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LIBERAL EDUCATION AND THE POSSIBILITY OF VALUATIONAL PROGRESS

By Agnes Callard

Abstract: *This essay discusses two ways in which an agent can make progress with respect to value: self-cultivation and aspiration. The self-cultivator becomes a more coherent version of the person she was before, acquiring beliefs or desires or habits or skills that serve her antecedent valuational condition. The aspirant, by contrast, acquires new values. The existence of aspiration is under pressure from those who would assimilate it either to self-cultivation, or to a change in value that is done to a person rather than a change that is her own work. I show that those two options cannot be exhaustive by discussing liberal arts education; it is, I argue, paradigmatically aspirational.*

KEY WORDS: value, aspiration, rational, reasons, education, college, university

One way I make progress in valuing is by coming to behave as my values have always told me I ought: overcoming my weakness of will, living up to my ideals, making good on my value commitments — these are all forms of progress. In these cases, I progress by living out my values and realizing them in the world. I can also make progress by directing my values inward, so as to change myself. My values might dictate the acquisition of a new desire, habit of thinking or acting, or a new avenue of emotional sensitivity. Likewise, I might see that what I value calls for me to relinquish some desire, habit, or emotional tendency. In these ways, my values might generate rational requirements with respect to some attitude or disposition. If I make the relevant change, I value better, which is to say, more consistently and rationally. And this is a kind of value progress as well.

In this essay, I describe a form of valuational progress more radical than either of the above. Rather than attempting to realize or consolidate one's existing value condition, the agents I will describe leave the orbit of their old values. Instead of trying to see the implications of their existing values, such agents, whom I call aspirants, try to get some new value into view. It may appear that two features of such progress — that it is the work of the agent herself, and that it results in the acquisition of some genuinely new value — cut against one another. For it may be supposed that if I act in such a way as to acquire a new value, then my behavior is not regulated by the values I currently have; and, further, that behavior which is not regulated by my current values is not a full expression of my agency. These suppositions, taken together, preclude the possibility of aspirational agency.

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Elsewhere, I try to offer a response to this argument[1] in order to explain how aspirational progress is possible; here what I offer is evidence that it is actual. The undergraduate students who take classes from me or from my colleagues in English, mathematics, history, and so on, confront their teachers with a form of agency that cannot be captured in terms of either of the two less radical forms of progress. I will explain why it is so hard to understand the motivation for, structure of, and benefits of a liberal arts education without appealing to something like aspiration.

I. Valuing and Acting on Oneself

Consider the broad and varied set of changes that a person may undergo over the course of her life: changes in appearance, knowledge, interests, citizenship, family relationships, and so on. Within this set, I want to make two distinctions that are orthogonal to one another. First, I distinguish those changes that consist in or involve a change in what the person values, from those that do not. Second, I distinguish the changes that the person makes in herself, from changes she does not author but only passively undergoes.

I will call changes that implicate values "transformations," and my interest is in the subset of those changes that are the work of the person herself, which I will call "self-transformations." I will, in turn, want to further subdivide the category of self-transformation, but before doing so let me say a word about the first two distinctions.

A. Valuing

What is it to value something? Like Niko Kolodny,[2] Samuel Scheffler,[3] and Jay Wallace,[4] I deny that valuing is identical to the attitude of believing something to be valuable. As Scheffler observes, our capacity to believe that things are valuable far outstrips our capacity for personally investing ourselves in those objects we can truly be said to value.[5] Most of us believe that, for instance, early childhood education, public transportation, or opera are valuable. A person who values one of these things will also tend to display certain characteristic actions and feelings in relation to the object of value. Nor do action and feeling suffice for valuing. It is possible

[1] In chapter 5 of my *Aspiration: the Agency of Becoming* (manuscript, forthcoming in 2017 from Oxford University Press); the argument in question is adapted from Galen Strawson's "basic argument" ("The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility," *Philosophical Studies* 75 [1994], 5–24, at 5).

[2] Niko Kolodny, "Love as Valuing a Relationship," Philosophical Review 112, no. 2 (2003): 135–89, at 150.

[3] Samuel Scheffler, "Valuing," in his *Equality and Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 15–40.

[4] R. Jay Wallace, *The View From Here* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 23–32.

[5] Ibid., 21.

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to be emotionally vulnerable to, and disposed to protect or engage with, something one thinks badly of, and wishes one did not care about. When I value something, by contrast, I approve of my own affective entanglement with it. Scheffler articulates four components of valuing. I paraphrase them as follows:

(1) Cognitive: A belief that the object is good.
(2) Affective: An emotional sensitivity in relation to the object.
(3) Motivational: A disposition to see the object as giving rise to practical reasons.
(4) Reflexive: A tendency to experience (1)–(3) as warranted.[6]

When I value something, I both care about it and take it to be worth caring about. Valued objects mean something to the person who values them. The role the object plays in the person's life is reflected in the set of interrelated and mutually reinforcing attitudes[7] described by Scheffler. It is useful to invoke the framework of value, as opposed to merely that of desire, or belief, or emotion, because when those attitudes are bound together in a value they are also more reliably bound up with who someone is. I may have a stray attitude that doesn't reflect "the real me," but I cannot thus claim alienation from the beliefs, desires, and feelings that form part of the nexus that is my valuing of something. The fact that I have values means that my attitudes "clump" together into units that reflect what, as we say, I am all about.

Because my values pick out those things that really matter to me, they serve as a rational springboard for how I ought to act, think and feel. In the most familiar case, the fact that I value something gives rise to a reason to engage with that object. So, for example, if my mother makes an expedition to Bayreuth at great personal expense, this trip is rationalized by the fact that she values opera. I, by contrast, merely believe that

[6] Ibid., 25. Scheffler limits the reflexive condition to an approval of the affective condition specifically; in chap. 3 of my *Aspiration*, I argue that it should be expanded to cover the cognitive and motivational condition as well.

