Aspiration vs. Moral Luck: A Murdochian Response

Abstract: In this paper, after giving a brief overview of the tension between Agnes Callard’s recent work on aspiration and Galen Strawson’s arguments against moral responsibility and self-creation, I make a two-part argument, relying heavily on Iris Murdoch’s *The Sovereignty of Good*. First, pain can provide the impetus to first attend to and then come to value new things, and Murdoch’s M exemplifies this. Second, if self-creation is an endless task, any evidence for which is years in the making, then the years of practice and experience an aspirant may have can provide nearly limitless opportunities for cultivating the attention that presages the pain that prompts self-change.

Word Count: 2970 Words

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In *Aspiration*, Agnes Callard aims to make room for the possibility of forward-looking, chosen, self-creation. Galen Strawson argues that because none of us can have ultimate self-responsibility, who and how we are reduces to luck. However, since Callard isn’t arguing that aspirants are *causa sui*, her account may be more compatible with Strawsonian luck than she claims. Nevertheless, I think Strawson demands too much in his depiction of the sources of new values, and I think Callard too swiftly brushes aside Strawson’s picture. In this paper, after giving a brief overview of the Callard-Strawson tension, I make a two-part argument, relying heavily on Iris Murdoch’s *The Sovereignty of Good*. First, pain can provide the impetus to first attend to and then come to value new things, and Murdoch’s M exemplifies this. Second, if self-creation is an endless task, any evidence for which is years in the making, then the years of
practice and experience an aspirant may have can provide nearly limitless opportunities for cultivating the attention that presages the pain that prompts self-change.

According to the standard models of rational agency Callard reviews, it is difficult to see why or how someone can make a rational choice to value something that doesn’t already cohere with her current set of values.\(^1\) Nevertheless, we have an intuitive sense that people do actually come to hold values that are, in some sense, genuinely new. At the very least, the experience of perceived self-directed value-change in one’s own life (or in someone else’s) invites philosophical consideration. In *Aspiration*, Callard argues that aspiration is “the distinctive form of agency directed at the acquisition of values.”\(^2\) That is, standard models of either agency or decision-making fail to explain what happens when we aim to become someone different.

As Callard describes it, aspirants aim at their future selves in order to develop new values rather than aiming at new values to try to become something different. That is to say, aspirants don’t just pick new values as for a list and then try to embody or hold them; neither are these values divorced from a conception, however, hazy, of the person they would be like if they held the values. Instead, aspirants think about a version of themselves and then model their current behavior on the actions, attitudes, and desires they believe the future self lives by. The current self “looks up to, imitates, and seeks to become the created self”\(^3\) because she perceives her “current desires, attachments, etc.” as inadequate in some respect for happiness.\(^4\) By starting with the values she does have, the aspirant works to shift those values by learning to appreciate things

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\(^2\) Agnes Callard. *Aspiration*. 5


she doesn’t yet appreciate or to distance herself from things she currently finds herself repeatedly
drawn to, for the sake of a well-being she imagines possible for a self with values other than the
ones she currently holds.5

On the other hand, Galen Strawson argues that because no one can be *causa sui*, no one can be
ultimately morally responsible for their actions; neither can we be fully causally responsible for
how we change (if we change). To be ultimately or truly responsible for our actions, we would
have to be responsible for how we are, mentally, psychologically, emotionally speaking. Who
and how we are is the result of “hereditary and early experience” and who and how we become
will always be shaped by the same.6 Therefore, it is impossible to know the extent to which self-
caused changes to our characters are freely undertaken, and so no one can be ultimately morally
responsible for their own character.7 It seems that for Strawson, ALL change, at bottom, would
be either determined or accidental: there seems to be little room for deliberate, rational, chosen
change,8 which Callard wants to make room for.9

Callard concedes that “many of our values trace their roots to the early-childhood period”
and that the luck of environment might be the beginning of the story of some instance of
valuational change, but she rejects the idea that all of our values and interests stem from our
experiences in the parental home. Our experiences, she says, “could ignite a spark of interest, but
then something more would be needed to drive someone’s systematic development of that initial

7 Strawson, “The Impossibility,” 7.
spark into a full-fledged passion,” and the “something more” she says, “is unlikely to be a value to which he was antecedently committed.”10 However, it isn’t simply our parents’ homes that shape our values, but everything we’ve experienced in and outside the home and from earliest memory going forward. We may reject some of the values held by our families of origin and find, after some reflection, that the new values we’ve taken on may have their source (even if only in part) in a teacher, an advertisement long since off the air, or a once-beloved book.

In “Luck Swallows Everything,” Strawson and an interlocutor imagine as examples a man who wants to become the kind of person who can exercise consistently and even enjoy doing so, and someone who wants to learn to like olives. The problem for them is this: where does the desire to want to like exercise, or to want to like olives come from? Either it’s already there, in germ form, OR somehow a person is dispositioned to have the desire. In response, one might suggest that a person could see someone else exercising with apparent ease, or relishing the taste of olives, and, in a practically common but philosophically complex set of moves, come to try it out for themselves. To which Strawson is likely to respond by saying “But it’s only by luck that you saw such a person on which to model yourself in the first place! And only by luck that they appeared attractive rather than repulsive!”

