

Reports of the Death of Aspiration Have Been Indeed Much Exaggerated

Blaine J. Fowers
University of Miami

Jordan B. Ainsley
University of Miami

G. Tyler Lefevor
University of Miami

Mailing address:

Blaine J. Fowers, Ph.D.
Department of Educational
and Psychological Studies
P.O. Box 248065
University of Miami
Coral Gables, FL 33124

Telephone: (305) 284-5261
Fax: (305) 284-3003
E-Mail: bfowers@miami.edu

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In their recent article, Williams and Gantt (2013) make the provocative claim that the only way to account for human aspiration is to recognize the existence of an eternal soul. Although it is possible to argue for such a position, their exposition is plagued by unsubstantiated assertions, false dichotomies, straw-person arguments, appeals to authority, and disregard for large psychological literatures related to their claims. These problematic forms of argumentation are inadequate to the task that these authors set for themselves and show insufficient respect for many potential interlocutors. In their apparent eagerness to discuss their eternal soul thesis, Williams and Gantt dismiss the work of scholars in positive psychology, virtue ethics, and “mainstream psychology” with whom they share extensive common ground, thereby neglecting the richness and fruitfulness of these scholars’ contributions to the topic of human aspiration.

Key words: Aspiration, the good, eternal, mortal, fallacy

Williams and Gantt (2013) make a provocative set of claims regarding the discipline of psychology and a set of ontological possibilities for human life in their discussion of the death of aspiration. In fact, it is difficult to recall authors who have attempted to encompass an entire discipline and the eternal soul in a single journal article. We find their title and thesis rhetorically arresting. In addition, we find significant areas of agreement with Williams and Gantt. We agree with their basic intuition that a strongly deterministic approach to explaining human behavior negates aspiration. We also agree that aspirations to truth, beauty, goodness, and justice are constitutive of our humanity, and that the inclusion of the pervasive human interest in a purposeful future is indispensable to a full account of human action.

Given the common ground that we have with these authors, we will focus on four problematic forms of reasoning they use repeatedly to draw the conclusion that aspiration is only possible if humans have eternal souls. First, Williams and Gantt make frequent assertions that lack supporting arguments or evidence. Second, they repeatedly employ the fallacy of false dichotomies, in which they presuppose bifurcated explanations that ignore a wealth of existing options. They then conclude that their eternal soul thesis must be correct based only on their rejection of the alternative to their viewpoint. In this fallacy, “people often try to frame the issue of a discussion as a dichotomy, so that it appears that the respondent should be concerned with working out which one of the alternatives should be chosen, instead of thinking about other possible alternatives” (Walton, 2008, p. 52). The alternatives to their viewpoint in these dichotomies are always straw persons, a fallacy in which an opponent’s “position is misrepresented, by being misquoted, exaggerated, or otherwise distorted, and then this incorrect version is used to attack his argument and try to refute it (Walton, p. 21). Finally, these authors consistently rely on appeals to authority to support their claims, seeking readers’ affirmation of their views solely by appeal to the respect or reverence readers have for these authorities. That is, they quote

three philosophers' views without any of the philosophers' supporting arguments as though the quotations, by the nature of their sources, are sufficient evidence for Williams and Gantt's viewpoint.

The problem that animates William and Gantt's discussion is their generalization that "the image of human nature operative in the mainstream of our discipline—with its commitment to naturalism, and the determinism and positivism therein—leaves no real room for aspiration. Metaphysical presumptions that regard human beings as natural objects, determined by things foreign to themselves as persons—even if built into their natures—ultimately render real aspiration meaningless, at best a useful illusion and at worst a pathological delusion" (p. 195).

They begin by stating: "Our basic contention will be...that aspiration—distinctly, the aspiration to the good, the true, and that which is best in us—is impossible, indeed it makes no sense, absent a grounding in some particular ontological possibilities..." (pp. 184-5). They believe that the work of Unamuno, Marion, and Levinas can give us "the most fundamental apprehension of our being." They present "access to this revelation" (p. 185) through quotations from these authors. They dismiss other psychologists' work as inadequate to the task of understanding and promoting human aspiration.

They make the following major claims:

1. Temporal continuity enables human identity and telos.
2. Temporal continuity has "little genuine or meaningful impact" (p. 186) unless it is based on an eternal soul.
3. "Human being is...fundamentally and inescapably moral being" (p. 189).
4. Any justification of morality must be based on the eternal soul. Rationality or commitments to others (present or future) are "indistinguishable from a simple desire" (p. 187).
5. They state that "at the foundation of our being" humans need "the assurance that we matter..." and the "ultimate assurance of the meaning of our existence comes...from loving" others (p. 190).
6. Unless humans are uncreated, eternal souls, all human interaction will consist of using one another as means.
7. The three most likely sources of an account of aspiration fail to support it.

