2021 Nuveen Lecture on Socratic Politics

Agnes Callard

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Agnes Callard, professor and public philosopher, on "Socratic Politics," delivered as the 2021 Nuveen Lecture at The University of Chicago Divinity School on October 12, 2021.

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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uHCNXHzMRuc

Jim Robinson: This is very exciting indeed.

Welcome, everyone, to the Nuveen Lecture, to the 2021 Nuveen Lecture.

This is a great moment having Agnes Kellard here.

It's also a great moment for the first ever live stream from the Divinity School.

So live from Swift Hall, we have this annual event presented and reaching an audience like never before.

So welcome to you in person, welcome to you online, and welcome to you, Agnes Keller.

The Nuveen Lecture was established in 1972 to honor John Nuveen, one of Chicago's most influential business leaders and an active civil and cultural leader with ties to many educational institutions.

At the University of Chicago, Nuveen served as a trustee chairman of the university's alumni association as a trustee of the Baptist Theological Union.

Each year a prominent member of the university's faculty, this year Agneth Kellard, professor in philosophy, associate professor, is invited to deliver the Nuveen lecture.

Past lectures have included luminaries such as Janet Rowley, Jonathan Lear, Agnes's teacher, Leon Cass, Paul Ricor, and many others.

In fact, we have a marker of all of this.

There's a plaque in the back commemorating all the Nuveen lectures.

You can see them year by year from 1972, and you can already see Professor Callig's name engraved onto the board in advance.

You have seen that? Have you seen that?

Agnes: No, I was just saying optimistically, but yeah.

Jim: My name is Jim Robinson.

I am the interim dean of the Divinity School, and it gives me great pleasure now to introduce Professor Kellard Agnes.

Professor Kellard is in the philosophy department.

She has a BA from the University of Chicago, yay, yay, yay, in fundamentals, and an MA and PhD from UC Berkeley, my own alma mater, in classics and in philosophy.

Professor Kellard is the author of two books, Aspiration, The Agency of Becoming, which focused on philosophy related to the value of things and new things.

Her second book, On Anger, is an edited volume with her lead essay, and it was given the honor of being chosen as one of the best books of 2020 by The New Yorker, a very good honor indeed.

Professor Callard has been recognized for her scholarship, of course, but also for her teaching.

She is the winner of the Say Teaching Award in the Division of Humanities in the 2017 Quantrell Award for Undergraduate Teaching, also quite prestigious to recognize her teaching prowess.

Professor Koller is a great scholar, a wonderful scholar, and also a public teacher and philosopher.

As many of you know, as all of you know, I think far better than I know, she is the creator of the Night Owls conversation here on campus, which has been a much success. And we're in the daytime now, so we are not part of the Night Owls, but we will speculate about what owl could represent our talk today.

She is the creator of the Night Owls, a very successful framework for philosophical discussions.

She is a monthly columnist for The Point.

magazine, and a frequent contributor for op-ed pieces to the New York Times.

Her work in progress on Socrates will analyze contemporary intellectual culture within philosophy, within academia more broadly, and on social media in light of its Socratic origins.

Today, Professor Callard will be presenting a talk entitled Socratic Politics, which, we think, is a rather timely subject, salient for many of the issues that continue to confront us daily on campus and beyond.

I want to ask you to join me in welcoming Professor Koller to this year's Neuveen Lectern.

Agnes: Thank you so much for that really nice introduction.

Three years ago, I wrote an op-ed in the New York Times arguing against petitions.

I'd been asked by one group of academic philosophers to sign a petition. And that petition was itself a response to another petition that had been put forward earlier by a different group of academic philosophers.

In my op-ed, I explained why I thought philosophers shouldn't be in the business of using petitions to settle disputes among ourselves.

One of the claims that I made was that attaching a list of names to a set of assertions amounted to politicizing philosophy.

Philosophers should make use of the force of argument not the pressure implied by having assembled a larger or more prestigious mass of people on one side of a dispute.

Some of the readers of the op-ed asked me to explain further.

What exactly did I mean by politicize? What is it to politicize something? My first instinct was to say that politicizing means taking a domain that isn't politics and treating it as though it were.

So applying political rules to unpolitical situations.

The implication of this response would be that it's okay if government operates by counting up the numbers on each side.

That's how government's supposed to work.

But it's not okay for philosophy to be conducted that way.

It's okay to politicize politics, but not okay to politicize philosophy.

The problem with that answer is that I don't actually believe that politics should be politicized either.