[7] Scheffler describes his own paper as arguing against "a variety of simple reductionist proposals" (ibid, p. 4) identifying valuing with desiring or believing. It is unclear whether the intended contrast is with a complex form of reductionism, or whether Scheffler eschews reductionism altogether. I believe that Scheffler's rich conception of valuing corresponds better with the latter position, which is in any case the one I adopt. For just as we deny that someone who merely believes that music is valuable values it if he is affectively and motivationally indifferent to it, and we deny that someone values an activity he takes pleasure in but disapproves of, we also do not want to call someone a valuer when she judges something to be valuable in the manner of the first and takes pleasure in something in the manner of the second. In the valuer, the various pro-attitudes are mutually informative: my understanding of why, for example, the painting is valuable is informed by the distinctive pleasures I take in features of its composition. Valuing in this richer sense is not merely a combination of attitudes, but a unified complex that represents a higher level of organization of the self from that of the attitudes themselves.

opera is valuable. Given that opera does not matter much to me, those who know me would be mystified to discover that I went all the way to Germany to listen to it.

Valuing also serves as rational ground for self-correction: a person decides that, given how much he values public transportation, he should be less irritated than he is with the minor inconveniences of bus travel; someone resolves, on the basis of her valuation of early childhood education, to volunteer more regularly at her local Head Start. These decisions presuppose *already* valuing the objects in question, and are distinct from any process by which a person comes to value them (that is, comes to believe that they are valuable, and acquires the relevant emotional, motivational, and reflexive tendencies).

Thus, we can draw a distinction between the set of attitudes and dispositions that constitute someone's valuation of an object like opera, public transportation, or early childhood education, and the set of attitudes and dispositions she is rationally required to have as a result of having those values. One way to change in value is to consolidate a value-nexus one already has by honoring the entailments of one's current values; another way is to acquire some whole novel nexus of value. In short, one can both change *from* or *on the basis of* value, and *toward* or *in order to acquire* value. The difference between these two forms of value-change will play a big role in the discussion to follow.

There is, of course, a distinction to be drawn between value-change and progress in respect of value. For there are degenerative changes. In what follows I will simply be assuming that all of the changes under discussion are changes for the better. (Elsewhere,[8] I argue that the central distinction of this essay can be articulated only in relation to progressive changes.)

B. Changing oneself versus being changed

Sometimes, a change that a person undergoes is the intended result of something that she does: she changes herself. For instance, someone has her hair cut because she thinks it will look better that way; another person starts exercising, because he wants to be healthier; yet another cultivates a particular accent, because she thinks it will make her sound sophisticated. Someone becomes a vegetarian, because he thinks eating meat is unethical; someone else stops being a vegetarian, because she judges that *not* eating meat is unethical. In these cases, the changes to the agent happen as part of her own deliberate attempt to shape what kind of person she is. She acts on herself. These same kinds of changes can occur in a more passive way: her friends pull a prank on her and cut her hair while she's sleeping; he stops eating meat because it becomes unavailable; she finds herself losing

[8] Callard, *Aspiration*, chap. 6, pp. 4–5.

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her accent over the course of years abroad; he starts exercising less and less each day, without realizing his habits are changing. These people cannot explain the advent of their new condition by casting it as a response to reasons to be in that condition.

In these examples, it is easy to distinguish between whether the change in a person is a product of her agency or instead something she underwent as a passive subject. Some cases will be harder: consider the person who cuts off her hair in a burst of anger; or the one who starts exercising under the influence of peer pressure; or the one who stops eating meat from growing distaste. Without offering an analysis of these more obscure cases, I will say that I follow Joseph Raz's[9] understanding of the criterion with reference to which such analysis would have to proceed: activity is marked by responsiveness to what the agent takes to be reasons.[10] If someone changes because she takes herself to see a reason to be in the changed condition, her change is her own work; whereas if she finds herself unable to rationalize the change, it is something that happens to her.[11] What makes the difficult cases difficult is precisely that we cannot immediately discern whether or not the change is reasons-responsive.

II. Self-Transformation

Now consider those changes that are both active and transformative — changes I am calling "self-transformations." Take the case of quitting vegetarianism. On a visit to my extended family in Hungary, I came to see my repeated vegetarian refusals of the food they had prepared — which, given the national cuisine, invariably included meat — as violating my commitment to be a good guest. I decided that my valuation of hospitality called for me to change my eating habits. Dispositions to act are the most natural place for such changes to take root, but they will often involve more than that. I came fairly quickly to think that hospitality required more of me than merely getting the food down: on my view, a good guest takes pleasure in what she is offered. Thus, I sought to change my affective response to meat as well as my behavioral disposition. The important fact,

[9] Joseph Raz, "When We Are Ourselves: The Active and the Passive," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volumes, vol. 71 (1997).

[10] Ibid., 217–18.

[11] Because I want to reserve the category of self-transformation for changes to the self that are the proper target of agency, I am setting aside cases in which some attitudinal change is a foreseeable but unintended consequence of what a person does. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that such cases share the basic explanatory structure of cases I will call self-cultivation: the agent's willingness to undergo the foreseeable but unintended change will be explainable in terms of her attachment to the value driving her to her primary target. The change is, in this sense, a response to reasons to be in the changed condition. So, for instance, if I can see that it is a cost of accepting such and such a job that I will become jaded and cynical, I will move forward only if I take that cost to be outweighed by the good I can do. Thanks to David Schmidtz for pointing out the need to clarify this issue.

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however, is that these changes were wholly dependent on my established values. Before ever considering the question of meat-eating specifically, I already valued hospitality, which is to say that I had the cognitive, motivational, affective and reflexive responses constitutive of such valuing.

We can also imagine cases in which I am required to revise beliefs in the light of my values. For instance, I might reflect on the fact that I tend to belittle my political opponents, and judge that my valuation of democracy requires me to give up the belief that people of a certain political party are uneducated or unpatriotic. There will also be cases in which my value calls for belief-acquisition rather than loss. For instance, I am advising a dissertation that touches on Kierkegaard, whose work I'm only minimally acquainted with. I may take myself to be required to do some reading in order to learn what Kierkegaard thinks, so that I'm in a better position to evaluate my student's work.