- a. Positive psychology cannot account for aspiration because it is focused on individual happiness and meaning making.
 - b. Virtue ethics cannot account for aspiration because its “rationality” cannot “anchor...virtue and knowledge” (p. 193).
 - c. Mainstream psychology is inimical to human aspiration because it is naturalistic, deterministic, and positivistic.
8. Intelligence is the capacity that enables aspiration and it resides in the soul. For this reason, those who are committed to naturalism cannot give an account of intelligence.

The High Price of Eagerness

In setting out Williams and Gantt’s line of thought, we have omitted some minor premises in favor of focusing on their central theses. In this section, we will assess the arguments and evidence for each of the assertions just listed. We found a general lack of argument and evidence for their assertions. The most charitable interpretation of this is that the authors were so eager to present their eternal soul thesis that they could not take the time to make a persuasive case for it or the premises that could warrant such a conclusion. The degree to which they neglected to notice or engage with scholars who have similar interests is noteworthy because there is great potential for dialogue in this area. Given Williams and Gantt’s commitment to the concept of an eternal soul, perhaps they neglected other scholars’ work because it is limited to the mortal lives of humans, which may seem irrelevant or trivial in the context of an eternal existence. The price of their eagerness is that the only people likely to agree with them at the end were in agreement with them before beginning.

Assertion 1: Temporal continuity enables human identity and the human telos.

In discussing Unamumo, the first of Williams and Gantt’s three primary sources, the authors state that “temporal continuity into the future provides both a ‘who’ and a ‘why’ for the here-and-now of human existence” (p. 186). Strictly speaking, temporal continuity does not provide anything. Stars and

planets have temporal continuity. We believe that the authors meant that the awareness of one's temporal continuity provides the possibility for identity and purpose. Insofar as temporal continuity refers to the mortal lifespan of humans, we agree with this statement because identity and purpose require a personal future. Indeed, the persistence of identity through time and the involvement in purposeful activity appear to presuppose an awareness of one's temporal continuity.

Assertion 2: Temporal continuity has “little genuine or meaningful impact” if it is not based on an eternal soul.

The authors' claims regarding Unamuno's work, however, extend far beyond this conception of temporal continuity in the mortal lifespan as they claim temporal continuity is “*infinite*” and a matter of the soul (p. 186, italics in original). They further claim that “finite and measurable continuity” (i.e., an ordinary mortal human life) “engenders little genuine or meaningful impact. Infinite continuity, by contrast, not only impacts, but indeed *anchors* and *occasions* meaning itself” (pp. 186-187, italics added).

In one of their strongest assertions, Williams and Gantt claim that “If we are going to enable ourselves—and those whom we serve—to aspire at all, and to aspire to virtue in particular, we must affirm certain possibilities over other possibilities at the deepest metaphysical (or ontological) level—and then pursue psychology in a manner consistent with those affirmations” (p. 195). The “ontological starting point” they believe is necessary to “understand human beings” is to see humans as “distinguishable, indissoluble, eternal, uncreated, intelligent beings” (p. 196). They recognize the absence of arguments for these affirmations, so they simply stated them and “invite further scholarly investigation” (p. 195). We are stunned that these authors would make such controversial and unusual assertions in a scholarly publication without providing good reasons for the plausibility of their claims. In the absence of an argumentative or evidential basis for their core claim for an eternal soul, readers have

no reason to believe that this “ontological possibility” is plausible. The only justification they offer is an appeal to Unamuno’s authority.

Williams and Gantt appear to expect the term “wherefore” to do a lot of the work in establishing the necessity of the eternal soul. Although they use the term more than once per page (24 times in 17 pages of text), they don’t define it clearly. The extent of their definition is that it is “an end or purpose, a *telos*” and “whither we are going” (p. 186). Later, they add that “the wherefore” is not an instrumental concern, but “a concern for meaning” and “worthiness” (p. 187). We are left to guess what “whither we are going,” can possibly mean. Is it a place, a state of existence, heaven, hell, nirvana, or something else entirely? We are in a similar position with regard to what Williams and Gantt mean by purposes, ends, and meanings. Will any purpose, end, or meaning do? We are confident that they would answer in the negative, but they offer no way to know if they have something specific in mind or simply a subjective attachment to particular *teloi*. The wherefore is meant to justify their central premise, but there is neither an argument for that justification, nor a definition for its core term.

They go on to characterize the activities of ordinary mortal life as “calculations of short-term survivability and advantage, fight-flight, gratification, avoidance,” and so on with “little reason for aspiring to a virtue” unless the virtue can become an attribute of the individual’s eternal soul (p. 187). They claim that mortal “aspiration is indistinguishable from a simple desire” (p. 187). This is one of the most dramatic false dichotomies in this article. The authors claimed that the only way to have a meaningful life is to accept the idea that humans have eternal souls. By the authors’ terms and description, life is otherwise distinctly Hobbesian: nasty, brutish, and short. This may be a good example of what prompted Maslow’s (1993) caution that “dichotomizing pathologizes” (p. 317).