I think government should rely on the force of argument.

Argument isn't some niche methodology appropriate for philosophy classrooms and academic journals.

Argument is what everyone should use all the time to discover the truth, because that's what we all want in every situation, the truth.

So my instinct, my original instinct, you could call it a compartmentalizing instinct, was wrong.

But I didn't know what else to say.

I felt like someone who opens her mouth and finds, to her surprise, that no answer emerges.

I started flailing, saying a bunch of words that didn't add up to anything.

I was sure that I somehow knew what politicize meant, but I couldn't explain it in any way that made sense.

That question has been hovering around me ever since, for years now, a standing debt that I need to pay.

So today I'm going to try to pay it, and you'll be the judges of whether I've succeeded.

What is politicizing? So if someone claims that some area, be it minimum wage debates, climate change, the COVID pandemic, college course syllabi, has been politicized, they mean that action and speech in that area have to be interpreted against the backdrop of some standing conflict.

I'm going to state that again, because that's sort of my first pass at a definition.

I'll I'll have some complications to add later, but we'll go with this one for a while, okay? So it means something is politicized when action and speech in that area have to be interpreted against the backdrop of some standing conflict.

So for example, the ostentatious inclusion or removal of a text from my syllabus can constitute a way of positioning myself in a culture war.

I might be providing assurance to my allies.

I might be provoking my enemies.

Okay, so there are two important parts to my definition.

The first is the idea of war, and the 2nd is the idea of interpretation.

So all interpretation requires context, right? And politicizing makes war an essential part of the interpretive context.

It's often the case that you can't understand the subtext of an op-ed or the tension in a faculty meeting, or why certain items are bundled together in a congressional bill without invoking facts about the history of a given debate.

Just like you can't understand a lone soldier firing a gun without bringing in the context of which side he's on and where this battle sits in some larger war.

But there's a really important difference between the two wars, the political one and the one that the soldier is a part of.

Political wars are not really happening.

There is no actual fighting.

There are no bombs, no tanks, cannons, guns, or weapons of any kind.

Nobody dies.

It's true that people might inflict real harms on the other side, even personal harms.

For example, they might make their enemies lose face or lose their jobs or their social connections.

Still, these damages, however serious, will not be fully understood unless we invoke the framing of conflict within which they're situated.

They're real harms, but they're also symbolic harms, symbolizing defeat as though the person had died in a real war.

So It's important to see, I think, that the battle with reference to which some arena is politicized doesn't have to line up with the dominant political battle of, in current US culture, left versus right.

So let me give 2 examples of that.

So there's currently a set of conversations over gender, pronouns, what it is to be a woman, that are politicized in relation to the battle between two groups, most of whose members would identify themselves, both sides, as being politically on the left.

The one group is trans activists.

The other group, I'm actually not sure what to call them because the labels are themselves politicized.

Sometimes they're called trans-exclusive feminists, sometimes they're called gender-critical feminists.

Actually, this was the topic of the dueling petitions that I was engaging in my op-ed years ago. And it has, in fact, heated up recently in the discipline of philosophy.

Okay, so in my native language, Hungarian, pronouns aren't gendered.

It's just the same pronoun for he and she.

I learned English young enough that gendered pronouns don't give me any trouble, but my parents still often get he and she mixed up.

They'll say, of me, he.

No one takes these errors for anything more than errors.

More generally, it was just true until recently that what pronouns someone called you by was not a political question.

The use of the wrong pronoun only constitutes an aggressive act of misgendering in the context of a background battle that is itself relatively new.

That's my first example.

Second example is the movement to, and I think the language is instructive here, cancel, cancel culture.

So the anti-woke are known for their opposition to the politicization of questions of race and gender, critiquing the woke for employing mob justice to purge the elite of supposed enemies.

But the anti-woke themselves politicize the topics of free speech, open conversation, and liberal toleration.

The anti-woke see the woke as dangerous, as enemies to be fought rather than intellectual interlocutors.

They're suspicious as to the motives and the true intent of the woke.

So A telltale sign of politicization is that honest conversation becomes impossible, and each side blames the other for that.

Because people in this context who disagree can't trust each other, they can't resolve their disagreement by disagreeing.

Instead, they fight.

They mainly fight each other by saying words, but the words are meant as symbolic weapons.

They're not mainly meant to carry the force of argument.

They're not aimed at leading the interlocutor towards the truth.

So one example of this is I gave you this Harper's letter from 2020.

