

A conversation with Agnes Callard on her book *Open Socrates*

Agnes Callard & Ella Carpenter

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Acclaimed philosopher Agnes Callard shares her new book, *Open Socrates*, and argues that an ancient philosopher still holds the key to the Good Life. In conversation with host Ella Carpenter Street at Toronto Reference Library's Appel Salon on September 19, 2025.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=770BhZ6oyQQ>

Ella Carpenter Street: Okay, so thank you Elspeth, and thank you to the amazing crew at the Toronto Public Library for putting on this free event, which is something that we're so lucky to have. And thank you, Agnes, for being here. It's such a pleasure and privilege to have read your book and to get to ask you questions about it. This evening, so I'm going to dive in.

You make the case in this book, as the title suggests, you make the case for living a philosophic life, but it's not just any kind of philosophic life. You're not arguing that we should all be more like Descartes or Kant for that matter, but rather that we should be more like Socrates, and we should Socratize politics, Socratize love, and be more Socratic in our approach to death. So I want to begin by asking you to say more about what it means to Socratize inquiry. And one visual aid for this question, and actually it corresponds to one of the slides on this slideshow, for many of us, when we think about the philosopher, we think about that famous Rodin's sculptor, the thinker, someone sort of leaning over, thinking deep thoughts in the privacy of their own head. And in your book, you're arguing among other things that that's not quite right. So why not?

Agnes Callard: So, it's not the case that every single time when representations pass through your mind, we should glorify that with the label of thinking. For example, sometimes you're dreaming, right? At night, you're dreaming, that's not thinking. Sometimes during the day, you're daydreaming, that's not thinking. Sometimes you're just like obsessing. That's not really thinking. Sometimes you're fantasizing about revenge, not really thinking. Why? Why am I saying this is not thinking? I think that to call what you're doing in your head thinking, we have to be able to say that you're holding your ideas up to standards, right? So if, like, here's an example of thinking, OK. A is true and B is true, and if A&B are true, then C is true. Now, you see the way C is showing up in my head? It's not just any old random representation. It's like being... It has a justified place in my mental life because it follows from A and B. That's what thinking looks like. Thinking means you hold your thoughts up to standards and you think them if they deserve to be thought, if they follow from other things, if they're true, et cetera. You don't just indulge your mind wherever it wants to go. That's not thinking. Okay. So the question is, how do we do that? How do we hold our thoughts up to standards? And now here's a problem with doing that. Suppose I wanted to

hold my thoughts up to standards. Descartes wanted to do this. He's like, Well, what if I just listed all my thoughts and then I put a check mark next to all the ones that are true and an X next to the ones that are false? I'm holding it to standard, right? I only want to believe the true ones. Well, if I do that, here's the problem. I just keep putting checks next to every single one. Because obviously I think that everything I think is true. I wouldn't think it if I didn't think that it was true. But what if it's really not true? What if I just think it's true and it's not? That's the problem. That's the human predicament, is that we think a lot of stuff, and we think the stuff that we think is true, but we could be wrong. So the question is, how do you ensure that what you're thinking is really right, and that you're thinking it because it's true, not just because it's a thing that you think? The answer to that question is other people. That is, other people can show you that you're wrong when you think you're right. That's the simplest answer. There's a lot of other answers, and we'll probably go into them, but that's the simplest answer to why you need other people to help you think. And by the way, this was true of Descartes, and it was true of Kant. It's just not the picture that they tell you in their philosophy, but Descartes, okay, in the discourse on method, he's like, I'm sitting alone in my stove-heated room. But in other texts, when he tells the story of how he came to the stove-heated room thing, he's like, I went and I traveled everywhere, and I listened to all different kinds of people and talked to him. Kant was apparently a very vibrant like dinner party host, right? So there's a picture we get of philosophy that maybe corresponds to like the vibe of certain philosophical texts, but I'm not sure it corresponds even to the people who wrote this text.

Ella: Okay, great. So the hero of your book, the protagonist and the person that you're basing your conception of a philosophic life that you're advocating is Socrates. Socrates famously never wrote. Everything we know about Socrates we get primarily from Plato. There are a couple other places where he shows up. And Plato wrote these very dramatic dialogues. So you listen to these conversations with Socrates and his conversation partners, often centered on some question like, you know, what is a just life? What is a good life? life. You, in your book, you describe the questions that you're most concerned with pursuing as untimely. What do you mean by that?

