

Aspiring to be rational

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How does a person coherently aspire to change who she is? How can someone rationally want to transform themselves into a kind of person they don't currently want to be? This is the central question of Agnes Callard's important new book, *Aspiration: The Agency of Becoming*. The book makes a major contribution to the philosophical literature on practical rationality and moral psychology.

Start by adopting an account of the self in primarily ethical terms, defined by its hierarchical value structure. Ordinarily, when a person is engaged in the process of rational self-improvement, she is engaged in the process of bringing her lower-order values into alignment with her highest-order values. Perhaps she wants to appreciate music, that is, she values valuing music, but has a tin ear. So, she works towards enlarging her ability to appreciate music. Or perhaps she believes that parenting is intrinsically valuable, and so wants to make spending time around babies and children more appealing to her.

These ordinary kinds of value-alignment and self-change are not Callard's target. Her interest is in how we aspire to transform ourselves in "large scale" ways by transforming our core, self-defining values.

To frame the central question, consider two examples, one involving music appreciation and one involving parenting.

Philistine has no taste or appreciation for music. She knows she should appreciate music. In fact, she doesn't just want to cultivate her tastes. She wants to change herself into someone for whom the appreciation of music forms a central way of living her life. Aspiring to transform herself, she enrolls in a music appreciation class and works diligently to transform herself into becoming a music-lover.

Macbeth has no desire to have a child. Nevertheless, his wife, a woman of strong opinions and persuasive powers, believes that he should value fatherhood. Macbeth recognizes that fatherhood will radically affect his life goals and will change the rest of his life. He strives valiantly to transform himself into the kind of man his wife wants him to be, a man who wants to be a devoted father.

The question is, how do Philistine and Macbeth *aspire* to this sort of change? As Callard frames things, they aspire to re-create themselves, to give themselves new core values. How can Philistine and Macbeth rationally undertake this process of transformation?

On Callard's view, each of our aspirants, Philistine and Macbeth, must work to transition themselves from their current system of values into new ones. They must work to acquire values they don't

currently value, “driving [themselves] toward a different value-condition from the one [they] are in” (p. 180). Importantly, this is a profound change in core values and preferences: a change in who one is. Philistine and Macbeth are attempting to transform themselves into a new kind of person, a new self. (In the ontology I prefer, a person is constituted over time by a series of selves. Thus someone can persist as the same person, metaphysically speaking, even if they are realized by a new self.)

But how can one rationally replace one’s self in this way? How can someone rationally undertake a transformative re-creation of oneself? The problem, at root, is the way the new values of the new self are alien to the current self, the self (the aspirant) making the choice to transform. In particular, the aspirant does not have the right sort of cognitive contact with the self that they aspire to become. In a deep sense, they do not understand the self that they propose to transform themselves into. So how can the choice be rational?

Consider the problem for our exemplars. Philistine doesn’t value music. So how can she rationally choose to re-create herself as a music lover? Similarly for Macbeth: he simply doesn’t value fatherhood. How can he rationally replace his current values with new values, values that he does not value? Rational choice seems to require choosing what you value. Choosing what you do not value, especially when this amounts to choosing to become a self that you do not value, violates this presumption.

Note that there is no problem if the aspirant has higher-order values that guide the lower order value change. For example, there is a version of the case where Macbeth does not value being a father, but his wife has already convinced him to embrace a higher order value: valuing parenthood. He values valuing parenthood, or values valuing valuing it, and is simply working to bring his lower order values into alignment with his higher order values. I do not think this version of the case captures what Callard is concerned with. Aspiration is of interest because the aspirant wants to adopt values that, in some sense, she lacks at every level.

The problem relates to how we are to understand the possibility of rational, radical self-change for the internalist about reasons, who requires that R cannot be a reason for a person if that person is not “moved” or motivated by R. This brings out the cognitive dimension of the problem: being (intrinsically) moved by a value requires one to have it, to know it more than intellectually. The problem is that the aspirant does not have the right sort of cognitive contact with the aspired-to values in order to appreciate them. To be moved to acquire a value, you must appreciate it. But if you do not have that value, by definition, you do not appreciate it, for appreciation of it comes through having it.

So the first problem here is one involving bootstrapping: if change is to come from within, how can we be motivated to replace our current values with values that we do not (currently) hold? In order to grasp a value, you must take it on, you can’t just regard it from afar. You have to have the value already in order to be moved by it.

As Callard puts it: “The problem posed by large-scale transformative pursuits is this: they require us to act on reasons that reflect a grasp of the value we are working so hard and so long to come into contact with, but we can know that value only once we have come into contact with it.” (p. 76).

