s experience of growing up, which involves “searching for” meaning/value in different ways, and eventually “finding” it (e.g., you find a job you love, or a person, etc.). This makes us passive bystanders in our own life.
2. *The changes are (somehow) driven by decisions that our own past selves made.* Callard thinks this on the right track, but she wants to know how and why our past selves made these decisions (to come to care about things that they didn’t care about, and often didn’t even know much about). It certainly doesn’t seem like this is something our past selves could have chosen entirely on their own.

Callard concludes that the process of becoming who we are is both *passive* (involving outside forces) and *active* (involving our own choices and actions). Her theory of **aspiration** is intended to show how this works. So, what is aspiration? Aspiration is about wanting to be a somewhat different sort of person than I currently am. For example, I might *aspire* to be a better friend/parent/citizen, adopt a new religion wholeheartedly, or to appreciate art more, or whatever. Aspiration is NOT simply wanting to smarter/stronger/etc. so that I can fulfill my current desires; instead, it is (somehow) about desiring to have altogether different sorts of desires.

## Socrates and Proleptic Philosophy

Callard sees her own work as being inspired by (though not identical to) the ancient Greek philosophers that she studies. So, Socrates (at least as Plato) describes him was very interested in **proleptic** philosophy. This means (roughly) he wanted to help people “become better people.” However, this raises Callard’s problem—how can you give someone *reasons* (in terms of things she cares about right now) to care about new and different things? **Proleptic reasons** are simply the reasons our (ignorant! flawed!) past selves had for wanting to become our (more knowledgeable! somewhat better!) current selves. But how do these work? Here’s Callard again:

A proleptic reason is an acknowledgedly defective variant of a more standard reason. So suppose I want to go to the store to get milk. I know what I am doing and why [so, this is NOT a proleptic reason]. By contrast, when I want to become a lover of classical music, I don’t (exactly) know what I’m doing, and I don’t (exactly) know why I’m doing it. If you want answers to those questions, you’d be well advised to ask my future self rather than me. But I’m the one who needs to become motivated—so what are my reasons for advancing towards the knowledge that my future self will have?

I think the aspirant’s reason has two parts: a proximate face that speaks to her current motivational makeup and a distal face that points to the motivations of the person she will become. If I am an aspirant with respect to classical music, I might be motivated by the fact that I want a good grade in my music appreciation class, or I want to be sophisticated and cultured—but for a true aspirant these will only constitute part of the story. The aspirant is embarrassed that grades and appearances matter to her, and she is trying to become the person whose responses to classical music aren’t driven or dictated by those sorts of considerations. In order to understand her rational makeup, we need to take account of both of these facts.

In other words, when we to explain the *reasons* our past selves had for wanting to change, we are not ONLY going to talk about the sorts of things we wanted/desired back then (e.g., the “good grade” in a music class). We are also going to talk about what motivates us NOW, and the real “value” of these things (e.g., we can talk about the genuine value of music, which is something our “current selves” can appreciate.)

## A Few Ideas About ASpiration

Callard gives a number of examples to clarify what is (and is not) aspiration, and how it relates to other philosophical phenomena.

1. **Aspiration is NOT the same as ambition.** Ambition (for success in some field or other) involves wanting to fulfill the desires we currently have. Unlike aspiration, it need not involve wanting to change “who we are” in any deep sense.
2. **“Having adventures” or “trying to find myself” is NOT (necessarily) aspiration.** Callard argues that, while activities like traveling (or trying out different jobs, college majors, hobbies, etc.) might be valuable, this by themselves don’t count as aspiration because they are too *passive.* That is, when we aspire to something, we need to have *some* idea of who it is that we want to be, and make *efforts* to become that sort of person (and this might involve some mistakes and false starts). We can’t simply wander around aimlessly in the hope that something interesting strikes us.
3. **Aspiration can help explain “akrasia.”** Akrasia occurs when a (seemingly sane) person does something even though they have good reasons NOT to do whatever they did. So, for example, I know that eating a super-spicy curry will give me a stomachache, and that I won’t be able to sleep. It will far outweigh the short-term pleasure of eating it. I could tell you all of these things, and I really believe them. But then I go ahead and eat it anyways. Why? This sort of problem has long puzzled philosophers. Callard thinks we can understand it terms of aspiration. In particular, she argues that akrasia can occur when our *current* desires (“eat the curry”) conflict with the desires that we *aspire* to have (“eat in moderation” or whatever).
4. **Aspiration and the Responsibility for Who We Are.** Questions about “freedom of the will” often revolve around whether or not a person should be held responsible for a particular act. However, aspiration allows us to talk about responsibility for “who we are” in a more wholistic sense. In particular, Callard argues that the *extent* to which we are responsible for who we currently are is going to be depend on which parts of current selves are the results of past aspiration (e.g., when we had the opportunities to “try to become better,” what did we do these opportunities?). By contrast, we shouldn’t be held responsible for aspects of ourselves that were genuinely *forced* on us, and which didn’t really experience as “choices.”
5. **Aspiration and Education/Parenting.** Aspiration can also help explain what teachers (as well as parents of older children) are supposed to “do.” In particular, if children/students are aspiring to be new people, then there needs to be middle ground between paternalism (simply telling them what is valuable, and how they should leave their lives) and treating them as mere “consumers” (giving them “just the facts” and assuming they will use it in perfectly rational/good ways). Instead, education involves helping people discover worthwhile aspirations, and help them on the road to these aspirations (though you CANNOT simply give a person an aspiration, or fulfill an aspiration for them).
6. **Aspiration and the Logic of Anger/Sadness.** Callard has elsewhere argued that it might be perfectly *rational* to be “angry forever” (or “sad forever”). For example, if I betray you in some important way, this might be a perfectly good reason for you to be angry. Anger might even be an *appropriate* response, given what this betrayal does (e.g., the betrayal may make it impossible for you to pursue what you and I “valued together” in a positive way; a negative emotion such as anger may be your only way of “honoring” the value). Moreover, the sorts of things that I might do to “make it up to you”—such as apologize or do something nice—simply don’t address this original reason (the betrayal still happened!). Callard suggests that, if I *do* have reasons for not being angry, these are going to have be aspirational reasons—about the kind of person I want to, and the kind of values I wish to have.

## Review Questions

1. Think about your own childhood (your “past self”). Name at least one “aspiration” you had, and say a bit how this turned out. Remember, an aspiration is about the kind of person you wanted to be and NOT just an ambition about career, success, etc.
2. Which “parts” or “aspects” of who you are now do you feel responsible for (e.g., if they are good, you think this was at least partly because of your own past efforts; if they are bad, this was at least in part because of past failures)? Which parts do you feel least responsibility for (e.g., you feel like you didn’t “do” much to deserve this good/bad aspect of your personality)?
3. Think about your current self. What is at least one aspiration you have now? How are you pursuing it?
4. Take a look at the quote from Callard at the beginning of this handout. Now (a) explain what Callard is arguing, using your own words and examples and (b) say whether you agree or disagree with this, and why. Do you \*aspire\* to be more philosophical? What would this mean for you?

1. Agnes Callard and Richard Marshall, “Aspiration (Interview),” 3:16, accessed January 14, 2020, https://316am.site123.me/articles/aspiration. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)