This is a false dichotomy for two reasons. First, Williams and Gantt provide no reason to believe that the dichotomy is accurate. All they do is bifurcate two views: an eternal aspiration-filled life versus a life that is brief, pitiable, and undesirable. Second, there are many alternatives to this dichotomy. To

give just one counter-example, Aristotle (1984) stated in the *de Anima* that humans do not have eternal souls, but like all animals “partake in the eternal and divine” through reproduction (415a 29). That is, mortal creatures have a share in eternity through acting as links in a potentially eternal chain of being. This is the activity of the nutritive-reproductive soul, the most basic soul of five souls that are the form of human being, according to Aristotle.¹ Our point here is not to say that Aristotle’s view is correct, but to point out that a thinker of Aristotle’s stature clearly believed it possible and worthwhile to discuss aspirations to virtue, goodness, and truth without positing an eternal soul. Perhaps Williams and Gantt know better, but we are not persuaded.

It is worth noting that Williams and Gantt used the same ancient Greek term, *psyche*, that Aristotle did, which is generally, but not always, translated as soul. They do not comment on their anachronism or on their emphatic claim that the soul is singular rather than plural. In fact, they do not tell us what a soul is, only what it is not (material or natural), giving a clear impression of unexamined dualism.

Williams and Gantt do not explain their conviction that eternity is necessary for human beings to aspire to goodness, beauty, and truth. It seems to us that there is ample room for aspiration within the span and scope of an ordinary human life. We recognize that some people have aspirations that exceed a mortal life, but it is difficult to see how that hope would render purpose and aspiration within a mortal life worthless or impossible. In our view, one can always aspire to be better today than one was yesterday, to have greater appreciation for beauty, a firmer commitment to justice, and a clearer grasp of human dignity.

If a mortal life is all we have, would the abdication of our humanity be inevitable, as Williams and Gantt believe it is? We can see no logical reason for such a surrender. If a person does not believe in an eternal soul, and could somehow know that his or her life would end tomorrow, would it make sense for that person to abandon all commitments, attachments, and aspirations? We would be callow

creatures indeed, if death robs us of what makes life worth living, even if that life is brief. We do not see our fellow mortals in such a negative light, and we are puzzled that Williams and Gantt take such a dim view of ordinary human life.

Let us be clear. We do not object to Williams and Gantt's conviction that humans have eternal souls. We do not object to them writing about eternal souls. However, we do object to their bald assertion of this viewpoint without any supporting argument or evidence. They make powerful ontological claims without providing context or justification. When scholars make such enormous and controversial claims, it is incumbent on them to provide a commensurate degree of justification.

We also object to the repeated use of the false dichotomy implying that those who do not agree with them are bereft of meaning and aspiration; condemned to live as short-term pleasure seekers who use others as means to their benighted ends. Williams and Gantt may counter that everyone truly has an eternal soul, whether they realize it or not, and that all humans aspire to goodness and truth, knowingly or not, by their very nature. But they did not write or even imply that. Even so, it would follow from that premise that those who do not believe in the eternal soul are deluded about their mortality, and whatever aspirations leak through this delusion are likely to be distorted and self-defeating. We believe that greater dignity should be accorded to differing viewpoints, particularly in a scholarly context (Sacks, 2003).

Assertion 3: "Human being is...fundamentally and inescapably moral being" (p. 189).

The authors' claim that the human being is fundamentally and inescapably moral is a significant area of agreement we share with Williams and Gantt. Our only objection to this assertion is that, again, they fail to provide adequate evidence or argument for their viewpoint. We believe it is essential to make a case for such an important and, for many psychologists, controversial claim. We have devoted

ourselves to arguing extensively for this proposition in ways we hope are persuasive (Fowers, 2005, 2010, 2012; Lefevor & Fowers, 2013; Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999).

Assertion 4: Any justification of morality must be based on the eternal soul.

Williams and Gantt boldly assert that “There is no answer to the questions ‘why be moral?’ or ‘why adopt a particular virtue?’” unless it is for the sake of one’s personal immortal soul. They dismiss the “articulation of principle” and any effort to “make things better either now or in some ephemeral ‘future’ that one will never experience, or better for some ephemeral ‘others’ whom one will never meet” as pointless unless it involves one’s personal eternal soul (p. 187). Without an eternal soul, “the enticements of desire...are largely irresistible” (p. 187). This is another false dichotomy. EITHER humans have eternal souls OR morality is impossible. Eternal aspiration is genuine, mortal aspiration is ephemeral. A compilation of their descriptors of ordinary mortal life includes the following terms: short-term, egoistic, merely contingent, accidental accretion, calculation, short-term survivability, advantage, pleasure-pain, fight-flight, gratification, avoidance, ephemeral, immediate desire, no genuine possibility, fulfillment in consumption, instrumental, and illusory. The ONLY way out this wretchedness is if there is an eternal soul. They don’t say why the eternal soul is necessary or inescapable, just that it is our only salvation. By their lights, there are only two alternatives; one of them is ghastly and the other is their beatific vision.