In this parlance, to know a value one must “come into contact” with it. Such contact has two important features here: it teaches you how to grasp the nature of the value, and through grasping this nature, you recognize it as valuable. Grasping it involves making it your own, including it among your values.

We can do an end run around the bootstrapping problem, because experience can bring us into contact with value, and through this, it can teach us understanding. In my (2014), I argued that value change can come from having a new kind of experience. Such change from without can cause change from within. New experiences affect us cognitively (and neurally), changing the way we imagine, assess, and represent, thus creating the ability to recognize and value new values that we did not value before. Through experience, one grasps the value directly, and in virtue of this, can embrace it as one’s own.

We can distinguish between *knowing that* a value is valuable and *understanding* a value. In some contexts, testimony and other types of information can help us to know that a value is valuable. For example, we can rely on testimony from teachers or experts to tell us that appreciating music is valuable. Changing our beliefs about a value will not teach us to value it, that is, it is not sufficient for us to understand or grasp the value. However, if we know that something is valuable, we can know that we should value it.

Actually coming to have the value involves a different process. What creates understanding is coming into contact with the value directly. That is, the experience of responding to music or the experience of forming an attachment relation to one's child creates a new mode of presentation of the value (music, parenting). This mode of presentation allows the agent to grasp the value, and thus to understand it.

Philistine dislikes opera. She can't force herself to appreciate it simply because the music expert tells her it is valuable. But once she (somehow) decides she should value opera, she can put herself in a position where her mind can be changed for her. This is why she takes the class. Through having the experiences in her music appreciation class, her abilities are changed so that she has the capacity to grasp and appreciate opera. Her experiences (in the music appreciation class) directly form and shape her cognitive capacities, giving her the ability to understand and appreciate music.

Macbeth dislikes children. He can't force himself to value becoming a father simply because his wife wants him to. But once he (somehow) agrees, on the basis of his wife's arguments, that he should value becoming a parent, he tries to change. He can't simply create these values in himself, but, like Philistine, he can put himself in the way of external forces, various experiences, that can create this value in him. There's an important catch-22 in the background here. Macbeth does this without actually grasping the value of fatherhood. For it is the experience of forming and standing in the attachment relation to his child that allows him to grasp the value of fatherhood. He has to actually have the child in order to create the ability to value fatherhood in himself.

So the externalist, it seems, can solve some versions of the bootstrapping problem. Something external to the agent can cause them to change, creating the requisite motivation from within. For easy cases of self-change, the internalist can also solve the bootstrapping problem: she can solve it by postulating that the agent has internal higher order values that remain in place across the change. Such higher order values ground the desire to replace the agent's current first order values with new values, values that align with their higher order values. If Philistine already values being a music-lover, or Macbeth already values being the sort of person who wants to become a parent, or values valuing that sort of person, these higher-order values can rationally ground the desire to effect a value change. This solves the *easy* problem of self-change.

However, there is a second, much more serious problem. This is the *hard* problem of self-change.¹ The hard problem of self-change concerns the rationality of transformative value change: value change when the requisite higher order values are not in place. Transformative value change involves replacement of one's values at the highest levels: replacement of one's *self*. How can one rationally aspire to replace oneself by a new, alien self?

Transformative value change is not easy self-change. There is no persisting higher order value that can ground the desire to change. Philistine doesn't value being a music-lover, and Macbeth doesn't want to be the sort of person who is a parent. The internalist should deny that transformative change is rational.

If change comes from without, that is, if it comes from a transformative experience that changes the agent, we have an explanation of how such change is possible. We do not yet have an explanation of how an agent could be *rationally motivated* to choose such change. We can stipulate that our agents are told, through testimony (from the relevant social scientific experts?), that they should choose the

¹Paul (2014). With apologies to David Chalmers.

new values. But this is not enough for them to actually value these values. If they simply choose to replace their current selves on the basis of testimony alone, they are acting for the wrong reasons. They are alienated from their life-defining choices. So the externalist should also deny the rationality of transformative self-change.

Callard wants to avoid this result. She wants to explain how agents, somehow, could be rationally moved to guide themselves through the transformative process of replacing their core values, to rationally undertake transformative self-change. Her solution is to defend the existence of *proleptic* reasons: Janus-faced reasons that draw an aspirant towards a value they lack in order to allow them to grasp it.

“Proleptic reasons are—I conclude—the reasons that rationalize large-scale transformative pursuits. A proleptic reason is an acknowledgedly immature variant of a standard reason. A proleptic reasoner is moved to ϕ by some consideration that, taken by itself, would (in her view) provide an inadequate reason for ϕ -ing” (Callard 2018, p. 88).