Though it is true that what we have reason to do depends on our beliefs, emotions, desires, and habits, we are not hostage to the attitudes with which we happen to find ourselves. A person can make a choice about the kind of person she wants to become, on the basis of an antecedent appreciation of the value of being that person. She judges that some important feature of herself — such as her commitment to be a good guest among meat-lovers, or her investment in democracy, or her devotion to her advisee — is in tension with some other feature of herself, such as her vegetarianism, her political attitudes, or her ignorance about Kierkegaard. Holding the first feature fixed, she decides to change with respect to the second. I now want to contend that not all self-transformations work like this.

III. Aspiration

In my early twenties, I entered a doctoral program in Classics at Berkeley. Classicists are proficient translators of Greek and Latin; they produce interpretations of these texts that shape the way other people go on to read them; and they teach students to read Latin and Greek. What did I, as a senior in college, hope to gain out of those activities? If you had asked me, I think I would have probably said something vague about wanting "a fulfilling life." I would have had to be vague, because any fulfillment I could envision from those activities amounted to a very different kind of fulfillment from what I had already experienced. The truth is that I didn't know exactly what I wanted. I could see something good about the life of a classicist, enough to want to learn more. Instead of seeing my antecedent interests, values, and projects as dictating the change toward classics, it was the value of classics that dictated my attitude toward many of my "old" projects, values, desires, and habits. I was ready and willing to try to turn my life in a new and uncharted direction.

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I would not, however, have said at the time that I had "decided" to become a classicist. That would have struck me as hubris, given how incompletely I grasped the value of what I was doing. But I also wasn't experimenting, trying a career on for size in the way you might try out a new flavor of ice cream or an amusement park ride or vacation destination. I was trying to come to like it, setting before myself the task of liking it, striving to learn what the value of it was. I fought through thousands of pages of translation; I composed Greek prose in the style of Herodotus, Demosthenes, and Plato; I wrote about symbolism in Horatian Odes; I memorized dates and places for history exams; I learned Italian so that I could go to Rome to *speak* Latin, to say out loud Cicero's words in the places where he had stood. All of this was *work* and not play or fun or experimentation, and I was working toward a kind of insight that was, in fact, in the better moments of my brief and doomed career as a classicist, starting to dawn on me. I became a citizen of a place that vanished thousands of years ago. Walking among the stalls of tie-dyed T-shirts on Telegraph avenue, a part of me wasn't there at all. I felt the freedom and power of carrying a whole world in me; and not just any world but one in which I could see people discovering for themselves ideas of truthfulness, justice, courage, beauty. Another feeling I remember vividly from that time is gratitude. Generation after generation of scribes had, as I saw it, copied those manuscripts *for me*, so that I could eventually read them. And this gratitude gave rise to a sense of responsibility: I too was a kind of scribe, tasked with keeping these texts available to and relevant for a new generation. This was the way in which the value of becoming a classicist began to reveal itself to me.

IV. Aspiration versus Self-cultivation

Compare my self-transformation into someone who values eating meat with my self-transformation into someone who values Classics. In the first case, I was working through the entailments of the value-system I already had. In this way, the unchanging attitudes comprising my valuation of hospitality were driving the show. I was motivated by my belief in the value of hospitality, my desire to be a good guest, my sensitivity to my hosts' disappointment, and so on. In the second case, the engine of the process was the very set of beliefs, desires and affective conditions I sought to acquire. The point of what I was doing was coming to see the value of, and care about, a set of texts. Unlike my appetite for meat, my appetite for Classics is one I acquired for its own sake. When someone transforms herself as I did by quitting vegetarianism, I will call the change *self-cultivation*. When someone transforms herself as I did by setting out to become a classicist, I will call the change *aspiration.*

Let me offer a few more examples to flesh out the categories of self-cultivation and aspiration, since the claim that these are two real but importantly distinct forms of self-transformation is the argumentative

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backbone of this essay. One common form that self-cultivation takes is an agent noticing in herself problematic or self-destructive qualities: she spends too much money; she overeats; she habitually levels casual insults at her in-laws; she procrastinates. Recognizing these facts about herself, and that they are in tension with her central values, she might set out to change them. She develops a distaste for procrastination instead of seeing it as a charming peccadillo; she starts taking pride in her expertise about internet-blocking software. She might also set out to *acquire* projects, habits, skills, or desires. A larger vocabulary will help her get through translation exercises faster; regular jogging will increase her energy levels; pet-ownership will help combat depression; calling her mother and best friend once a week will keep those relationships in better order; cultivating pleasant relations with her in-laws will make everyone's lives run more smoothly.

The essential feature of self-cultivation is that, though the change itself may take time, the self-cultivator can see in advance just what is to be gained by it. This is because she *already has* whatever value the change serves. She isn't changing in *that* respect. The self-cultivator can step back from the way she currently is, reflect on what she wants out of life, and make an informed choice about how to change. The fact that she doesn't take pleasure in exercise or know how to speed-read doesn't keep her from understanding exactly what would be good about doing so.

Aspirational pursuits, by contrast, feature agents who must be more tentative, because they are less sure that they know what they are getting themselves into. Consider two stylized examples. Bill has never been a fan of classical music, but at some point he starts to open himself up to it: he takes a music appreciation class, he listens to one piece every night before going to bed, he buys an annual subscription to the symphony. His immersion in classical music neither supports his other pursuits, nor is entailed by his other values. He doesn't think that by coming to appreciate music he will be less stressed out at work, or that it will help him curry favor or appear sophisticated. In fact, the classes and tickets and equipment take time, energy and money *away* from the set of projects he was pursuing. He could say that his efforts are directed at the intrinsic value of music, but his words will have a hollow ring. For he does not yet appreciate this value.

Sheila, who has been single for a long time, decides to start dating. She makes an effort to, as they say, put herself out there. She does not do this because she finds herself unable to occupy her evenings, or because she finds her work unfulfilling; she does not take the plot of her life to call for someone in the role of partner. Her life is, on its own terms, complete. But she has the sense that those terms might themselves be a bit narrow, and an inchoate understanding of a form of value that is out there for her to discover and enjoy. Her romantic project does not promote what she already valued anyway. She orients herself toward a new value, and one

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she seeks to acquire for its own sake — not because it will serve something she valued before. If asked, she'd have to admit that she's not sure what she has to gain.