Agnes: So, there is a certain order that questions and answers are supposed to go in. It's that order that I just said, question then answer. If it goes in the other order, answer then question, that's wrong. You're not supposed to get the answers first, but there's a bunch of answers where it seems like that's what we do. That is, there's a bunch of stuff in our lives where by the time we're ready to ask a philosophy question about it, like, what should I do with my life? You're probably already doing something. What is justice? You're probably already ready to get angry at some people about something or other. Who should I care about? There's probably some people you care about. The most important questions in our lives are questions where we actually seem to have gotten answers. We don't know how we got them. And it occurs to us to raise the question only after we already have the answer. These are untimely

questions. They're untimely just for the reason I just gave, namely, the question and the answer go in the wrong order.

Ella: So when I read that, this term that you're using, untimely questions, at first I thought of Nietzsche, who describes philosophy as untimely, but then I realized after reading more that you're not using it in a sort of Nietzschean way. So that was intentional, you're smiling.

Agnes: Yeah, I'm like, Nietzsche doesn't get that word. So yeah, so I think that Yes, so I think that what Nietzsche means by that word, it's many things, but the simplest thing he means by it is something like, not straightforwardly subject to the demands and pressures of one's own time. Yes. And I think that there's like, we can all tell ourselves that or something, but I almost feel like that's for other people to judge, the degree to which you're subject to the demands and pressures of your own time. You might think you're not. But the question of like, do you start out with answers to the most important questions is when you can kind of see as true of yourself. You could judge it of yourself and be like, oh, there are these things where I just walk into the world with assumptions. Like I seem to have been born with a bunch of assumptions, or if not born, As far back as I remember, I had a bunch of assumptions. And I mean, I guess that in the end, it almost means the opposite of what Nietzsche said. Namely, I'm very subject to the forces of the world around me, because that's where I ended up getting my answers. And so it's something close to the opposite of Nietzsche. And I just think that at least most of us, we are not Nietzschean in that sense. question whether Nietzsche was Nietzschean, but most of us are not Nietzschean. We are subject to the pressures of our time. But nonetheless, we are also, you know, untimely questions are nonetheless part of our lives.

Ella: So connected to that, You know, we might think of Socrates' motto as question everything or question authority, maybe in a way that intersects with a kind of Nietzschean understanding of philosophy. But in the book, you say, no, actually, Socrates' motto, to use your words, is persuade and be persuaded. Can you say more about that?

Agnes: Yeah, so I'll say another sentence about these untimely questions. So the problem with untimely questions is if you think you have the answer to a question, You cannot actually ask yourself that question. So try it, try it right now in your head with like two plus two is four and be like, what's two plus two? So you see what I did, I raised my voice at the end so it sounded like I was asking a question, but I wasn't actually asking. I wasn't wondering about what two plus two is. I already know the answer, so I can ask myself the question. Okay, so we are in this predicament where we actually cannot ask ourselves the most important questions because we somehow started off with answers to them, our hands are tied. And so we can't question everything. Precisely the most important things, the things we most need to question, we literally cannot question them. That's the situation they're in. But that's not to say someone else can't question them. That is, someone can ask me what $2+2$ is. That's not a problem, right? A very young child comes up to me and they're like, What's

2+2? And I can answer perfectly fine. So that interaction works. It's just the one where you try to say it to yourself, That doesn't work. So there's something that you might have tried to do by yourself, ask yourself deep questions about the meaning of life. No, that's not a thing. No one can do it. No one's ever done it. Impossible. There's another thing, talk to other people about the meaning of life and have them ask you a question, like, what's the meaning of life? And you give an answer. And you try to convince them that your answer is right. No, really, two plus two is four. Look, let me draw four lines. Let me draw two lines, another two lines. That'd be better, right? And then we'll add them all up and we'll see that it comes to four. So what I'm doing there is I'm trying to persuade. That is, I'm giving an answer. I'm telling you what the meaning of life is. But then you can ask me, wait a minute, I didn't quite follow that, or here's a problem. And I'm not trying to persuade and then a foot stomp at the end of the sentence, like persuade no matter what. Something more like this. I'm answering your questions, and I'm sort of hostage to your willingness to accept my answers, such that, look, maybe in the end it's going to turn out that you are the one who persuades me. That's what an inquiry into an untimely question looks like.