“Psychology and the Death of Aspiration” may be the “only-est” article we have ever read. We were intrigued by the frequency with which Williams and Gantt made strongly categorical claims in the article, so we counted the number of times the word “only” appeared. They used it 40 times, more than twice per page of text. Not all of the uses of “only” are categorical, and some of them are found in quotes, but this extensive use of the term indicates a very strong tendency toward categorical statements, and is a clear indicator of the pervasive presence of false dichotomies. We have already

cited one example, but here are a few more: “While both desire and aspiration can motivate and draw people toward action, desire, because of its generally presumed origin in the self or the body, can *only* draw us to the immediate in the self, the body, or the social context” (p. 187, italics added). “*Only* beings with the operative and confident hope of open-ended temporal continuity will find reason to bother to aspire at all” (p. 195, italics added). In their denunciation of naturalism, they say “at its ontological foundation, aspiration can *only* be physiologically anchored desire masquerading as something beyond itself” (p. 197, italics added). Mortal love “finds its purpose *only* in the consumption of its own fruits before the moment ends. Its goal is fulfillment in consumption” (p. 198, italics added).

The falseness of their dichotomy that aspiration is only possible on an eternal time scale is evident in a wealth of obvious counterexamples. An individual can aspire to be a good parent, not just for self-satisfying reasons or even just for the sake of his or her children, but for the sake of a legacy that will flow through many generations. The founders of the United States had neither short-term nor eternal aspirations. They wanted to create a lasting republic that would encourage widespread and long-lasting democratic government in this world. Physicians have aspired to rid this world of polio, rubella, and other diseases. Artists create works meant to inspire for the indefinite human future. Scientists seek to understand the cosmos for the pure wonder of it.

Williams and Gantt say that humans, seen as natural beings, “can do only what such a nature permits” (p. 198). Where we differ from them is that we think human nature permits a very great deal, and no one knows how far our humanity will reach. Do Williams and Gantt really want to dismiss the grandeur and beauty of mortal human possibility so cavalierly? One can only hope that they just became caught up in their rhetoric, but will subsequently acknowledge that there is much to admire and to aspire to in the ordinary plane of existence.

In our view, the clearest alternative to Williams and Gantt’s dichotomized vision is to recognize that, as human beings, we participate in a qualified form of eternity as links in the ongoing chain of life,

as illustrated by the examples in the previous paragraph. All human action contributes to the ongoing story of what it is to be human, for good or ill. These contributions may be prosaic or magnificent. We recognize, of course, that humans are capable of evil, both mundane and great, but how does the idea of an eternal possibility negate the value of mortal aspiration? We see no reason to believe that the aspirations to make significant, lasting contributions to human welfare, to enhance what it means to be a human being, require an eternal soul. It is our view that ordinary mortals are often quite inspirational.

Assertion 5: Following Marion, they state that “at the foundation of our being” humans need “the assurance that we matter” (p. 190). The “ultimate assurance of the meaning of our existence comes...from loving” others (p. 190).

Similar to our agreement with Williams and Gantt’s assertions regarding morality, we again find fundamental agreement that mattering is essential to human beings. Our understanding of the human need for meaning is based on a conception that of humans as deeply social, self-interpreting beings (Richardson et al., 1999). Williams and Gantt appeal to the authority of Marion, the second of their three primary sources in their differing view of this fundamental need. Marion may be correct that the ultimate form of mattering is found in loving others. It is certainly an interesting idea, but, again, such an important thesis deserves more justification than merely quoting a single authority. We think many readers would have welcomed a discussion of Marion’s reasoning for this view. This would be a good topic for an article all by itself. Williams and Gantt go much farther and say that loving should occur “without expectation of compensation and permanently” (p. 190). It sounds like they have a lot in mind here, but they do not clarify what they mean beyond this bald claim. It may be of interest to Williams and Gantt that there is a growing and fascinating literature on the value of loving others for human beings (e.g., Canevello & Crocker, 2010; Feeney & Collins, 2003; Fehr & Sprecher, 2009). Williams and Gantt may scoff at this research, both at its empirical approach and its focus on well-being and ordinary human relationships, but we believe that these studies provide a worthwhile intimation of the extent to which human nature includes the capacity to love deeply and to enact that love in the service of others.

Assertion 6: Unless humans are uncreated, eternal souls, all human interaction will consist of using one another as means.