The self-cultivator sees the changes she is enacting in herself as entailed by the fixed value-condition she is already in. Her "change" therefore amounts to a consolidation of the self she already has. The aspirant, by contrast, sets out to acquire a way of being that need not serve, and may well clash with, her pre-existing values. Given the intimate connection between what a person values and who she is, we can say she is in search of a new self. We can also articulate the difference with reference to the values contained in the new condition. The aspirant sets out to acquire new beliefs, desires, emotions, and so on, for their own sakes, that is, for the sake of the value that is comprised of those attitudes, whereas the self-cultivator sets out to acquire them because she sees them as serving her antecedently fixed valuational condition.

V. The Possibility of Aspiration?

In cases of self-cultivation, I encounter an opportunity to incorporate some new area of agency into a standing value nexus. Even if they do not explicitly articulate the position, many philosophers are committed to thinking that the only alternative to this form of self-change is being changed. They assume that unless someone can derive an attitudinal change from the values she already has, the change cannot be rational.

In my book *Aspiration*, I articulate three areas of ethics in which the temptation to exclude the very possibility of aspiration manifests itself: decision theory, moral psychology, and the theory of moral responsibility. Let me briefly summarize the first, so as to give the reader a sense of how the topic of aspiration fits into the existing philosophical literature. In the decision-theoretic literature, we find agents described not in terms of values but in terms of preferences. So we can say that the aspirant and the self-cultivator are both on their way to acquiring new preferences, but the latter is distinguished by the fact that she currently has a full-fledged preference to have those new preferences. The aspirant won't know exactly what preferences she is acquiring or exactly why those are good preferences to have; and if, as often occurs, her aspirational activity results in a change to her core preferences, it will not usually be the best way to maximize the satisfaction of her standing (antecedent) preferences. How, then, can it be rational?

Edna Ullmann-Margalit[12] thinks that it cannot. She argues that an agent who must decide whether to engage in some activity that will foreseeably alter her core preferences — such as having a child, getting married, or

[12] Edna Ullmann-Margalit, "Big Decisions: Opting, Converting, Drifting," in *Political Philosophy*, ed. Anthony O'Hear, *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements* 58 (2006): 157–72.

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emigrating from one's homeland — faces a choice that "straddles two discontinuous personalities with two different rationality bases."[13] She contends that any claim as to which way the agent should go will arbitrarily privilege one of the two sets of reasons.[14] On this picture, if the value in question is truly new, one cannot rationally come to acquire it.[15] L. A. Paul argues, on similar grounds, that someone who wants to have a child but cannot do so is *irrational* if she grieves this fact.[16] In my book, I make the case against Paul and Ullmann-Margalit by describing the rational structure of the process governing one's transition to motherhood, or becoming a citizen of another country.[17] In place of that argument, what I am going to offer here is an example of aspiration.

The reader may wonder why I am adding to the examples I have already offered of myself as proto-classicist, of Bill's foray into music, of Sheila's romantic aspirations. The problem is that examples are prone to collapse under theoretical pressure. If one's interlocutor is not inclined to acknowledge some phenomenon, she will simply re-interpret purported examples of it. So, for instance, if I point out that Sheila, Bill, and I do not derive the end-state from our earlier value condition, the interlocutor will point out that I went to graduate school with *some* appreciation for classics; likewise, *mutatis mutandis*, for Bill and Sheila. She will be inclined to say that my (weak, incipient) appreciation of classics explains my further progress *in just the way* that my appreciation of hospitality explains my coming to eat meat. I will reply that the aspirant's actions are "grounded" in her antecedent appreciation of value in the way that someone is grounded in the spongy mud of a swamp. She reaches toward the stable, fixed value condition on which the self-cultivator rests comfortably from the outset. When interlocutor rightly demands that I cash out this metaphor, I cannot merely reiterate the distinction between the original acquisition of a value-nexus, and the extrapolation or extension of an already established valuation. For the stubborn interlocutor simply denies that there is a principled distinction to be drawn there: she insists that either the agent has a firm enough value-basis to move forward, or what happens to her is

[13] Ullmann-Margalit, "Big Decisions," 167.

[14] She does not therefore think they are *irrational:* "In order to be irrational about something there must also be a rational way of going about it, and the rational way of going about opting is what I am here questioning" (ibid., 168).

[15] At the end of her book *Transformative Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), L. A. Paul suggests that there may be one way of making these decisions rationally: if the agent has a higher-order preference in favor of having new preferences (pp. 118–20). On Paul's analysis, however, this reason is paradoxically promiscuous: the very same reason will be a reason both to have a child and to emigrate from one's homeland. I offer a way of retaining the fine-grained rationality of such choices in my paper "Proleptic Reasons" forthcoming in *Oxford Studies in Meta-Ethics* vol. 11 (2016).

[16] L. A. Paul, "What You Can't Expect When You're Expecting," *Res Philosophica* 92, no. 2 (2015): 21.

[17] Callard, *Aspiration,* chap. 1, parts V–VI.

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not something she does. How can we convince her that she *must* make space between these options?

It might seem, then, that we can make no progress with examples until we carefully unpack the assumptions underwriting the interlocutor's unwillingness to admit a third way. But I think that is not the case, because examples are not all made equal. In the remainder of this essay, I will discuss an example that is especially resistant to the reinterpretative gambit, because it is in a certain sense paradigmatically aspirational: liberal arts education. I will show that if we take ourselves to be forced to choose between modeling college education as passive and modeling it as self-cultivation, we will introduce a recognizable distortion of the phenomenon.

VI. The Parental Model

What are college students after? What do they hope to get out of the classes they take from philosophers such as myself, or from my colleagues in English, history, mathematics, and so on? Consider two models that we might apply to students' engagement with the value of the education they receive in college.