I think Callard is onto something important, and I am impressed by the depth and sensitivity with which she explores and defends her project. But I am still puzzled. Her account provides an excellent description of one’s internal phenomenology, and I see how it can solve the bootstrapping problem. That is, I see how agents with a proleptic phenomenology can be motivated (from within) to change their values. But I do not see how it solves the hard problem: I do not see how it makes transformative value change rational.

The problem, again, with transformative value replacement is that it seems incoherent to choose values you do not value: rationality involves acting in accordance with your values, not acting against them. Moving that incoherence inside a reason, so that you can act in accordance with your (proleptic) reasons when you choose to replace your values, does not remove the incoherence, it merely glosses over it. Hiding our ultimate ends from ourselves in order to act can make us motivated to destroy our current selves, but how can it make such action *rational*?

Callard proposes a stealth approach. She points to a way we approach life choices, such as choosing to have a child, by taking small steps in order to reposition ourselves. We spend time around babies, or read books about parenting, and discuss the possibilities with friends and family. In this way, she argues, we start to change our values and desires about becoming a parent. Think of it as cognitive valuation therapy. We find small ways to present the value to ourselves that, eventually, allows us to grasp it properly.

I agree that we often take these small steps. This is indeed how we prepare ourselves for these changes. We act in indirect, and sometimes stepwise ways, stealthily avoiding revealing to ourselves what we are really doing. The discussion here is right on point. But this will not make such an undertaking rational. The trouble with a stealth approach is that taking an indirect route to changing oneself seems just as rationally problematic as taking a direct route. The same problem of rationally changing one’s self arises with a small step just as much as with a big step. If you do not value being a certain kind of person, it is no more rational to choose to *begin the process* of becoming that kind of person than it is to choose to become that kind of person *simpliciter*.

Return to Macbeth, and the catch-22 he faces. He does not value becoming a father, and, we assume, has the higher order value of valuing his current, child-free state. He cannot appreciate the value of parenthood until he actually becomes a parent, and by the same token, he cannot appreciate the value of valuing parenthood until he actually begins to value it. “It is... characteristic of the aspirant that she *must* act in ignorance of what she is doing, since it is by such action that she comes to learn the value and the nature of her activity” (Callard, p. 219). If Macbeth must act in ignorance, how can he rationally choose to step onto the path that takes him towards valuing parenthood?²

²To make the choice rational, we could assume Macbeth values his wife’s values and is simply acting, consistent with this higher order value, to bring his values into alignment with hers. But this, by stipulation, isn’t our case. The move is an illicit attempt to substitute the easy problem for the hard problem.

Callard's response to this objection will be, again, to propose proleptic reasons: reasons that will motivate us to take steps towards becoming a self we do not currently value. Macbeth's proleptic reasons are to draw him, somewhat mysteriously, towards the self he rejects, perhaps via his desire to satisfy his wife's desires. In the process, he will become a new kind of man.

But again, I ask: how could rational choice and action be based on self-deception? How can choosing and acting through deceiving one's current self be rational?

Callard thinks we can provide a teleological argument for the rationality of aspiration, arguing that the choice of the earlier, creating self normatively depends on the values of the later, created self. But mere normative dependence doesn't resolve the epistemic problem. Rationality requires that when one acts, one acts in accordance with one's current values. Until we get a clear answer to the epistemological and metaphysical question of how rational choice and action are possible in cases of hard self-change, we should conclude that there's more of rationalization than rationality about aspirational self-creation.

CONCLUSION

Callard concludes with a discussion of aspiring to be a parent. She explores, with sensitivity and thoughtfulness, the pain that a person can feel when they cannot become a parent through ordinary biological means. In the process, she discusses my argument that you can't rationally choose to become a parent based on what you think it will be like, claiming that I'd hold that a person who faces infertility "has no reason to grieve his or her infertility as a loss" (p. 264).

I do not dispute her argument that we need to respond to infertility with humility and sensitivity. I do, however, dispute her characterization of my views. A person who deeply desires to have a child, but cannot, has every reason to grieve, for this person feels a very deep and profound loss. This is not changed one whit when their desire for a child is based on what they think it will be like. For they are in fact experiencing the very significant loss of the opportunity to discover what it is like to be a parent, to discover what it is like to hold their newborn child in their arms, and to discover what it is like to experience the joys and the suffering of parenthood. You can't know what it's like to for you be a parent until you become one—but you can know what it's like to be denied this life-changing opportunity.

REFERENCES

- Callard, A. (2018). *Aspiration: The agency of becoming*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
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