We are in agreement with William's and Gantt's basic contention that "At the core of all meaningful intimacy with another human being is the requirement that we relate to him or her not as means but as ends in themselves" (p. 199). Yet we do not see how their claim about eternal souls follows from the need to matter. They believe that, "*Certainly*, a contingent person—one whose being is merely the contingent conflation of external natural realities—is more difficult to understand as an end in itself" (p. 199, italics added). At first, they claim only that contingency and physicality makes it difficult to see other people as ends in themselves. They quickly progress to a categorical claim: "Genuine intimacy...is impossible for natural organisms because it is impossible for them to rise beyond themselves" (p. 199). Curiously, they do not say why it is impossible for natural beings to think beyond themselves; they merely assert it. Yet there is a great deal of documentation that it is not only possible, but ubiquitous for human beings to rise beyond themselves through perspective taking (Decety, & Grèzes, 2006), empathy (Eisenberg, 2002), helping behavior (Maner et al., 2002), punishing cheaters without any possibility of gain (Fehr & Gaechter, 2002), and cooperation (e.g., West, Griffin, & Gardner, 2007). The authors offer no basis for dismissing all of this evidence.

Similarly, they contend that love is only genuine if it is eternal in nature. "Loving and mattering for an instant [their word for a non-eternal human life]...finds its purpose only in the consumption of its own fruits before the moment ends. Its goal is fulfillment in consumption... loving—in the context of temporal continuity [read: eternal]—makes loving and mattering ends in themselves, to be consummated, rather than consumed" (p. 198). No argument for this dichotomy is offered.

They then claim that "In relationship with eternal beings... we find the capacity to love and commit to others as ends in themselves. We find the 'wherefore' for love and for becoming 'for the

other” (p. 199). We can see how one could hope for this vision of eternal love and commitment. But it is also clear that this is not the only kind of eternity that is ontologically possible. Mere longevity, even eternal longevity, does not logically entail benevolence and love. In many belief systems, there is an eternal being such as Satan that is filled with hate and spite. The basis for Williams and Gantt’s faith in the benevolence of eternal souls is left unwarranted.

Assertion 7: According to Williams and Gantt, contemporary psychology offers no explanation or account of aspiration. They offer two specific and one broad source for this claim.

A: Positive psychology cannot account for aspiration because it is focused on individual happiness and meaning making.

The specific justifications Williams and Gantt make for the obliteration of aspiration in contemporary psychology comes from their apparent recognition of only two other contenders for an account of human aspiration: positive psychology and virtue ethics. They devote a section of their paper to discrediting each of these two viewpoints, apparently so that their preferred alternative is the only one left standing. They do not say this explicitly, but it is hard to see any other reason why they would present and criticize straw-person caricatures of these alternatives. There is no indication that they present these viewpoints out of respect or in the belief that they could learn something from and build upon others’ work.

Their dismissiveness is evident in their characterization of positive psychology as the mere pursuit of happiness and dispensing with it in less than two pages. This is a multivocal movement that involves thousands of scholars and practitioners. Williams and Gantt zero in on two issues with positive psychology. First, a tendency to focus on the pursuit of happiness, which has come under sustained critique from several quarters (e.g., Guignon, 2002; Held, 2004). We, the authors, are also critical of those who focus solely on shallow indicators of the quality of life such as life satisfaction or positive

affect. If this is an issue for Williams and Gantt, one would think that they would show more interest in the alternatives to shallow emotional well-being in positive psychology. They do not seem to be aware of even the most obvious alternative: a large and growing interest in eudaimonia or flourishing within and beyond positive psychology. There remains a good deal of debate about eudaimonia, but for many scholars, eudaimonia is a matter of living a meaningful, generative, growth-oriented life, a concept with clear relevance to some of Williams and Gantt's primary interests.

It is true that some studies focus on the benefits of a flourishing life to the individual, as if one seeks to flourish because it helps one to experience positive emotion (e.g., Niemiec, Ryan, & Deci, 2009). Yet many others see flourishing as the fulfillment of what it is to be a human being, with the benefits being secondary (e.g., Guignon, 2002; Huta & Ryan, 2010). It seems that these scholars would provide more fitting conversation partners, if that is of interest to Williams and Gantt. The authors' framing of purpose in eternal terms may be central to their reasons for dismissing this line of thought—the primacy of the eternal element may, in their view, preclude comparison between mortal eudaimonia and their conception of purpose. Nevertheless, we believe it worthwhile to learn from and acknowledge those who are investigating similar topics in the mortal realm, even if one is focused primarily on eternity.

The second area of critique is the relative neglect in positive psychology of the deeply social and moral aspects of human life. We agree that this is a weak point for positive psychology in general and Seligman in particular. Yet there are many people who affiliate to some degree with positive psychology and recognize and study the meaning in caring for others (e.g., Myers, 2004). Such scholars do not receive any notice from Williams and Gantt, who express interest in genuine caring and its meaning and value for humans, but do not give any indication that they want to learn from those studying human relations in the ordinary plane of existence.

B: Virtue ethics cannot account for aspiration because its “rationality” cannot “anchor...virtue and knowledge” (p. 193).