Strawson’s claims about the ubiquity of external, barely noticed value-sources and about their pervasiveness are strong, and what is needed is a way to imagine (self-)creation in the absence of ultimate freedom. In what follows, I return to and expand on what Callard says about the aspirant’s desire for a more complete happiness, and connect it to Iris Murdoch’s essay on perfection as a guiding and transformative ideal to argue that while of course there is luck involved in self-creation, Callard’s claims about the rational agency in self-transformation hold up in spite of Strawson’s claims about luck.

10 Callard, 207.
In “The Idea of Perfection,” Murdoch argues that perfection is the ultimate regulatory ideal in morality and that most of the effort we make in aiming for perfection is inner work invisible to the dominant ideals in the moral philosophy prevalent at the time of her writing. To that end, she creates a hypothetical case study about a mother-in-law, M, and her daughter-in-law, D. M doesn’t care for D but behaves beautifully toward her at all times. Murdoch then stipulates the absence or removal of D combined with a new desire on the part of M to “take another look” at her own opinions of D and at D’s character. Over time, by reframing how she saw D, M comes to a new understanding and appreciation of D.11

Murdoch’s account of M and D is sparse, but in the example, after M has formed her opinion of D, Murdoch describes her as characterized by “a hardened sense of grievance,” and as “imprisoned” by her beliefs about D. M is, however, “capable of self-criticism,” and so identifies her own possible character flaws before deciding to look again at D, reflecting upon her entirely within her own mind.12 Thus, I posit that pain is a likely precursor to aspirational change. The pain of acknowledging her jealousy, snobbishness, prejudice, and narrowmindedness appears to be the proximate precursor to her choice to look again at D, rather than the possibility of loving D for her own sake. Moreover, rather than being guided by a belief that she must learn to love D, M appears to be guided by her beliefs in her own intelligence, good intentions, ability to be self-critical, and capacity for careful attention. So, as in the model of aspiration Callard describes, M begins with her own values (and skills) just as they are, and then works toward a version of

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herself that embodies those values in such a way that they mitigate or even obviate the pain she feels in her current state.

Because Murdoch takes pains to show that M comes to truly love D, not just to acknowledge the inadequacy of her own vision, I see M as going beyond mere “coherentist self-policing” to genuine value change. There is nothing about “behaving beautifully” that entails a requirement to love; if M held as her value the correctness of behavior, then there would be nothing incoherent in behaving beautifully even to those whom one despises. Somehow, in this case, M chose to see D anew, and this led to a burgeoning openness to valuing D for her own sake, not merely for the sake of propriety.

In her treatment of the problems with self-creation, Callard explains the image of Neurath’s boat and expands upon it to show how it can figure some kinds of aspirational self-transformation. Not only is it impossible for us to get outside of ourselves to assess and then change ourselves, we also make incremental self-changes that don’t simply maintain the status quo. Instead, our self-alterations can aim, imperfectly and sometimes unclearly, at more thoroughgoing transformations—the boat can become some other vessel, possibly even one better suited for land or air, rather than a repaired iteration of the same rowboat over and over again.13 Applied to the problem of unlimited choice in morality or art, the artist (whether of paint or of morals) aims to train her vision so she can eliminate from her view all the false choices (the faulty planks in Neurath’s boat) so that the necessary ones stand out. The result is that “moral change and moral

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achievement are slow; we are not free in the sense of being able suddenly to alter ourselves since we cannot suddenly alter what we can see and ergo what we desire and are compelled by."\textsuperscript{14}

If, as Murdoch says, we are not free to suddenly change ourselves, that does not mean we are unable to change ourselves at all. When in Strawson’s conversation he discusses the possibility of learning to like olives, the sense one gets is of a sudden, urgent desire to learn to like olives. Moreover, regarding the “first want—the want for a want” it seems to him that “it was just there, just a given, not something you chose or engineered.”\textsuperscript{15} But this seems false to me. If we create ourselves by altering our vision, then as we encounter new things and attend to them with care, we accrue new possibilities for desire, and therefore for self-change. Of course the creativity of our created self is limited by what is at hand; that’s the less interesting part. More interesting is this: the better we are at seeing what surrounds us, the more materials we have. Murdoch that “as we move and as we look our concepts themselves are changing,” and this is part of why growing in attention and love is an endless task.\textsuperscript{16}

Here, the Strawsonian objector may point out that it is pure luck that M is capable of self-reflection, pure luck that she (perhaps correctly) attributed her lack of happiness to her vision of D. I think the proper Murdochian response might be this: So what? So what if the origins of some of our future choices lay in earlier experiences we can’t fully unearth or dispositions we didn’t choose? So what if it’s pure luck that we find someone else’s olive-eating attractive and so try to like olives ourselves? That’s just what it means to be the sort of being that grows in openness to value by looking and by expanding our vision.