The first model is the parental model. On this model, a student needn't have access to what is valuable about the education she receives. The principal authors of her transformation are the teachers and administrators who have their eye on the prize. The parental model presents the acquisition of whatever is valuable about a liberal arts education as a form of passivity. The students *are changed* but do not *change themselves.* This model may be a good fit for much, if not all, of the education that one receives before attending college. As Harry Brighouse brings out in his defense of schooling directed at "human flourishing," the parental model is an appropriate attitude toward children:

> If I feel uncomfortable with the role of facilitating a child to lead a flourishing life, or making judgments about what a flourishing life will be for her, then I should feel equally uncomfortable forcing her to eat what I regard as healthy, or good, food, or to listen to what I believe is good music, or to read what I regard as enjoyable books. Or, for that matter, forcing her to attend a building for seven hours a day; to sit still and listen to what the teacher has to say; and forcing her to interact with numerous other coerced detainees with whom she may have no natural affinity. Once we have accepted the principle of parental obligation, we have accepted the paternalistic principle that we know better for the children what should happen to them than they do themselves. And, having accepted the principle, and the consequence that parents have the right to send their children to school, we have to ask to what purpose we should use the time they spend in

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> the school. The simple answer is that we should use the time, at least in part, to facilitate their long-term prospects of living a successful and flourishing life.[18]

It is striking that Brighouse portrays teachers and parents as the ones who "use the time" that students spend in school. Are such students passive recipients of their education? Children must show up to class, participate in discussions, complete assignments, and so forth, else they will get no benefit from the time spent in school. In defense of Brighouse, we can point out that a student may be motivated to act in ways conducive to her acquiring an education not because she understands the value of doing so, but partly by authority (students trust and respect their teachers), partly by compulsion (students must attend school), partly from enjoyment (well-designed assignments can be pleasant), and partly by reward (parents and teachers find ways to associate positive outcomes with academic success). On the parental model, the students themselves don't need to understand the values they are to acquire; that understanding has been delegated to the parents, teachers, school administrators, and policymakers who are in charge of the process of educating them. And these people may, indeed, know better "what should happen to them than they do themselves." But only temporarily.

High school students typically experience alienation from school, finding that it regulates their lives in ways that can strike them as arbitrary and stifling. They rebel against parental, academic, and other authorities, asserting their need to make choices about how to live their own lives. In this period of life, a person begins to age out of being, as it were, the patient of her own education. The parental model seems most appropriate to elementary school, and positively inappropriate — disrespectful — by the time a person enters college. It would be both false and offensive for me to claim that I know better than my students what constitutes *for them* a happy and flourishing life. Even if we suppose that my years of study and life experience give me a better general conception of what a happy or meaningful or flourishing life is, I cannot claim the authority to think through the meaning of my students' lives on their behalf.

If education is to outstrip childhood, we need a nonparental model for the later stretches of the educational process. This is to say that we need a model where the agent herself is at the helm of the educational process by which she changes. For only a nonparental model will pay proper respect to the student as someone whose place it is to govern her own acquisition of knowledge, desires, interests, habits, and, most importantly, values. She may do a poor job of it, at least at first, but it is not a job anyone can do for her.

[18] Harry Brighouse, *On Education* (NY: Routledge, 2006), 42–43.

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VII. The Consumer Model

An alternative model, one to which a young adult may herself be drawn,[19] is to think of herself as a *consumer* in relation to her education. Our students do, after all, "shop" for classes which, if they take, they can go on to review; these reviews are sometimes accessible online, presumably to assist others who are trying to determine whether to make the same "purchase." And these students, or their parents, have indeed paid a high price for the courses they take from us. Given that they often go deep into debt in the process, it is not unreasonable that they should demand to acquire their money's worth.

The problem with the consumer model is that it presupposes that students enter college already in possession of exactly what they attend college to get. Consider what makes someone an ideal or excellent consumer: such a person does not go to the supermarket for milk and come home with magazines; she buys a car for its automotive properties, and because of how it looks or what her neighbors think;[20] she has done her research, and she is also self-informed — she must know her own needs and desires in order to gauge which purchases would serve her well. She enters the store armed with a schema that her purchase must fit, and she will not spend money until she can be fairly certain, in advance, that she has lit upon something that satisfies this schema. She grasps the value of what she is getting before she gets it. When she gets it, she therefore experiences satisfaction, a kind of match or fit between what she thought she was going to get and what she in fact ended up getting. What makes an ideal consumer ideal is that she is *informed*. She knows what she wants, and she knows what kinds of things are available to satisfy those wants. She is, then, full of knowledge about her own values, needs and desires, and about what the world has on offer to address them. But our students go to college precisely in order to acquire this knowledge.

[19] "You know, we're paying for a service. We're paying for our attendance here. We need to be able to get what we need in a way that we can actually consume it," said a college student quoted in the recent *New Yorker* article on student unrest at Oberlin ("The Big Uneasy," May 30, 2016).

[20] I am here assuming what I must acknowledge as a cartoonishly simple picture of what it is to be a consumer. A more nuanced conception would acknowledge the aspirational features of consumption, that is, that such a person could be shopping for a status symbol. That more nuanced picture would, of course, be less useful to me in drawing the relevant contrast; but it would also, I think, presuppose the success of the argument presented here. For what I am trying to do is to show that there is such a thing as the aspirational feature the sophisticated theorist is trying to include in his picture of consumption. The theorist might deny this, and insist, in the words of an anonymous referee, that "buying a flashy car could be straightforwardly instrumental in light of the value I currently place on the respect or esteem of my peers." I am inclined to deny that such purchases are best characterized as "straightforwardly instrumental." It is telling that people would find it uncomfortable to describe themselves as attempting to buy the respect of their peers unless they wanted that respect for some ulterior motive, for example, as part of a bid for political office. In any case, the "straightforwardly instrumental" construal of conspicuous consumption is one on which it fits into my cartoonishly simple model. Thanks to Tyler Cowen, Bas van der Vossen, Jonathan Anomaly and an anonymous referee for pressing me on this issue.

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When one teaches art history or physics or French at the college level, one is trying to give students access to a distinct domain of aesthetic, scientific, or literary value. We aren't selling them something they already want; instead, we are trying to help them learn to want something, or to strengthen and deepen a pre-existing but weak desire. We teach them to demand more, of life and of themselves, than they would otherwise have done. We help them see what is out there on offer, and what they themselves want and need. As a result, they (hopefully) *become* informed consumers. And this suggests that they cannot already *be* informed consumers when we first meet them.