I'm not going to read it to you.

Maybe you saw it online.

Maybe you had time to read it while we were delayed.

If not, you can read it later.

But I'm going to say some stuff about it.

I wanted to give it to you just so you can check it against what I say about it.

So basically, I think this letter puts itself forward as defending free speech and open debate against the, quote, forces of illiberalism, which the letter describes as gaining strength. And so maybe I will read you, I wrote a short letter to Harper's in response to the Harper's letter.

It was printed in the same issue.

I'll read you my response, and then later you can look back at the letter, which is longer, and judge whether what I'm saying is correct. Okay.

We welcome responses, Harper's Magazine noted in its online introduction to the letter, but its writers do not seem to.

They, quote, raise their voices.

They, quote, refuse.

They tell us what must not be allowed to happen or what is needed.

But something they do not do is argue for the value of open debate.

Is it even possible to argue for free speech? Yes.

In On Liberty, John Stuart Mill is careful to acknowledge the structural sources of pressure on speech.

The tyranny of the majority is not the product of evil, illiberal forces, but a danger endemic to political freedom.

Mill's arguments stem from an optimistic conception of human reason.

Instead of taking a stand against opponents of free speech, Mill treats them as reasonable, intelligent interlocutors.

Because the stifling atmosphere to which the letter refers is palpable in every sentence of it, It's worth reminding ourselves that a freer defense of free speech is possible.

So the cancel culture wars illustrate the fact that one of the things you can politicize is politicization itself.

Even if the warriors against wokeness prefer different or gentler weapons, right, petitions over cancellations, they see themselves as battling wokeness just as the woke battle racism.

Fighting back is a kind of fighting.

My point here, by the way, is not to cast blame on either side, but simply to bring out how ubiquitous this phenomenon of politicization is.

It extends beyond politics altogether.

In every marriage, there are one or more topics that could be described as politicized.

In my marriage, laundry is an example.

It's a place where I can reliably find a fight if I want to pick one.

Politicizers are good at shifting the battle over into an arena where they want to fight it now.

When we speak of office politics, we use politics in the way that I'm using the word politicized.

We mean office infighting.

Even career politicians will say, let's keep politics out of this, I mean out of politics, right? And what they're doing is using the word politics actually as shorthand for what has been politicized.

What they mean is, let's temporarily suspend our usual practice of mapping every interaction onto a symbolic battlefield.

That's what they mean by saying, let's keep politics out of this.

Okay, so war is sometimes described as politics by another means.

Should we, armed with our new definition of politicization, say that's actually because politics is war, metaphorical war, war by another means? No, I think that's going too far.

It's not fair to assume that all politics is politicized, because I think politicization picks out a pathology of politics.

It's a way that politics can go wrong.

In fact, I think it is the distinctive pathology of politics.

So these days we hear a lot about the evils of polarization, right? But I actually don't think polarization per se is an evil.

An area of philosophy where the views tend to be polarized into two camps won't necessarily feature worse conversations than one where the views are more evenly distributed over a range of intermediate positions.

I'm more interested in watching a movie that polarizes people in the sense that you either love it or hate it than a movie that everyone thinks is okay.

Polarization without politicization is fine. And politicization can engender a lot of hostility, even when the difference between the two sides is, in some objective sense, very small.

Think of two neighbors battling over the precise placement of the fence that divides their properties.

So small differences look big when people hate each other.

The concept of politicization, sorry, the concept of polarization just fails to pick out the problem in what Aristotle would call the most precise way.

So I say when you hear talk of polarization in the political climate, just cut that word out and replace it with politicization.

That's what people really mean.

Okay, if politicization is politics at its most warlike, what does the rest of politics look like? What is good politics? That's what I want to spend the rest of this talk discussing.

But actually, I want to make the question more specific.

I want to ask, what is Socratic politics? So remember my original stumbling block from three years ago when people asked me what was wrong with the politicization of philosophy? I had this instinct to answer in terms of what was wrong with politics, right? I was ready to tar politics with the politicization brush, which is to say I was inclined to go too far in just the way I cautioned us against going too far just a minute ago.

But what stopped me, the way that I knew I was making a mistake, was Socrates.

Socrates is my hero.

He's A philosopher through and through, but in the Gorgias, he also describes himself as a politician.

He says, I believe that I'm one of, sorry, this is not on your handout, but it's very famous, it's just one sentence.