Ella: For us to think through and pursue knowledge about the most important things, what is a meaningful life, what is a good life, what is a just life, we need to do so, you're arguing, following Socrates in conversation with others. Yes. I have one more question on this point, which is Hannah Arendt Also, when she, or not also, when Hannah Arendt theorizes thinking and judgment, she calls it dialogical. She says that it has to be conversational, but she argues that it, she calls it a two-in-one, that you should be having a kind of internalized conversation in your own head. And part of the reason why she says that, as I understand it, is because she wants to avoid the Eichmann problem, which is if you have someone in a society surrounded by people who have really corrupt ideas, in this case, Nazis, she doesn't want thinking and judgment about the most important questions, about justice, for example, to depend on others. She wants to locate thinking in a very independent sort of context independent way. So is that a problem for this investment in like actual conversation with others in order to arrive at answers?

Agnes: Yes, but I would describe it as a problem with Oren's view that if she wants something to be true that isn't true. Namely, that there's a thing you can, that you're fine if you're surrounded by really corrupt people who won't inquire with you and who inculcate all the wrong views with you, you're still fine, because you can think for yourself. The answer is no, you're not fine, that's a super bad situation to be in. And we need to make sure that that doesn't happen, because in effect, as a Socratic, I just think of people as maybe more vulnerable and dependent on one another than Arendt does. There's a way to think about Arendt as kind of a little bit of a stoic, I mean, she's kind of a Kantian, and so therefore she's kind of a stoic. And stoicism was this idea that maybe you could be a good person by kind of retreating into yourself in a certain way. That's a bit of a caricature, and there's more to say. And I think that if you could really do that, it would be great. Like, I'm just as much a fan of that idea as

Arendt. I just don't think it's a reality. And I think You know, let me slightly temper, though, this response. I do think that if you spend a lot of time talking to other people, like a lot of philosophers do this, or just academics more generally, right? We spend time talking to each other and people push back against us. You acquire some ability to simulate that in your head so that you can sort of pretend like you're talking to someone, but in your head. and When Arendt talks about this dialogical ability, I think she's referring to a real thing that she can do because she's a trained academic and a philosopher But what she's not thinking about is what was necessary for her to get there and it was a bunch of conversations So I think if you stuck Eichmann in a room and you're like just think really hard about like whether it's okay to kill Jews Just think about it inside of yourself. I don't think he's gonna get anywhere and And I think saying, well, it's just he didn't think hard enough or something like that. It's like there was no lever there for him to pull at all. And so I think that there is some role, some like moderate role for this kind of simulation that we learn to do in our heads where it's not like all we're ever doing is walking around daydreaming and fantasizing. That's a lot of what we're doing in our heads. A lot of just your mental content is like mush and garbage, like just to be fair, but it's not It's the only thing we do. I think we can do a thing where we're holding our thoughts to standards. I think that's when we're simulating other people arguing with us, in effect. And you can get better at that thing, and you largely get better at it by doing the actual arguing.

Ella: Okay, so Socrates famously says, The unexamined life is not worth living. I take it that you believe that. And in the book, you argue, and in fact, at some moments, this is a controversial way of interpreting Platonic dialogues, you argue that Socrates really was pursuing answers. Like the goal of these conversations is not because it's just interesting or stimulating or fun, but you're trying to arrive at answers and knowledge, to possess knowledge of these questions, what is justice, what is a good life. So I want to, ask you to say more about why that's so important. Like, why is inquisitiveness and why is actually knowing so important? But I want to pose the question in this way. What would you say to someone who says, okay, I read your book, it sounds great, but you know what? Like, I have a pretty good sense of how I live my life. I have a set of values. I probably haven't, you know, philosophically interrogated them. with my friends, but they're working out pretty well for me. And I love my family, I have some hobbies, I think I'm good. Would you and your Socrates say, is it kind of like a false consciousness thing, like no, you're actually not good? Or is it, yeah.