The fact that liberal arts education is predicated on the uninformedness of the consumer is an indication that the consumer model distorts the students' activity. It distorts that of the teacher as well, discouraging her from acknowledging the distinctive kind of benefit she provides. She is there to change how the student sees things rather than to help him get what he can already see that he wants. Must we, then revert to the parental model, and treat them as children who are not in a position to govern their own choices and actions? I believe there is a third option.

VIII. Students as Aspirants

Recall the distinction between those changes that are wrought by the agent herself, and those that are products of environmental influences. The parental model suggests that education belongs in the latter category: the student is passive in relation to the change of becoming educated. On the consumer model, students are active in the mode of self-cultivation: they are in school because they recognize just what is to be gained from each educational choice. The suggestion I want to make is that the right model for higher education is the aspirational model. What the possibility of aspiration reveals is that there is some space between a condition in which other people are rightly in charge of your agency and development, and a condition in which you know what's good for you. For the aspirant, learning what is good for herself is her own work.

The concept of aspiration gives us a way of modeling the work we do in helping our students as something other than a form of *service* to needs that are fully independent of that work. Aspirants are characteristically needy and vulnerable, because they are guided by a sense of value on which they have only a tenuous grip. They reach out for mentors, not because they want to farm out the activity of grasping the value of their own pursuits to someone else, but because they cannot do it alone. The aspirant feels, all the time, that her grip on the value of what she is doing is tenuous. She is hungry for more, self-critical, vulnerable to others' assessments as to whether she is getting it right. At the same time she strives to free herself from needing their help, from caring what they think of her. Her vulnerability should not be confused with childishness: it calls

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for a courageous self-awareness of weakness that marks adulthood. She hasn't *committed* to turning her life in some pre-approved direction. She is expending considerable resources stretching herself hopefully toward something she grasps only through a glass darkly, all too aware of the danger that she may be left empty-handed.

Though they know that they do not know, our students also insist that the meaning of what they are learning is theirs to discover. They are not and should not be willing to entrust to us the project of becoming someone new. If we see them as aspirants, we can see how much they need our help, while at the same time recognizing that the form of help they are seeking is compatible with respecting them as self-shaping adults.

Some years after graduating from college, I asked the best teacher I ever had why she stopped teaching the course I first took with her. She said that she stops teaching a book when she feels she knows it too well to be curious about what other people have to say about it. That response helped me to understand why the experience of being her student was, above all, the experience of being listened to, as though I were a font of answers to life's great questions. She would stare intently at me while I spoke, and often her reply would take the form of a two word command: "Another sentence." My first reaction was always panic. I would think to myself, I've said all I had to say. To my own surprise, the words would come, I would draw out the sentence that I didn't know was in me. It would have been unthinkable to demand that her class serve any desire or need I had before I entered it; but I also couldn't see her as an authority figure, not when she was taking what *I* said so seriously. She wasn't forcing or even suggesting that I become anything; she was somehow enabling me to hold myself up to the set of standards that I was just beginning to recognize as my own. I would not be the person that I am without her. But she did not make me who I am. Though our teachers may draw it out from us, that next sentence expresses our thought and not theirs.

IX. Pure Aspiration?

There is an important difference between the examples of aspiration with which I began — my pursuit of classics, Sheila's foray into dating, Bill's quest to appreciate classical music — and the case I have leveraged those examples to analyze. Though Sheila and Bill and I did not begin our aspirational journey with a full grasp of the value we sought to come to appreciate, we would have been able to say from the start *what value* we were hunting. The processes by which the three of us came to arrive at or near our goals have the rational structure they do because we directed them, from the outset, at some definite target: Classics, romance, music. I may not have known the value of classics, but I did know that it was the value of *classics* that I was after. If my target had radically shifted, say from classics to music, or from music to romance, it would not have seemed

right to describe me as engaged in an aspirational project. The agent who shifts from classics to romance to music seems to be drifting rather than working to make systematic progress along an aspirational trajectory. And the agent who is trying to "find herself" without having any sense of whether she is trying to find a self interested in classics, romance, or music seems to be flailing rather than aspiring.

The problem is that the college experience is characterized by just such shifting and uncertainty. In the good case, students leave college with a deeper grasp of some intrinsic value(s) than they had at the outset. As a result of their time in college, something matters to them that didn't matter to them as much, or at all, before. But did they go off to college *in order to* come into contact with those very values? In many cases, no. I endeavor to bring it about that my students leave college with some appreciation for and interest in philosophy — but many of them had not even heard of the subject before entering college. A fortiori, they didn't come to college *in order* to study it. And even in cases where the student did enter with the relevant passion, they often enter with *many* such passions, and little, or a mistaken, view as to which they will end up deepening.[21]

When I changed my undergraduate major from physics to classics, I did not experience this change as a breaking off and restarting my college education. By contrast, when I switched from a Classics PhD program to one in philosophy, I did experience a break in my professional training. Though the subjects, especially given my own specialization, were much closer to one another, the switch meant that I left a program training me to become a classicist and entered one that trained me to become a philosopher. Graduate education does not have the flexibility to accommodate such shifts in one's aspirational target. Undergraduate education, by contrast, can allow for shifts away from the academic domain altogether, into theater or activism or sports; even time spent working through romantic entanglements can be a profitable element of the college journey. An event that would mark the termination of the graduate student's (or romance seeker's, or would-be music lover's) aspiration is but a shift within the career of the undergraduate's.

A. Bartlett Giamatti's[22] address to the incoming class at Yale beautifully captures this peculiar condition of aspirational uncertainty:

> All summer long . . . you have simply wanted to get on with it. There, of course, is the rub. Despite all you have heard and read, no one can tell you what it is you are now so desirous of getting on with. Nor can

[21] For a discussion of the prevalence and meaning of student's indecision about their course of study, see V. N. Gordon, *The Undecided College Student: An Academic and Career Advising Challenge,* 2nd. ed. (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1995).

[22] A. Bartlett Giamatti, "The Earthly Use of a Liberal Education," in his *A Free and Ordered Space: The Real World of the University* (New York: W.W. Norton,1990), 118–26.