I believe that I'm one of a few Athenians, so as not to say I'm the only one, but the only one among our contemporaries, to take up the true political craft and practice the true politics.

Socrates, If politics is something that Socrates prides himself on, it can't be all bad, and it can't be incompatible with philosophy.

So what would good politics look like? Let's start in general with what politics is.

Here's my definition of politics.

So to say that human beings are social picks out the fact that a normal human life is spent with other people.

To say that we're political picks out something more specific, which is that we live together under a shared idea of how to do so.

animals might be social, but they're not, in our usual understanding of them, political.

I'm just going to repeat that, because that's kind of important. And if you think that's wrong, a lot of this talk hangs on it. And I just came up with it, so it could be wrong, right? To say that we're political means that we live together under a shared idea of how to do so.

I looked up other people's definitions of political, like Rawls and stuff, and they'll just be like, political is where the concept of justice applies. And I'm like, that doesn't help me, because where does the concept of justice apply? So I think the virtue that applies to that is justice, as a matter of fact.

All right, the problem that politics has to resolve politics, remember, is living together under a shared idea of how to do so, is that we sometimes have trouble living together because we have different ideas about how to live.

Bad politics, politicization, resolves these differences by attempting to eliminate or coerce the other side.

It aims to organize the two competing views into like a winner and a loser, right, by way of battles that involve losses on both sides and that have a tendency to drag on indefinitely.

good politics would bring about cooperation more efficiently on terms advantageous to all.

What does that look like? Well, there's a standard familiar answer to this question, a standard familiar list of activities that is constantly being called for by the people who are just to put politics aside.

Okay, so good politics, as like my contemporaries conceive it, involves being tolerant of those who see the world in fundamentally different terms, seeking majoritarian solutions, employing persuasion rather than force, compromising between competing interests, encouraging debate between opposed parties, and when the question is one on which expertise exists, deferring to the relevant experts who could range from academic specialists to government agencies to people with personal experience of a given injustice.

So let me illustrate with an example.

We might tolerate vaccine hesitancy, or we might compromise by saying the unvaccinated need to wear masks and not travel.

Or we might try to persuade them to accept the vaccine, or we might hope that as more and more people get the vaccine, everyone will conform to majoritarian social pressure.

Or we might stage a debate between a pro-vaxxer and an anti-vaxxer, or we might direct the vaccine hesitant to listen to experts.

That's what we got.

Those are our strategies.

Okay, so I think that list, tolerance, persuasion, majoritarianism, compromise, debate, expertise, that's like a reasonable summary of what most people mean by positive politics, by contrast with politicization, which you could think of as negative politics.

But none of that can capture what Socrates means when he calls himself a true politician.

Why not? Because Socrates is against all of those things, right? He does not think that you can make any kind of progress with tolerance, majoritarianism, persuasion, expertise, debate, or compromise.

He thinks they're all bad. And they come up in a variety of dialogues, and he talks about them, and people put them forward as possible measures to resolve disagreements. And he's like, no, that's a terrible way to do it.

So what I'm now going to go through is explain why Socrates thinks all of those things are a mistake. And then we'll talk about, okay, what would Socratic politics look like.

But I'll use the phrase positive politics to refer to that list, okay? So just for terminological purposes, good politics, Socratic politics, isn't going to be identical to positive politics.

Positive politics is just that list of five things.

Five, 6, I've maybe lost count.

Okay, let me start with expertise. And I'm not going to, I could pull in lots of text for each of these, but I think your patience for reading, for hearing me quote Plato, may, is not commensurate with how much text I need to pull.

So in the longer version of this, if you want, I have lots of text.

But in this version, I think I'm only going to quote text for like one of them.

Okay, so let me start with experts.

So when there are experts, disagreement about among non-experts matters a lot less.

Socrates often distinguishes a really important distinction between technical experts and moral experts.

So to illustrate with a contemporary example, in the case of COVID, a technical expert might have direct understanding of why you're less likely to be hospitalized over the next six months if you're vaccinated.

But only a moral expert could tell you that you should get vaccinated, all things considered.

The question of how important health should be to you is not a question any doctor can answer.

The problem is, though it's obvious that technical experts exist, it is not obvious that there are any moral experts.

Socrates often makes the observation that moral questions are subject to the kind of bickering that suggests the absence of expertise.

He is, of course, continually hoping that his fellow citizens prove to be moral experts.

When he enters into conversation with people like Gorgias, Protagoras, Euthyphro, Hippias, he gives them the benefit of the doubt. And he asks them to teach him the wisdom that he is happy to presume that they possess.

