# Summary of Book as a Whole:

This book addresses a new form of agency: the agency of becoming. It locates standing assumptions in the theory of rationality, moral psychology and autonomy that preclude the possibility of working to acquire new values. It also explains what changes need to be made if we are to make room for this form of agency, which I call aspiration.

Becoming someone is a learning process; and what we learn, in the first instance, are the new values around which, if we succeed, our lives will come to turn. Agents transform themselves in the process of becoming parents, embarking on careers, or acquiring a passion for music or politics. How can such activity be rational, if the reason for engaging in the relevant pursuit is only available to the person one will become? How is it psychologically possible for someone to feel the attraction of a form of concern that is not yet one’s own? How can the work done to arrive at the finish line be ascribed to one who barely knows what she is doing, or why she is doing it? These questions belong to the theory of aspiration.

Here is a brief overview of the answers the book provides: Aspirants are motivated by proleptic reasons, acknowledgedly defective versions of the reasons they expect to eventually grasp. The psychology of such a transformation is marked by intrinsic conflict between their old point of view on value and the one they are trying to acquire. They cannot adjudicate this conflict by deliberating or choosing or deciding—rather, they resolve it by working to see the world in a new way. This work has a teleological structure: by modeling herself on the person she is trying to be, the aspirant brings that person into being. Because it is open to us to engage in an activity of self-creation, we are responsible for being the kinds of people we are.

# Chapter-by-Chapter Summaries:

# Introduction:

In addition to reasoning *from* the valuational condition we are already in, it is possible to reason *towards* value. This form of value-learning is aspiration. Its neglect in the philosophical literature on rationality, moral psychology and responsibility is visible in certain subtle ways in which the space of possibility has been narrowed in each area. But aspiration must be possible, since it is actual. We see it in Alcibiades’ speech in Plato’s Symposium. Plato shows us the tortured condition of someone who can almost see what it would be like to see things differently: Alcibiades’ conventional honor-loving values move him to flee from and hate Socrates, even as he struggles to recognize that the honor-loving life is not worth living. He can almost see his values as bankrupt—but he can’t quite, because they won’t go away.

# I. Decision Theory and Transformative Choice

If rationality is the maximization of expected preference-satisfaction, it appears impossible to rationally decide to change one’s core preferences. For there is no stable set of preferences whose maximization could determine the rationality of the choice. Some have argued that this means one cannot rationally become, e.g., a parent, philosopher, music-lover. But we do not become parents or philosophers by choosing: there are no acts of choice that take as their input a non-parent and output a parent. The rationality of major life transformations is invisible to those who look for it at an initial moment of decision to become a new person. These transformations are gradual—and not because we thoughtlessly ‘drift’ into the people we become. They are gradual because they are kinds of learning, and it takes time to learn to care about new things.

# II. Proleptic Reasons

If someone is to rationally engage in a large-scale transformative pursuit, she must be acting on some reason. The would-be music lover cannot listen to music for the ‘right’ reason, namely the intrinsic value of that music. For in order to grasp this reason, she would have to already value music. Nor can she act on the ‘wrong’ reason, e.g. because she wants a good grade, or in order to impress someone: if she were listening only for the sake of such extrinsic rewards, she would not be transforming herself. Such agents act on *proleptic reasons*, acknowledgedly defective variants of the reasons they will come to grasp fully at the end of their transformations. Proleptic reasons are not internal reasons—they cannot be arrived at by sound deliberation from what the agent already cares about. Instead, they reflect the possibility of rationally coming to care about something new.

# III. Intrinsic And Extrinsic Conflict

In an “extrinsic” conflict, an agent’s desires pull her toward incompatible actions. As a matter of contingent fact, nothing she does will get her everything she wants. Intrinsically conflicted agents are conflicted at the level of value, and this means that the conflict fracture’s the agent’s evaluative point of view: in order to get the appeal of one of the things she wants fully in view, she must step out of the point of view from which the other appears attractive. For this reason, the conflict cannot be resolved by deliberation as to which side is better overall. Harry Frankfurt is wrong to think that such conflicts are resolved by identifying with one side, and externalizing the other. In fact they cannot be resolved by any single, momentary act of the will: it takes time to work one’s way into a point of view. We resolve intrinsic conflicts by aspiring.

# IV. Akrasia

The standard analysis of weak-willed (akratic) action is that the agent acts on a reason she acknowledges as weaker than another she could have acted on. I argue that it does not make sense to think that the akratic “adds up” all her reasons, and then opts to act on the weaker set. Instead, we must conclude that the akratic is unable to add up the relevant considerations, because she is intrinsically conflicted. Intrinsically conflicted agents inhabit two evaluative perspectives at the same time, but only one of them—the dominant perspective—governs their deliberative activity. The akratic acts against her deliberation, because she is motivated by the subordinate evaluative perspective from which she does not deliberate. She acts on reasons her reasoning failed to take into account. Akrasia occurs because agents sometimes need to make use of—deliberate from—values they don’t (fully) have.

# V. The Problem of Self-Creation

The new values, acquisition of which constitutes my act of self-creation, must either be continuous or discontinuous with the ones I already have. If they are continuous, I am not changing but rather working out the implications of the person I already was. If they are discontinuous, and the new values contradict or come at a tangent to my old values, the change is not a product of my agency. I change, but I do not change myself. This paradox, adapted from the work of Galen Strawson, can be solved if we allow that the direction of value-dependence may be teleological: the aspirant’s values depend on, and are entailed by, those of the person she is trying to be. The aspirant does not fashion, control, or make the self she creates. Instead, she looks up to that self, tries to understand her, endeavors to find a way to her.

# VI. Self-Creation and Responsibility

Aspiration, unlike Talbot Brewer’s “dialectical activities,” is a learning process in which someone moves from an inadequate to an adequate grasp of some value. Because one cannot learn what is not there, we can only take ourselves (or others) to aspire when we think there is something *there* to aspire to. Aspiration is distinct from *ambition*, in which agents make large-scale changes in the world without coming to learn why they are doing so. If some pursuit—e.g. becoming a gangster—is bereft of value at the endpoint, it cannot be engaged in aspirationally. This gives rise to an asymmetrical theory of moral responsibility for self: we are responsible for our valuational successes to the extent that we arrived at them aspirationally, and we are responsible for our valuational defects to the extent that they are the products of culpable failure to aspire.

Conclusion

The conceptual landscape in the theory of rationality, moral psychology and moral responsibility must be modified—by the addition of proleptic reasons, by the recognition of intrinsic conflict, by the acknowledgement of teleological self-creation—in order to make room for aspiration. Why? The stakes here are both philosophical and personal: unless we recognize the distinctive ethical status of aspirants, we will be liable to mistreat an especially vulnerable population. Consider the characteristic mistreatment to which we subject those struggling with infertility and unwanted pregnancy—we tend to judge that unless they have a full, i.e. non-proleptic, grasp of the reason to (not) want children, they have no reason to mourn the relevant loss. Aspirants open themselves up to a distinctive experience of losing what they did not have but were only *trying* to have. We must acknowledge the reality of aspiration in order to apprehend the profundity of such losses.