Agnes: Okay, so I want to tell you a remarkable thing about this question. I get it very, very often about this, in discussions about this book, and always in this form, namely, What if someone, who are not me at all, that's not what I think or how I feel, were to say, I'm perfectly philosophically satisfied with life and I see no need to inquire into it. Sometimes it's like, my cousin, who's a plumber, he's a simple guy. The simple guy, you're not all academics, this is not an academic event, so we'll see, maybe we'll get to the Q&A, and someone will say, no, I'm this person. But as of yet, it has not happened that I met this person, so I'm actually excited to meet them,

if one day that should happen. But I also am struck by how we want to bring this person into the conversation, but we don't want to be this person. And I guess I want to say that, like, in terms of my response, like, you know you part of the importance of having actual conversations is you never know how they'll go so like I'm not sure how the conversation with this person would go where I didn't meet them but like one like maybe they're super wise maybe they have knowledge maybe they would teach me their knowledge is one possibility that a Socratic has to keep on the table right that would probably be my first attack is like okay so you have a pretty good sense of how to live your life do you want to explain to me because like Like, I could learn that. This is just what happens to Socrates, right? So Socrates originally encounters this person that never shows up to my events. And so I think probably that would be my— probably, depending on the other things, that would be my first strategy, to be like, OK, explain it to me, and then allow me to ask you questions about it if it doesn't make sense to me. Suppose they're like, no, I don't want to explain it to you. I don't wanna do philosophy. You're trying to get me to do philosophy. And what I am is a thought experiment designed to never talk to you, but only to produce out of you this reaction, how would you talk to this person who won't talk to you? And I think at that point, my answer is, I don't have anything to say to people who won't talk to me. That is, the Socratic... Method is not sort of, the approach of this book is not like, here's a theory that everybody should apply to their lives. Here's my wisdom, I'm giving it to you, now you use it. Even the book itself is meant to address people who have some interest in this mode of proceeding. And I think it's gonna be a result of the book that it doesn't speak to people who don't wanna speak to it. Right, so there just could well be a character where if they don't want to talk to me, then there isn't anything that I have to say to them. And we'll never find out whether they secretly were full of wisdom or secretly really could have used more philosophy.

Ella: I think you're making a stronger claim in the book than that. Please. So one of the answers that you give to that question is if we only have good opinions, but we haven't actually thought through them really carefully in the company of others, we will waiver.

Agnes: Yeah.

Ella: So I think your discussion of wavering is a really useful, I mean, can you elaborate quickly on that?

Agnes: Absolutely. So I think, I mean, again, if the person's willing to have a conversation with me, right, I might try to bring out this issue, which is just what Socrates, is exactly what Socrates does out when people talked about their views, which is that when we feel like we have a good grip on our lives, we might say something like this. Look, I'm really against conformism. I don't think people should be subjected to conformist pressures. And to make themselves into the image of what other people want them to be, that's like a really bad thing. And then kind of in the same breath, they might praise someone for being so cooperative. Cooperativeness is just the word we use for conformism when we like it, and conformism is the word we use for when you

do what works for other people, but you don't like it. That's tribalism and loyalty. The same thing just depends. Do you like it or do you not like it? We have tons of words like this. That is, we have a whole vocabulary and even sets of, you know, Even sets of like truisms and expressions, like silence is golden, the squeaky wheel gets the grease, et cetera. I go through a bunch of them in the book. So our common sense wisdom is actually just filled with contradictions that we've papered over by changing the word we use for something when we want to say the opposite. And so this is a big part of how when Socrates meets someone who's like, I'm fine, I know how to live, I'm good. He then will ask them questions and he'll bring out that their perfectly good sense of how to live is actually involves saying P and not P and just using different words. And his name for this is wavering. We're constantly wavering, which is to say, we don't have a stable view about how to live, it's a fluctuating view. But the question of whether I can have this conversation with the person is dependent on whether they're willing to engage with me, right? And so I still think it's actually the same as my previous answer, which is, I would have to ask them to share their wisdom with me, and then I would have to do this examination, which is just the one Socrates does, and what that would expose, unless they had the wisdom, was that they were using words inconsistently to cover over the fact that they didn't actually have any clue how to live their lives.

Ella: Yeah, and another thing that would need to be true, which is dramatized a lot in platonic dialogues, is they would need to have the capacity to be embarrassed.

Agnes: Yeah.

Ella: So, yeah, so I want to talk a bit about—

Agnes: That's very well distributed among people, though, so.