Time and again, he is disappointed.

Okay, so let's assume for the moment that things haven't really improved in Socrates' time.

There aren't no moral experts, so we don't have that recourse.

Okay, tolerance.

This is a very popular one today.

So tolerance manages disagreement by agreeing to disagree.

Tolerance and compromise go hand in hand, actually.

I'm going to handle them together, right? Compromise smooths the conflicts that arise when tolerated differences make their presence felt.

Notice that tolerance does not apply to insignificant things, such as if you prefer chocolate and I vanilla, I don't speak of tolerating your taste for ice cream, right? Nor do we talk about compromising if you get chocolate as you prefer and I get vanilla as I prefer.

Differences in politics, religion, morality, these are the kinds of differences that we have to tolerate and compromise around. And part of why we need to invoke something like tolerance in these cases is that we really care about getting these things right.

These things really matter, unlike the ice cream.

Okay, so it's the hallmark of liberalism, I think, to deploy tolerance and compromise in such a way as to leave some of the important questions, questions about the meaning of life, what really matters, how we should live, unresolved at the group level.

The most famous and well-known sort of move, I think, in liberalism is the Rawlsian move to sideline debate over what he calls comprehensive doctrines as lying outside the scope of justice.

Political cooperation, according to Rawls, requires only a minimum level of agreement on the protection of liberties and the equitable distribution of basic instrumental goods that people can go on to use in the service of whatever ends their comprehensive doctrines have settled on.

Rawlsian justice means that how I pursue happiness is none of your business.

Now, if this were employed as a methodology for Socratic inquiry, it would be a total disaster.

The whole point of these conversations is for people to help each other get the important questions right, not for us to leave one another to our own deeply erroneous devices.

So Socratic politics can't be tolerant of disagreement.

It's based on the intolerance of disagreement.

A tolerant society is going to tend to celebrate free and open debate as an indication of how hospitable it has made itself to the divergence of opinion.

Of course, from a Socratic point of view, these displays of collective ignorance would be nothing to rejoice over or be proud about.

This is a sign that we don't know.

But Socrates actually has another objection to debate, which is that it feeds into majoritarianism.

Of all these things, I think it's the one he dislikes the most.

So debate is set up to have the speakers speaking not to each other, but to an audience among whom each hopes to win a larger share of the adherents.

The problem with this method is that more people thinking something doesn't make it more true.

I'm going to give you here, I couldn't resist here giving you some text, right? I'm going to give you some beautiful passages from the gorgeous that illustrate this point, because Socrates is so vehement on this one.

So what's happened to Megorgias is that Polus, who Socrates is talking to, is insisting that he wins an argument because everyone agrees with him.

Socrates replies that their conversation is not a debate and that his goal was actually to speak to Polus, not to the audience.

So Polus, don't you think you've been refuted already, Socrates, when you're saying things the likes of which no human being would maintain? Just ask any one of these people.

Socrates, my wonderful man, You're trying to refute me in oratorical style, the way people do in law courts when they think they're refuting some claim.

There, too, one side thinks it's refuting the other when it produces many reputable witnesses on behalf of the arguments that it presents, while the person who asserts the opposite produces only one witness or none at all.

This refutation is worthless as far as the truth is concerned, for it might happen sometimes that an individual is brought down by the false testimony of many reputable people.

Now, too, nearly every Athenian and alien will take your side on the things you're saying if it's witnesses you want to produce against me to show that what I'm saying isn't true.

Nikias, son of Nicaratus, will testify for you if you like, and his brothers along with him, the ones who, okay, blah, blah, blah, right? So will the whole house of Pericles.

Nevertheless, though I'm only one person, I don't agree with you.

don't compel me.

Instead, you produce many false witnesses against me and try to banish me from my property, the truth.

For my part, if I don't produce you as a single witness to agree with what I'm saying, then I suppose I've achieved nothing worth mentioning concerning the things we've been discussing. And I suppose you haven't either if I don't testify on your side, though I'm just one person, and you disregard all these people. Okay.

I won't read the second passage.

It's kind of more of the same.

I just, I couldn't resist putting that one on too. Okay.

So here we see Socrates contrasting the method that he associates with polis debate staged before an audience with his own method of refutation.

I'm going to say more about refutation in a minute, but I just wanted to flag that.

All right, so let's sum up where we are.

Expertise blunts the import of disagreement, because only one view, namely expert's view, really matter.