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> anyone tell you what it, whatever it is, will be like. You wonder, Will everyone else know? Will he or she be more sure, less insecure, less new? Will I ever get to know anyone? Will I be able to do it? Whatever it is. . . .
>
> I cannot tell you with certainty what it will be like; no one can. Each of us experiences college differently. I can assure you that soon your normal anxieties will recede and a genuine excitement will begin, a rousing motion of the spirit unlike anything you have experienced before. And that will mark the beginning of it, the grand adventure that you now undertake, never alone but on your own, the voyage of exploration in freedom that is the development of your own mind. Generations have preceded you in this splendid opening out of the self as you use the mind to explore the mind, and, if the human race is rational, generations will come after you. But each of you will experience your education uniquely — charting and ordering and dwelling in the land of your own intellect and sensibility, discovering powers you had only dreamed of and mysteries you had not imagined and reaches you had not thought that thought could reach.[23]

Giamatti's description may strike some as pious and high-minded; to others, it may be a reminder of the privilege experienced by the very few undergrads who are in a position to attend elite institutions such as Yale. To me, it rings true, at least as a description of my better moments as a student and a teacher; and I readily grant that one should be grateful to have teachers and students that afford one even so much as glimpse into such a process. My experience aside, I cannot know whether the phenomenon Giamatti describes is typical of what happens at colleges across the United States; I have no doubt that the freedom to engage in such a process, which must turn a deaf ear to worldly demands for predictable advances and fungible value, is associated with many forms of privilege. My interest is not in the empirical question of how often this ideal of liberal learning is instantiated, or even in whether it *is* the ideal of liberal learning. My interest is in how what Giamatti describes is so much as conceptually coherent. Even those who would decry it as the wrong ideal or a bastion of economic and social privilege seem to admit this much. For they do not fail to understand what he is talking about. And that is already a remarkable fact.

Recall Bill. He becomes someone who loves *music*, and he takes a *musical* journey, and he learns to think *about music.* In the case of the college student attending Giamatti's lecture, we may well be unable to fill in the corresponding blanks. We regularly describe college as a place where people learn how to think (about what?) or a place of personal development (into

[23] Giamatti, "Earthly Use of a Liberal Education," 118–19.

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what?) or as an intellectual journey (whither?). This is, to adapt a line of thought from David Velleman, like saying that if college were a game, its goal would be winning; or that if it were a hunt, its goal would be the quarry; or that if college were a question, its goal would be to find the answer.[24] Velleman insists that an activity-description that invokes only such a formal or generic object is incomplete, or in Velleman's phrase, not "fully constituted."[25] Just as Velleman would correct the game-player who says her goal is winning — "that's the goal of every game, what's the goal of *this* one?" — he would have to correct the description of the college student as becoming someone or acquiring new values or learning how to think. He would demand that we supply the more specific goal and value by which to assess her aspirational success.

Velleman's demand is not unreasonable. If her aspirations get her anywhere, she does end up having satisfied a far more specific goal than that of value-acquisition in general. But that goal needn't be one she could articulate at the outset. We must distinguish between an activity-description that is incomplete because it adopts too general a level of description ("What are you doing?" "Something"), and one that is incomplete because it describes only the beginning of a long process. If we fail to make this distinction, we will think that incompleteness always calls for a more specific description, as opposed to calling for us take in a longer swath of the phenomenon. This is to say that it is possible that our description is incomplete because the thing we are describing has not been completed. Some forms of agency are not homogeneous in their rational structure; instead of having the structure of a game governed by a determinate set of rules throughout the course of play, they have the structure of a blurry image gradually coming into view. The college student will be able to produce a description that satisfies Velleman; but she may not be able to do so *yet*.

Consider the poetic last line quoted above: "reaches you had not thought that thought could reach." Giamatti envisions a project where one could not have foreseen in advance the very existence of the developmental steps that one ends up taking, a voyage into territory that seems to materialize as one advances into it. This line captures the impotence of a motive such as "curiosity" to fuel the sort of exploration Giamatti has in mind. An appetite for learning is bounded by a person's conception of what there is to be learned, and it is this conception, as much as anything, that is subject to revision, emendation, improvement. To "use the mind to explore the mind" involves using the mind to disturb, goad, and provoke the mind into wanting to know something, the knowledge of which will goad it into wanting more. It is hard work to learn to ask the questions of the physicist, the philosopher, the anthropologist. Those teachers do not simply provide answers to questions with which their students happen

[24] J. David Velleman, "The Possibility of Practical Reason," *Ethics* 106, no. 4 (1996): 694–726.
[25] Ibid., 701.

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to approach them; one doesn't study any of these subjects because one is "just curious." Seeing one's way to the questions of physics or philosophy is itself an achievement within physics and philosophy.[26]

We will lose our sense of what is happening with our students if we reinterpret what they are doing by way of a description that applies, homogeneously, throughout the process. It is true that college students are curious. It is also true that argumentative training fortifies a mind against deceptive political and commercial rhetoric, fitting one for democratic citizenship; college writing and classroom discussion gives a person lifelong training in articulating, and therefore also having, her own views; employers of many kinds are eager to hire liberal arts graduates.[27] College may, indeed, help you do whatever you happen to want to do next — but it is infelicitous to describe college students as engaged in the project of furthering whatever ends they might later acquire. No undergraduate ever wrote a great paper on Descartes solely with a view to acquiring skills she might later apply in her political career — even if it is true that by writing the paper she was thereby acquiring those skills. If we were assuming the parental model, we could separate the question of how the student conceives of what she is doing from the question of the kind of education she is receiving. But, as I've been insisting, college students are too old to have their learning governed by anyone's else's conception of its value.

The problem with portraying college as a rational skills factory is not only that the education has an intrinsic value that we ignore by instrumentalizing it as skill-acquisition; it's that the very acquisition of those skills seems, in this case, to be predicated on not taking skill-acquisition as one's primary goal.[28] Our students approach Descartes or painting or psychology in a meticulous rational spirit because they have learned, and are learning, to come to care about Descartes and painting and psychology.

[26] One could imagine a form of curiosity that is open-ended, highly motivating, and expands rather than contracts in response to satisfaction. But we will have thereby imagined an aspirational form of curiosity. I employ this mode of argument in relation to a number of would-be explanatory substitutes for aspiration in my "Proleptic Reasons" (ibid.).