Following this discussion of positive psychology, Williams and Gantt begin their assessment of virtue ethics by complimenting Fowers (2005) and Macaro (2006). They devote a few lines to the core problem of virtue ethics, the identification of the human good, as did Aristotle. They list several possibilities for resolving that problem (a utilitarian ethic, natural law, intrinsic goods), none of which have been endorsed by Aristotle or any significant number of neo-Aristotelians (cf. Fowers, 2012). Williams and Gantt’s initial approach promises some degree of engagement with virtue ethicists, yet they short-circuit this engagement and dispense with virtue ethics in two pages. They do this by presenting an obvious and distorted straw person version of virtue ethics that is easy to discount. They begin this line of thought by setting up another hyperbolic dichotomy:

...unless one grounds one’s virtue ethics in some sort of “natural law” paradigm, then all that is left to aspire to is whatever happens to be practically and pragmatically successful in the pursuit of an integrated and praiseworthy life well lived...However, with or without natural law, the answer to the “why” question concerning virtue and aspiration is always the same: rationality (p. 193).

The first difficulty in understanding Williams and Gantt’s criticism is they do not clarify at all what they mean by rationality. This term has been contested for millennia. What is worse, they declare that it is at the center of Fowers’ views of virtue without a shred of evidence for that claim. They seem to think that the centrality of practical wisdom means that virtue ethics is subject to some problematic form of rationality, but they do not say either what they mean by rationality or why it is such a damning problem in virtue ethics. Williams and Gantt go on to worry that “virtue ethics, as found in contemporary psychology, with rationality as the foundation of such ethics, does not provide a ‘wherefore’” (p. 194). If they were correct, it would be a devastating critique.

Does Fowers’ version of virtue ethics offer a “wherefore?” Recall that a “wherefore,” in Williams and Gantt’s terms is a *telos*, end, purpose, or meaning. A cursory reading of Fowers (2005), with the

goal of “boiling it down” to a problematic thesis, one could misconstrue practical wisdom for problematic rationality. After all, Fowers writes that practical wisdom is “the ability to make wise decisions about how best to pursue one’s aims, [and] which character strengths to employ” (p. 5). If one stopped there, he does sound very instrumental, even egoistically rationalistic. We surmise, in the absence of any explanation of their own, that this is Williams and Gantt’s concern.

It is legitimate to ask whether Fowers (2005) portrays practical wisdom as instrumental rationality. The proper way to answer this question is through close examination of the text. Fowers discusses the relationship of practical wisdom to the human good throughout the book, and it is well-illustrated by two quotations: “The first and most central thing that we need to understand about virtues is that they are the character strengths that make it possible for human beings to pursue uniquely human aims or goods successfully” (p. 29). And what is practical wisdom? “In a nutshell, practical wisdom is the ability to make wise decisions about how to act well in a specific situation” (p. 13).

In addition, Fowers devotes the entire third chapter to a sustained critique of the instrumental rationality and ultimately recommends a clear alternative: the pursuit of choiceworthy human goods such as knowledge, justice, beauty, and friendship through constitutive activity. That is, the human good is attained through activity that constitutes or embodies specific human goods rather than through attempts to attain them instrumentally. Goods such as knowledge, justice, beauty, and friendship seem to qualify as ends or purposes that have great meaning. Do Williams and Gantt disqualify them because they are merely mortal goods? They seem to endorse at least friendship in eternity in their discussion of intimacy. We think we can safely assume that their concept of eternal life would include knowledge, just relations, and the appreciation of beauty as well. We wonder at both the absence of any recognition of this argument in Williams and Gantt as well as their attribution of a problematic rationality to Fowers in

spite of his explicit commitment to aspirations to truth, justice, and beauty that seem quite congenial to some of Williams and Gantt's views.

If instrumental rationality is not at the core of Fowers' views, what is? The centerpiece of his understanding of is the human good. The first four chapters of the book are devoted to *eudaimonia* or the good life for humans, which are followed by four chapters discussing the role of practical wisdom in a *eudaimonic* life. How does Fowers (2005) define *eudaimonia*? He states *eudaimonia* or flourishing as a human being² is comprised of pursuing uniquely human goods, such as knowledge, justice, beauty, and friendship. The overall human good, from an Aristotelian perspective, is the interweaving of these specific human goods in a complete life. As Fowers (2005) puts it, "Flourishing consists in cultivating excellence in action, bringing out the best in oneself, and living the best kind of complete life" (p. 35).

It is also instructive to examine how Fowers used the term "good." There are two main usages: attributive and nominative. Attributive uses include instances such as good character, good life, good judgment, and good science. (Yes, we think it is possible to do good science, even in psychology.) Nominative uses include the good, what is good for humans, the goods of knowledge, justice, etc., and uniquely human goods.

Far from a rationalistic approach to the human good, Fowers (2005) writes that "a proper recognition of what is good naturally inspires a desire to act in the service of that good", indeed a "love of what is good" (p. 45). Williams and Gantt claim that virtue ethics answers the questions "Why be moral? Why be virtuous?" is "Because doing so makes rational sense" (p. 193). This coldly rational view is very incomplete, and it is an obvious distortion of Fowers' views. Rationality does not move us to virtue. Love does. As human beings, we act morally when we understand, love, and seek the human good. We are drawn to the good because we recognize that as the best form of human life.