Tolerance puts up with disagreement.

Debate showcases disagreement.

Compromise and majoritarianism are ways to manage the interpersonal conflicts that arise from disagreement.

What none of these strategies do is resolve disagreement. And so we come to persuasion, which might seem like the most promising candidate for Socratic politics. And also figures heavily in the popular conception of politics, right? Many see persuasion as addressing the actual root cause of disagreement, the difference in opinion. And maybe the main thing that politicians are seen as doing and see themselves as doing is persuading.

You might even think, even when there's expertise about some question, you need persuasion because someone has to take it upon themselves to persuade people to listen to the experts.

This actually happens in the Gorgias, like when Socrates meets the orator, Gorgias, persuader, right? Gorgias boasts that his oratorical skill makes him better at getting patients to take their medicine than his brother, the doctor.

Right? I think it's like because persuasion so much seems like it would be the thing that Plato devotes an entire dialogue in one of his longest dialogues, the Gorgias, to having Socrates explain why he is not in the persuasion business.

Not to go on about it, basically, persuasion attempts to instill belief, not knowledge.

That's the problem with persuasion.

Persuaders want to change someone's mind for the purposes of getting them to act more cooperatively. And so first of all, they have to be prepared to persuade on a variety of topics, wherever the conflicts happen to arise, right? Gorgias freely grants that he does not have expertise in everything, all those matters.

Indeed, what he prides himself on is precisely the fact that the art of oratory allows him to persuade without knowledge.

It's hard work to get so much knowledge, right? He just can use persuasion.

But to nonetheless persuade unilaterally.

So let me explain what I mean by that, because that's really the key, the idea of unilateral.

What we mean by persuasion is unilateral persuasion.

Okay, suppose two people disagree.

about some question where one of them knows the answer, right? Maybe it could be like a math question.

You know some math, I don't know the math, we disagree, okay? If at the end of the, and you know it, if at the end of the conversation our views converge, we're going to converge on your view, right? Because you can teach me what you know, and you're not going to be able to be convinced out of it by my ignorance.

By contrast, if two people without knowledge talk, Either one might change the mind of the other, right? This is a political problem.

Conversation is not a reliable mechanism for coordination, not among ignorant people, right? Because it could go either way.

When people speak of the value of dialogue and communication and persuasion with reference to, for example, the vaccine hesitant, they don't imagine the outcome where we all walk out more avoidant of vaccines.

The power to persuade substitutes for knowledge in ensuring A unilateral direction of belief alignment, and this is what makes it politically useful for the resolution of disagreement.

But in Socrates' view, the real cause of disagreement is not divergence of opinion, but ignorance, lack of knowledge.

Persuasion might be useful in getting us to coordinate and having the same beliefs, but it just doesn't ensure that we're going to coordinate around the truth.

Okay, so that's why Socrates dumps persuasion, too.

So he was in the business of disagreement, right? That's what Socrates did, is just disagree with people all day.

But he rejected all the standard, non-hostile ways of managing disagreement, tolerance, compromise, debate, majoritarianism, expertise, persuasion.

So did he have some other thing? Did he have some like other method? Yes, right? It's called the Socratic method.

right? The Greek word is a lenkos, right? It's translated as refutation, so it was translated as Socratic method.

That's the whole thing of the Socratic method, is that it's a way to deal with disagreement that isn't any one of those ways that I just said.

It's a process by which one person tries to advance a view and the other person tries to defeat it.

Unlike debate, there is only one view on the table.

That is, If you have a pro-vaxxer and an anti-vaxxer, right, the pro-vaxxer has a view, namely vaccines are good, and the anti-vaxxer has a view, vaccines are bad.

If you have a Socratic Elenchus, you would just have one view, let's say the pro-vaxxer, and the other person would just try to show them that they're wrong.

It wouldn't necessarily show vaccines are bad.

It would just show that whatever argument the pro-vaxxer had put forward wasn't a good argument, right? So that's what I mean by saying there's only one view on the table.

It's being called into question.

Unlike persuasion, Elenchus' refutation is bilateral.

The goal of the two parties isn't simply to persuade, but rather to either persuade or be persuaded.

The dialogue where you'll find that motto articulated in the most kind of moving way is the Crito.

Socrates thinks that even with the law, but also with Crito, the thing you have to do is always persuade or be persuaded.

Okay, so This, what I'm giving you is, will hopefully probably be part of this book that I'm working on Socrates, and it's really in other chapters of the book that I talk about this Socratic method in more detail.