Ella: So I want to talk about that actually. Okay. so, you talk about this in the book, that people want to make sense. And I think that is true of most people I know, that when push comes to shove, people want to know what they think and why they think it. And if you... expose or if you make them realize, particularly when you're there and they know that you're there and that they actually are not making sense or they're contradicting themselves, they'll be embarrassed or they'll try and find a way of escaping the situation, which happens in platonic dialogues all the time. People blush. And those moments of blushing are very important. So is this attachment to being the kind of person that can actually will A, defend their views, but also make sense. Do you think that that's an innate attachment, or is it something that has to be cultivated?

Agnes: Okay, so here's the super cool thing. There's one dialogue where Socrates talks to people who don't have it. It's the Euthydemus. So he talks to these two sophists, Euthydemus and Dionysiodorus, and he refutes them. And they're like, oh, you think I'm the same person as I was 2 minutes ago? No, I don't care that you're refuted to me. So they have no shame. So I think that's Plato trying to show us Like, one of the really cool things about the Socratic dialogues is that Socrates is talking to all these different people who really differ very substantively from each other. There's sort of, with a few exceptions, basically no repeats. He's always talking to different people. And I think

he wants to show us, like, all the possibilities. So he does. I haven't read that dialogue. It's not a very popular one. I think it's among the least popular, and I think it's really weird, but I think the ending is very beautiful. So I wouldn't don't read it first. You know, maybe tense, okay, um, but so what happens in the euthydemus. With these people who are not going to get embarrassed if they're refuted is that it becomes clear that for them talking is just a game. Arguing is just a game. It's like a sport. Socrates doesn't dismiss them for that. He that doesn't make him not want to talk to them. But he says that basically they have a few tricks, and once you've learned those, he says you have to make sure you charge people upfront for talking to you, because once they learn your tricks, that's going to be it, and they're not going to want to talk to you anymore. And I think that the thought there is that when people are incapable of being embarrassed, then that kind of limits the depth to which the conversation can go. Most people are very capable of being embarrassed. So this is a very rare duo, okay? They're very unusual people, but I think it does happen. And I think it's probably not that they innately were born without it, but that they trained themselves out of it. But I do think that embarrassment is I mean, all of our emotions, embarrassment is an emotion, and all of our emotions are ways that we are keyed in to what's really important to us. And embarrassment is how we're sort of keyed in to the importance of what other people think about us. And I think it can be a help. It can also hurt in a social encounter. But I wanted to say something. You know, you originally framed your question before you put it in terms of what would you say to someone, just like, Why is it so important? Can I just speak to that? Why is it so important to get to answers? Why do you need to inquire into these questions and have knowledge? And I think that for me, it actually can be hard for me to even ask myself that question, because I'm so deep in that world, right? I just think the reason I'm a philosopher is that I think you do everything better if you understand what you're doing. And philosophy is just an attempt to understand what you're doing. It's like you turn the lights on or something. But I came up with this way to explain it to people who haven't already drunk the Kool-Aid, which is, imagine if you had a choice. You could live the rest of your life as it would go, or alternative, it's going to go the same in every outward respect. That is, no one around you will ever notice the difference. But you will not be conscious. So in life number two, you're a zombie. Nobody knows that you're a zombie, because you make all the same noises out of your mouth, and you have the same facial expressions, and your loved ones are like, oh, she's just as lively and fun as ever. But actually, secretly, there's no one home. You're just this animated corpse. And then the question is like, well, which life do you want to live? Do you want to live, you know, regular life or zombie life? They have all the same effects on other people. Like, I've posed this question to people. No one's ever chosen zombie life. Not one time. Everyone wants consciousness. Why? Well, they're like, that's obvious. Like, it wouldn't be my life. If I was – I wouldn't be there, right? That wouldn't be me. I wouldn't be, like, owning it. It wouldn't be my own. I think Socrates, and some philosophers who are inspired by him, kind of feel that way

about knowing what you're doing. That is, understanding why you're doing the things you're doing, it actually stands in relation to consciousness as the way you're thinking consciousness stands to zombie life. Namely, if you don't get what you're doing and why you're living, it's kind of like you're just wandering around inside of your life. And you're just like making some movements around, but you don't get like what's the point of any of this? Why is it good? That's kind of like being a zombie. And so wanting to turn the lights on, wanting clarity about what you're doing, from a Socratic point of view, that's just the real transition out of zombie-dom.