[27] Martha Nussbaum (*Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010]) makes the political argument (see esp. chap. 4); Fareed Zakariah (*In Defense of a Liberal Education* [New York: W. W. Norton, 2015]) focuses on the virtues of self-articulation. For the economic argument, see Alison Wolf, *Does Education Matter?: Myths About Education and Economic Growth* (London: Penguin Business, 2003), chap. 2.

[28] Could someone acquire these skills more directly, simply by setting out to do so? Perhaps, but the very generality of the skills — thinking logically, reading carefully, arguing forcefully, writing clearly — makes it, I think, hard to get a grip on them except in a more oblique way. Those who have taught classes specifically designed to improve students' writing have encountered the problem of trying to get students to care about writing well while paying less attention to the importance of what they are writing about. It is usually relatively easy to improve the basic mechanics of student writing in this way, but harder to address deeper problems. But in case the conceptual point here is questionable, let me simply record my own experience: I find that great strides in respect of reading, writing, arguing, and thinking tend to go hand in hand with a passion for the material in which these skills are exercised.

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It is because the meaning of her life has become entwined with the meaning of some sentences in Descartes that Cartesian arguments become an arena in which the student's mind develops. The entering class Giamatti addresses is likely to have left Yale with a toolkit of rational skills, for good jobs, and to have become better citizens in the process; but those descriptions will have left out much of what college has meant for them.

Velleman is right that if all we are doing is "doing something" or "becoming someone" then we are not doing anything at all. But there is an important difference between the question of whether someone is to be described in this objectionably "formal" or "generic" way in virtue of the beginning of the process or the end. Suppose a suit-maker cuts and tailors his suits to fit any figure. Before tailoring, such a suit is not a 38 or 40; it is not short or long. We would misrepresent the fact that such a suit has no determinate size[29] if we were to claim that it was one size fits all.[30] Rather, the suit is unfinished. I am encouraging the reader to resist shoehorning aspiration into agreement with Velleman's principle by way of a generic common element, such as curiosity, rational skill-acquisition or citizenship training. The purpose of what you are doing can itself be something that you are learning; and one way that a purpose can guide your behavior is by becoming something you get better and better at grasping.

This form of guidance characterizes aspiration quite generally, but it stands out with special clarity in the case at hand. The case of the college student reveals that even when we have purged the aspirant of any attachment to music, or romance, or classics, we can still describe her as

[29] Within the domain of suit-sizing. Of course in another sense it does have a size, since it has a definite spatial extension. For this reason, the paradox that would lead one to mischaracterize the suits as "one size fits all" is more superficial than that involved in liberal education.

[30] One ingenious instance of such a one-size-fits-all strategy are the "maieutic ends" described in David Schmidtz's "Choosing Ends," (*Ethics* 104, no. 2 [1994]: 226–51. A maieutic end is an end achieved by coming to have other ends. Schmidtz himself offers the example of Kate, who has the end of doing something with her life, and pursues this end by going to medical school. Schmidtz claims that she values medicine as an end in itself, but she also values it as a way of fulfilling her maieutic end of doing something with her life. Allan Buchanan has also made a suggestion to me along these lines with regard to Bill and Sheila: a person might have a desire to be well-rounded, and thus takes up music or romance as a way of satisfying this desire. Having maieutic ends of this kind allows us to choose final ends. But how is the transition between the general (maieutic) end and the particular final end effected? Schmidtz says that "at some point, she concluded that going to medical school and becoming a surgeon would give her the career she wanted." (p. 228) The question is, as it were, what were the premises from which she concluded this? Was she selecting randomly among ends that instantiate her general end? In this case, the transition is not something she did. Or did she have desires that medicine (or music) would speak to? In that case, her pursuit of her end would be instrumental, as Schmidtz wants to deny. But there is a third possibility, which is that she settles her end because she gradually gets its value into view. An aspirational process of learning (as opposed to merely instantiating) value could, indeed, explain the transition from the maieutic end (of having some project) to the final end (of becoming a doctor). My contention is not that we lack maieutic ends, but that they do not, absent aspiration, explain the rational but noninstrumental development of final ends.

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doing something — aspiring. She is trying to become someone, to acquire values, to come to see what she cannot yet get in view. College education is paradigmatically aspirational because the "purity" of the aspirant's initial condition helps shine a spotlight on exactly what goes missing when we try to assimilate Bill and Sheila's grasp of the value of music and romance to my grasp of the value of being a good guest. What drives Bill, Sheila, and the college student is not the appreciation of those values they already have, but the prospect of the (true, complete) appreciation they can see they lack.

But its purity also makes this particular form of aspiration especially puzzling. How can someone pursue the project of becoming someone when she has no (or wrong) ideas about who she wants to become? The answer, in this case, seems to be the existence of a special kind of institution. There do seem to be some unique features of the institutions that sustain such aspiration, for instance:

(1) They offer students the opportunity to learn just about anything they might end up wanting to learn. I could have become a classicist at a university without a physics department, but I wouldn't have become an undergraduate classics major at such a place. For I came to classics through physics.
(2) They offer students extra-academic opportunities for engagement with sports, drama, journalism, religion, political activism.
(3) They offer opportunities for friendship and romance.
(4) They present all these varied forms of value to students who are not yet expected to have any expertise in them. Moreover, those students are at some leisure to explore these values without being subject to a demand to produce output of value to anyone but themselves.
(5) They surround the student, who has recently emerged from the orbit of her parents' authority, with authorities in every subject but no parental substitutes. These authorities — professors, for the most part — are people whose guidance is conditional: they will help one make way in some domain of value provided that the one devotes oneself in that direction.

By way of these features, and perhaps others, a certain class of educational institutions — colleges and universities — make it possible to begin your aspirational path towards, for instance, philosophy or classics, before you have any sense of the relevant values as possible targets for aspiration.

In this essay, I have argued that aspiration helps us makes sense of liberal education. The aspirational analysis presents a third way between characterizing our students as children, and taking them to know already what kind of people they should become. When we see liberal education aspirationally, we are in a better position to articulate the distinctive benefits

it can provide. Liberal education, in turn, helps us get aspiration squarely into view; for it focuses our attention on the characteristically aspirational movement towards value that Giamatti called the "splendid opening out of the self."

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