So I'm happy to talk more about it in the Q&A, but I'm not going to tell you more about it now.

What I want to do is sort of look at the political aspect.

What is political about the Socratic method, right? So So what is political about this thing I just described? if politics aims at the resolution of disagreement about how to live, then the Socratic method is political because it does that. And it does it in the right way, namely, in a way that builds in a resistance to coordinating on any terms other than the truth.

Socrates says in the Gorgias that refutation, showing someone that they're wrong, is the greatest favor that one human being can do another.

But it's also a distinctively political favor.

If you save someone's life or someone's honor, you may or may not have made it easier to live together with that person under a shared idea.

Like, you might save their life, but they might be like your enemy, right? By contrast, correcting a mistake about how to live is guaranteed to count as help with your shared political endeavor.

On Socrates' picture, given that people don't know how to live, politics has to take an inquisitive form.

Okay, so, as I said, I'm not going to say more about Elenchus, but maybe I'll just say one thing that most of you probably know, but the kind of hallmark of it, right, is that it is combative and agonistic.

I mean, you're trying to prove someone wrong, right? And you either succeed or you don't. And Socrates' interlocutors often felt like angry with him for doing this to them, right? That's like, that was the typical mode, is like Socrates is proving that someone's wrong and they don't like it.

So that suggests 2 questions about the political nature of a Lenklos refutation in Socratic method.

The first is, does Socrates really think that we can live together without what I've been calling positive politics, tolerance, majoritarianism, persuasion, et cetera? Does he think we can have a political life without these things? And then the second question is, if Socratic politics can't be identified with positive politics, so if it isn't talking to

George Harry's persuasion, et cetera, is Socratic politics negative politics? Is it, like in refutation, there's something like a winner and a loser and a fight.

So is refutation a kind of politicization? Okay.

So let me start with the first question.

Does Socrates really think we can have a society without tolerating one another, compromising, going with the majority, using persuasion, et cetera? I don't think he needs to deny that what I've been calling positive politics has some kind of role to play in human affairs.

Any more than he denies that eating or drinking, or for that matter, warfare and negative politics have a role to play in human affairs, Socrates himself fought in several battles quite valiantly.

He couldn't have been a strict pacifist.

So Socrates isn't saying we should never do any of these things, tolerate, be majoritarians.

He's not saying that.

So what is he saying? Well, so let me take a step back.

So like one common move in relation to sort of politicization, negative politics, you'll see it a lot, especially I think among economists, is to present positive politics as a substitute for negative politics.

Let's compromise instead of fighting.

There's always a deal to be made, right? So Socratic politics is not attempting to substitute itself in that way for negative politics, nor is it attempting to substitute itself for positive politics.

Instead, it says that refutation is the kind of purpose or rationale for all these other activities.

If we have a reason to compromise or tolerate or fight, that reason is given by the knowledge that we might acquire or could acquire in refutation.

Socrates is not trying to eliminate standard politics, but he's sort of demoting it as not being real politics.

You can't really resolve A disagreement by way of compromise, majoritarianism, tolerance, persuasion, or debate, or by fighting actual wars.

That doesn't mean you should never do any of those things.

You can't resolve disagreements by eating either, but it's a good idea to eat sometimes.

For no other reason, if you don't eat, you won't have the energy to philosophize.

Likewise, people might use compromise majoritarianism, or for that matter, war, instrumentally to set up the background conditions that will allow people to converse with one another so as to actually resolve disagreements.

Socrates isn't denying that we ignorant people should try to get along with each other.

He's saying getting along isn't politics.

Disagreeing is politics.

Something Socrates says in the Phaedo is, you know, Imagine confusing a necessary condition on something with the thing on which it is a necessary condition.

So he's saying, look, there's lots of stuff that might be a necessary condition on politics.

For instance, eating, right, is a necessary condition.

Politicians have to eat, right? And so too, some of this majoritarianism, whatever stuff, might also be necessary conditions on politics.

But it's not politics.

Politics is a thing he does, real politics. Okay.

So just to contrast with liberalism, right? Standard liberalism says that the job of politics is to secure the fundamental liberties and basic goods that allow each of us to pursue our own individualistic conception of happiness.

Socratic politics conceives of our need for one another as being much more profound than that.

None of us knows what happiness is, and we need to help each other find out.

Socratism and liberalism are in agreement that a lot of what currently goes under the heading of standard politics, both positive and negative, is a matter of providing the background conditions for something else, which is where the real action is.