Ella: Okay, so following from that, another claim that you make in the book, but Socrates makes this claim, it's one of his positive statements. is that there is no weakness of will. And this is connected to this because the idea is that if you actually had knowledge, for example, of what justice is, then you would act justly. And if you had knowledge of what it means to be moderate, of what moderation is, you would be moderate. So there's like that... This has huge, I mean, if true, this has major implications for criminal justice, for example, because it means that people only act out of ignorance. There's no such thing as weakness of will. There's not that middle part in the kind of Socratic understanding of what motivates us to act. And yeah, can you say more about that?

Agnes: Yeah, absolutely. I think it's a really important Socratic principle, which is that if you knew what the right thing to do was, you actually would just go ahead and do it. But people all the time are like, no, I know. I know that I should exercise more and eat more healthy and go to bed earlier and not be on my phone. I know all those things. I just can't get myself to do it. I'm weak well. And Socrates says, you set the bar for knowledge too low there. That is, I get that you have in your head a thought, I should go to bed early. You have that thought. But we can still ask, well, how much of a thought even was that? That is, was it a kind of passing fancy? Was it kind of an echo of something you hear around you? Everyone says, go to bed early, like, and you glorified it to the level of a thought? Well, could you defend it? Could you explain it? Do you know why? And Socrates thinks, look, if that thought were really yours and you really had a full and complete understanding of it, you would act on it. And the way you can see that is just that in cases where that's obviously true, you do. So if we imagine that, you know, I were to like offer you there were two piles of money, right? And here's like this pile has like \$100 and this pile has like \$1,000. And let's suppose in this thought experiment you like money and it's like, which one do you want? Suppose you were to say, well, I know the thousand is more, but I just went for the hundred, like I was just kind of overwhelmed and Sometimes I do things that I know I shouldn't do. We'd be like, no, that's not, maybe you had a little mini stroke or something, or you didn't notice. We would look for some other explanation. You wouldn't do it. You wouldn't pick the 100 if you wanted money, and the 1,000 was more. So that's just what it would be like to have knowledge. It would just be like, you get what you should do, and you go ahead and do those things. In a world where people keep saying, I'm weak-willed, It's that there's a bunch of people who think they

have knowledge when they don't, and they're noticing that their non-knowledge is not very efficacious in getting them to do what they should do.

Ella: Okay, so this is, I mean, I have 100 questions, so we're going to run out of time. Luckily, we're going to dinner, but I'm just going to focus on this because we're running out of time. I want to get a sense of how this really works, because it is really surprising. It goes against what most everyone in here probably believes and how you think of your own life. So another formulation of the there is no weakness of will is something that someone like Thomas Hobbes would say, which is, there is no such thing as weakness of will. There is only discovering what you actually desired. So Hobbes thought that reason, and I'm asking this because I want to understand the Socratic view and your view of knowledge and the passions and desire, and what is their relationship. So Hobbes thought that basically we're just a bundle of desires, and reason is the scouts and spies for the passions. And whatever we do, what we're learning about ourselves is the most powerful passion won out, and reason figured out a way to do what our passion wanted. So if you wake up one morning and you say, I really want to go work out, I really want to work out, I know working out is good, and then you actually watch Netflix, you're actually learning that what you most wanted in that moment was to watch Netflix, but that's not actually the Socratic view.

Agnes: Good. So I think it has an overlap with it. Okay. Right? So I think there's an interesting, like, kind of coming around the bend intersection between a kind of intellectualist like Socrates, who is always moving aspirationally upward, and someone like Hobbes or Hume, right, reason as a slave of the passion, this is a very similar view, who says, well, it's revealed preference, basically, like, we'll figure out what you want by looking at what you do, if that's what you want. The overlap there is that both groups are willing to acknowledge the lack of efficacy of a certain form of thought. And that form of thought is the ordinary thought that all of us have in our lives when we're making a little meta commentary about I should really be going to bed. Socrates, it's like Socrates and Hobbes and humor, like holding hands being like, that's kind of trash. The difference is Socrates thinks you can turn that trash into treasure by examining it and interrogating it and thereby actually firm it up and make it have more force and eventually turn it into knowledge. And so for example, in a dialogue like the Crito, where Socrates is like, No, I'm not allowed to escape from jail. That would be wrong. And Crito's friend is like, Look, but they're going to kill you. We need to run out of here right now. I've bribed the guards. This is our chance. Let's not talk philosophy. Let's just go. We can talk about later. And Socrates is like, No, the problem is that I have these arguments. And they've always been the strongest thing that have guided me in my life, and I just don't have anything that is more stable and more reliable than these arguments, and so I gotta use them in this situation. But is Socrates scared of dying? Of course. Would he prefer it if the city of Athens were not being about to put him to death? Yes. Would he prefer to be able to continue to do philosophy? Yes. And so you can imagine a weak-willed person in his situation being like, Oh, I know I should stay here and be killed, but I'm gonna run off. And why doesn't Socrates, why