\textsuperscript{14} Murdoch, “The Idea of Perfection,” 38; emphasis added.
\textsuperscript{15} Galen Strawson, “You Cannot Make Yourself the Way You Are” in Things that Bother Me, 112.
\textsuperscript{16} Murdoch, “The Idea of Perfection,” 27.
What Murdoch says is this: “where virtue is concerned we often apprehend more than we clearly understand and grow by looking.”\textsuperscript{17} Our field of vision—moral and otherwise—is vaster and richer than our conceptual, discursive understanding can grasp. And yet, we persist in this belief that what we can say and what we can see or imagine, clearly and distinctly, are all that we are and essentially all we are. This not only narrows or constrains the realm of morality, but also of reality. Reality is not bound by our capacities for articulation or self-understanding. All that is the case exceeds human capacities for language even if we fall into the fantasy of believing that reality is all that we can see or say.

If self-creation follows vision, and if we apprehend more than we clearly understand, then the shifting picture of reality that we gain by attending to ourselves and our world exceeds our abilities to articulate that picture in language. No matter how clear or accurate our narrative reconstructions of personal transformation become, at some point they will reduce to language that appears to be trite or banal. The work that M did when she came to love D, like the work of any artist, was that of ego-transcendence. She got over herself and out of her own way. “Ego-transcendence,” however, is not a value one can come to hold in any practical way. It’s rather a daily practice that requires specific objects of attention. So the aspirant can’t just say “I’m going to transcend my ego now,” and have that be a new value. Instead, she can let go of a grudge that causes her pain, write a poem that aches to be written, learn a dance that catches her attention and won’t let her go, and then find, throughout the process, that she’s learning to transcend her ego, and come to value that in itself. As she gets better at ego-transcendence in one area, it may become possible to improve in other areas, and so to notice more in the world around and within her, and thereby notice new ways of being to value.

\textsuperscript{17} Murdoch, “The Idea of Perfection,” 30.
When non-artists think of artistic creation, there are two fears: first, given the infinite options, there will be either nothing or everything to create; second, that there are no genuine options, as all possibilities are already determined by luck, disposition, and availability. The same fears hold for moral selves, too. However, the freedom of the artist is not pure license, but “a selfless attention to nature” and this holds for the creation of art as for the creation of self.\textsuperscript{18} Not being able to take full causal or moral responsibility for who or how one is does not seem to preclude self-creation, any more than it precludes artistic creation. Michelangelo isn’t causally responsible for having had the capacity to create amazing art; Bach didn’t choose to have had the capacity to compose. And yet it also seems false to say they had no responsibility for their paintings, sculptures, or scores. And while some artists create with a detailed vision of the final composition, others discover as they go how the final product will turn out. So too with moral self-creation. Just as the ideal toward which a sculptor works is best expressed by the final sculpture and not in a written description or explanation, the vision of the ideal toward which the aspirant aims is expressed primarily in the creation that one becomes, and not in language.

The ideal toward which the aspirant or artist aims is perfection, not in the sense of an unattainable flawlessness or a demand that one become actually God. Rather, it is the idea of perfection that draws our attention away from self/ego and toward the Good, which she locates outside the individual self. Experiences of pain like the one M had help us to see, feel, and act beyond the limitations of “pure will,” which, as Murdoch notes, is insufficient for reorienting our desire or training our attention.\textsuperscript{19}

That anyone notices now (as opposed to four years ago or forty years hence) that it might be possible to relinquish an unloving attitude or to learn to like olives is, as Strawson says, a

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matter of luck. We cannot choose many of the experiences or events that will move us, by pain of longing or pain of suffering, to grow into a future self that embodies what is beautiful in them. The sense of “rightness” toward which we aspire in our characters may not ultimately be our own doing. Perhaps we cannot make ourselves the way we are in the ultimate sense Strawson means. Nevertheless, the sheer effort it costs us to be(come) the persons we might be “determined” to become matters for morality. None of us can become moral or artistic virtuosos simply by sitting back and waiting for our genius to manifest without any effort on our part.

If Callard’s work on aspiration merely describes the phenomenological aspect of self-development, it would still go far in explaining our perceptions of self-creation. I think it does more, and I think that Murdoch’s insight that what we apprehend exceeds what we can say or clearly understand helps to clarify the tension between Callard’s and Strawson’s arguments. The possibility of self-creation depends heavily on Murdochian vision, understood as a moral-artistic skill, and on rejecting a view of freedom that depends upon infinite choice and discursive explicitness. The freedom to become a changed self may look more like acquiescence than like ultimate self-causation, or, as Murdoch puts it, “as obedience to reality.” If this is so, then as we stumble upon, by luck, the experiences that capture and train our attention, our task is to try to catch up to what we have apprehended but not understood. The more we make that effort, the freer we become, in all the relevant senses.


———. “On ‘God’ and ‘Good’”


———. “You Cannot Make Yourself the Way You Are.” In *Things that Bother Me*. I