The most charitable explanation we can find for the degree to which Williams and Gantt missed the core of Fowers' book is that they were too eager to disqualify virtue ethics as a rival account of

human aspiration so that their eternal souls account would be the only plausible one. This could have prevented them from stopping to consider how much common ground they might have with that or other versions of virtue ethics. In discrediting virtue ethics, they go so far as to say that “rationality has been used as often to justify tyranny as it has virtue” (p. 193), which is true enough, but has nothing to do with virtue ethics. They continue this hyperbole with the comment that “the Age of Reason ultimately culminated in the holocaust” (p. 193), a very odd assertion with no discernible connection to virtue ethics.

C: Mainstream psychology is inimical to human aspiration because it is naturalistic, deterministic, and positivistic.

Williams and Gantt offer a broad condemnation of “mainstream psychology,” suggesting that “the image of human nature operative in the mainstream of our discipline—with its commitment to naturalism, and the determinism and positivism entailed therein leaves no room for aspiration” (p. 195). Here, as elsewhere, they do not define these terms, nor do they say specifically what or whom they mean by “mainstream psychology.” The idea that naturalism entails determinism, positivism, and reductionism (stated elsewhere in their article) is erroneous. It is entirely possible to be a naturalist without insisting on determinism, reductionism, or positivism. There may be psychologists who could be accurately described with all of these “isms”, but Williams and Gantt do not mention any. In contrast, many psychologists have explicitly rejected one or more of those descriptors. This therefore appears to be an entirely rhetorical characterization; overgeneralized, dismissive, and without illumination.

Williams and Gantt claim that the mere use of empirical methods means that researchers “cannot—*it is needless to say*—discover much about aspirations or virtues, except in a merely descriptive, epiphenomenal sense. Aspiration becomes indistinguishable from mere desire for fulfillment...” (p. 195, italics added). This is quite a series of non sequiturs. The conceptual connection between the claims here is entirely absent. Foremost among the non sequiturs is that the mere use of

empirical methods can rule out the in-depth study of aspiration. How is it possible that there are no legitimate empirical questions about aspiration? Williams and Gantt do not say, and they seem to be unaware of the many psychologists who do study human aspiration empirically, whether they use that term or other descriptors such as purpose, ultimate aim, or meaning. These researchers would strongly and, in our view, rightly reject the caricature of their work as focused on “epiphenomena.” We now provide some brief quotations from a range of authors as counter-examples of this assertion.

“A true purpose is an ultimate concern. It is the final answer to the question *Why? Why* am I doing this? *Why* does it matter? *Why* is it important for me and for the world beyond me?...The pursuit of a purpose can organize an entire life, imparting not only meaning and exhilaration but also motivation for learning and achievement.” (Damon, 2008, pp. 33-34).

“When a purpose is fully formed, it reflects both the genuine aspirations of the self and the practical needs of the world beyond the self.” (Damon, 2008, p. 161).

“Value-laden goals, referred to as *life aspirations*, influence important life decisions, define specific perceived values, and affect the direction and quality of life experiences. In a pervasive way, they shape perceptions, judgments, and behaviors” (Weinstein, Przybylski, & Ryan, 2009, pp. 1315-1316).

“Concerns over ultimate questions of meaning and existence, purpose and value, do find expression in one form or another through personal goals. In attempting to answer questions such as ‘Does life have any real meaning?’ or ‘Is there any ultimate purpose to human existence?’ individuals’ implicit worldview beliefs give rise to goal concerns that reflect how they ‘walk with ultimacy’ in daily life.” (Emmons, 2003).

“Our principal aim is to articulate a framework for the general study of eudaimonia, and to introduce a specific working model of eudaimonia derived from self-determination theory, with elements that are amenable to empirically based testing. Because eudaimonia refers to living well, any theory of eudaimonia consists of a set of prescriptions and proscriptions. How well the theory fares in terms of yielding a high quality life is thus an empirical question” (Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2008, p. 140).

“The resources are shaped into a personalized life product which, ideally, confers upon the individual a sense of unity and purpose – a feeling/belief that the person is whole and that his or her life is justified by a reason, mission, or goal. If identity is to be vital, the person must in some sense transform the world and, thereby, leave his or her mark upon it.” (McAdams, 1985, p. 4).

One could raise many questions and issues with these investigators’ work, but it is not possible to critique them as disinterested in human aspiration. We have quoted psychologists from many different literatures (positive youth development, goal research, self-determination theory, and

personality research), and this is only a very small sampling. Perhaps Williams and Gantt will want to disqualify these psychologists' work because it does not relate to eternity, but the researchers we cite, along with many others, believe that learning more about human aspiration in the mortal world is an entirely worthy activity.