isn't he weak-willed? It's that those thoughts, which in most of us are kind of idle in the way that human hops point out, are less so in him. They're not all the way, they're not knowledge. But I think it's really true that you can kind of, you can get principles for yourself that actually guide you in your life. when you've thought seriously about the principles and they really matter to you and they can cut against what you feel like doing. That's a real thing that can happen. It's just that none of us cares that much whether we stay up late or scroll on our phones or whatever. And so like those principles are there, they have this Hobbesian status.

Ella: So the reason why I find this so interesting and important is because whatever your theory of motivation is, like, why do we act the way we act? It's also going to be connected to your understanding of how to change behavior. And so, you know, you start off the book with this, the problem of Tolstoy's existential crisis, where Tolstoy is not finding meaning in his life. He's asking all of these questions like, what's the purpose? Why even be a father? Why write novels? And so, you know, That's an interesting part of the book. If I had more time, we could talk more about it. But I was thinking when reading the Socratic response, what about the unconscious, for example? So like all of us living in the 21st century and the 20th century are living in the wake of Freud's, sort of the revolution of Freud and this idea that we have an unconscious. So it's not enough just to have, be told something. In order to change behavior, you have to also think about unconscious motivation or think about, you know, childhood experiences that might be affecting the way, you know, your capacity to be present in your own life. Like, it's a very – I mean, we could say more about that, but it's a very different understanding of why people act and what needs to be done in order to change the way they act, which, if I understand it correctly, does not point to simply having the right knowledge.

Agnes: Good. So, I think, I mean, there's a way of seeing Freud as just a direct inheritor of Socrates. It's in Freud. I mean, that is, Freud says this. He references the partitioning of the soul in Plato as an early theory of the soul as having parts in the way that he wants to talk about. And if you think about the Think about psychoanalysis and how that's supposed to go. It's the theory that all you need to change is knowledge. That is, knowledge is all-powerful. If you acknowledge and somehow bring to light certain kind of impulses and come to grasp and understand them, that will cure your problems. So from a certain point, and also psychoanalysis is probably the closest just everyday practice that's like a little bit similar to Socratic inquiry. So I actually think Freud is quite Socratic in a lot of ways. But there are some differences. And I think, one of them is that, I think Socrates did not think that if you, let's say, had knowledge, you would stop being susceptible to contrary impulses and to even violent passions. There's a suggestion to this effect in the Protagoras argument against the possibility of weakness of will, where he says that the person with knowledge sort of, in effect, knows what kind of significance to a lot to these phantasmata, these images, not that he doesn't have them. A way to think about it is like, if I put my pen in this glass, OK, it's maybe not so clear, but it can look bent if you look at it from the wrong

angle, right? So a straight thing in water can look bent. But say you are wise people, so you know that it's actually straight. It didn't bend when I put it in the glass, right? But does it still look bent to you? Yeah, it still looks bent. I think one way to think about the difference between Freud and Socrates is how much importance do we allot to the fact that it still looks bent? Do you have to make the looking go away, too? I think Socrates is like, nah, it doesn't matter. If you have knowledge, you'll know it's straight, and you'll make all the right decisions. You won't be like, can't use that pen anymore, it's bent now. You'll just be like, no, this perfectly fine pen that is straight. But I think Freud, those appearances could be very, very powerful. And even if you had the contrary kind of knowledge, they might still have some kind of effect on you. And so he's kind of devoting his attention to that. But even so, the kind of attention he's devoting is a very Socratic kind of attention. Namely, you can change those through a question and answer process by which you come to have better knowledge of them, and that's it. You're done.

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Agnes Callard & Ella Carpenter

A conversation with Agnes Callard on her book Open Socrates
September 19, 2025

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