If Williams and Gantt are serious about discussing the possibilities for aspiration in psychology, it is important that they actually engage potential interlocutors, examine areas of agreement, seek to learn from them, and try to show how their own views can add to our understanding. We would suggest Gadamer's (1989) "art of questioning" (p. 360) as a valuable approach. Gadamer suggested that when questioning other's viewpoints, one learns a great deal by putting one's own presuppositions at risk. It turns out that there are many other candidates for an account of human aspiration. This contradicts the impression Williams and Gantt leave that there is little or no interest in aspiration in psychology as a discipline.

Assertion 8: Intelligence is the capacity that enables aspiration and the wherefore of human life and it resides in the soul. For this reason, those who are committed to naturalism cannot give an account of intelligence.

Williams and Gantt assert that intelligence is the capacity that enables aspiration and the wherefore of human life. They say that intelligence resides in the soul because people said so "in past centuries" (p. 196). This is another assertion without argument or evidence, and it is based on an appeal to the authority of tradition (Walton, 2008). They do, however, offer the following definition: "By 'intelligence' we mean that about us by virtue of which we "care," create ethical systems, exercise meaningful evaluative judgment, use language to express virtue, experience meaning rather than register sensations, and by which we experience and take upon ourselves moral obligations" (p. 196). In this, Williams and Gantt attempt to appropriate to their perspective aspects of humanity that many others claim as well. They offer no reasons for why they should be the sole proprietors.

We offer a few alternative viewpoints that have reasonable claims to these topics. The ethics of care (e.g., Noddings, 1984) is a well-articulated perspective that seldom, if ever, evokes an eternal soul. Many people, including those excoriated by Williams and Gantt as rationalists, have developed ethical systems. Finally, we are among many who see exercising meaningful evaluative judgment as a reasonably good definition of practical wisdom (if the meaning and evaluation are related to the good). What possible description of virtue would not use language? Are only those who espouse the idea of an eternal soul capable of experiencing meaning rather than merely registering sensations? Here, as elsewhere, Williams and Gantt inexplicably ignore scholars with whom they have common ground.

The authors also claim that there is no possible naturalistic account of intelligence because, they argue, intelligence cannot emerge from non-intelligence, ignoring the strong naturalistic account of intelligence provided by evolutionary biology. It is perfectly reasonable for Williams and Gantt to disagree with evolutionary science, but we believe that it is incumbent on them to acknowledge this prominent and widely accepted point of view and to offer arguments against it rather than stating that “there is no convincing explanation”(p. 197) that provides an alternative to their viewpoint. It is simply not reasonable to baldly claim that “intelligence does not arise from the physical substrate” (p. 196) without any recognition that there are evolutionary accounts that argue painstakingly for just that (Arnhart, 1998, MacIntyre, 1999; Okrent, 2007). The casual dismissal of this very extensive form of scholarship is breathtaking.

Similarly, they claim that “Only beings whose being is not ultimately reducible to natural substances and forces can be moral agents” (p. 198). This is another false dichotomy. Williams and Gantt suggest that either human beings are eternal or everything about us is reducible to natural substances and forces. Although there are some naturalists who argue for a reductionist account of human activity, others naturalists disagree with that viewpoint. All naturalists believe that the physical substrate is

necessary, but many see the mental and social dimensions of human activity as emergent properties that cannot be reduced to that physical substrate (e.g., Morowitz, 2004).

Conclusion

Williams and Gantt's pervasive use of unsubstantiated assertion, false dichotomies, straw person arguments, appeals to authority, and disregard for large psychological literatures related to their claims renders their discussion of the basis for human aspiration deeply problematic. We see these features of Williams and Gantt's article as a disservice to theoretical psychology wherein careful argumentation and a respectful stance toward one's interlocutors, even in disagreement, ought to be defining features.

As a discipline, psychology is extremely multivocal and fragmented. Therefore, broad characterizations of psychology are meaningless and the phrase "mainstream psychology" is useless. In our view, it is far more productive to raise questions about a specific aspect or domain of this sprawling discipline, carefully document one's interpretation of that domain, discuss the issues with which one is concerned in some depth and detail, and document the plausibility of one's alternative viewpoint and offer useful recommendations. Sweeping denunciations have little value.

Moreover, Williams and Gantt's assertion that aspiration is possible only for eternal souls may also be a disservice to those who wish to introduce discussion of topics of faith and transcendence to psychology. The bar is very high if one wants to persuade a skeptical readership of a controversial and unusual thesis. The more skeptical the readership and the more controversial the thesis, the greater the need for careful documentation, systematic argumentation, clear evidence, and respectful discourse.

We continue to believe that the ubiquity and power of human aspiration is a strong counter-argument against those who see human activity as entirely causally determined. A well-documented,

carefully argued discussion of the importance and irreducibility of aspiration would therefore be a valuable contribution to the discipline, and it should be offered.

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¹ The other four souls are appetitive, perceptive, locomotive, and intellective. For Aristotle, psyche was a kind of defining function for organisms, which gave their being a particular form.

² This formulation neglects the famous controversy over the relationship between workaday virtue and flourishing and contemplation in Aristotle. This controversy is well beyond the scope of this paper.