The disagreement is that Socrates, unlike liberalism, thinks that the real action is itself political.

So just to give an example, like Socratic politics would suggest that we welcome views that are sharply opposed to our own.

especially on very important topics, as occasions to practice refutation and to learn that we might have been wrong.

But Socrates wouldn't characterize that as tolerance.

It's fine to expect that the disagreements that are there today are still going to be there tomorrow and the next day and so on, maybe for the next 100 or 1,000 years.

But it's a principle of Socratic politics that if we keep at it, eventually we stand to know.

That's the point.

All of us together, knowing.

Of course, what we might come to know about a given domain is that pluralism is correct, right? So maybe music is not better than painting, painting is not better than music, so there's no need to have a disagreement about that.

So we might discover that some disagreements aren't really disagreements, right? But where there really is a disagreement, what we can expect, what we can work for, is to come to agree.

So where liberals invoke tolerance, Socrates would invoke patience.

See the disagreement as temporary.

Eventually, we'll either resolve it or realize there was nothing to disagree about in the 1st place.

Okay, so that's positive politics.

Socrates acknowledges that you need to have it, maybe some of it.

It's kind of like food, but it's not his thing, right? He's specializing in doing real politics, not the kind where you get people food of various kinds.

All right, second question.

Is a Lenkos itself politicization? Is it negative politics? Is it warlike? I'll talk about this and then we'll be done.

So consider a distinction between, to answer the question whether a Lenkos is warlike, I have to distinguish between two different kinds of war.

Really, it's two different reasons for which people might fight wars.

Pragmatic and ideological.

So the pragmatic fight happens because you see fighting as the best way to grab something of theirs or defend something of yours.

It might be your land, your riches, or your life.

The ideological fight happens because there's some moral principle or wrongdoing or perceived slight at stake.

In A pragmatic battle, fighting can be avoided if each party is given peaceful access to whatever item they were fighting for.

There always is such an item because pragmatic battles are battles for things.

Winning is sought only as a means to acquiring the thing in question.

In ideological fighting, victory is the target and the battle is an arena for reaffirming some threatened idea.

So if Elenchus is going to be compared to war, it would have to be too ideological rather than pragmatic war.

Socrates notes in a few places, the Euthyphro and the first Alcibiades are two that come immediately to mind.

that what drives the Greeks to wage war are disagreements over justice and injustice.

If that's right, if Socrates is right about that, then the ensuing wars are ideological.

They're driven by a disagreement.

We might, in sort of our time, we might give religious wars and civil wars as examples of wars where the dimension of moral righteousness comes to the fore.

In a religious war, we're fighting so as to spread our true religious idea and have it replace others' false religious ideas. And in a civil war, we're fighting so that our society may come to be guided by our and not our political enemy's idea of it.

Of course, it's always possible to give a religious or ideological cover for what is really a land or power grab.

But I think that the inverse is also true, and people are liable to pretend they're being pragmatic to cover their very sincere hostility.

So let me give an example of that.

The Iliad opens with the priest Chryses.

He's asked the Greeks for his daughter back.

I won't give you all the background there, but just leave it at that, right? And he's been turned down.

They won't give him his daughter back. And so he prays to the god Apollo to punish them.

This is on your handout.

I'll read it to you.

Hear me, Apollo, god of the silver bow, who strides the wall of Chrysae and Scylla sacrosanct, Lord in power of Tennitus, Smintheus, god of the plague.

If I ever roofed a shrine to please your heart, ever burn the long, rich bones of bulls and goats on your holy altar, now, bring my prayer to pass.

Pay the Danaans back, your arrows for my tears.

So the result of this prayer is that Apollo does indeed rain plague down on the Greeks.

That's the Danaans, right? who eventually figure out why they're being plagued, and that leads Agamemnon, their leader, to force Achilles to give Chryses back his daughter. And that action sets in motion, right, the hostility between Achilles and Agamemnon that drives the whole rest of the Iliad, right? All the disastrous events of the Iliad come out of this moment.

This is the very beginning of the Iliad.

Okay, so you might see this and ask yourself, like, looking back on, look back on Chryses' speech, right? If you're in a position to call in favors from a god, why not just ask him for your daughter back directly, right? The answer is that Chryses is angry.

He feels he's been wronged and he wants revenge.

Earlier he wanted his daughter back.

Now he wants to teach the Greeks a lesson.

The saga of Chryses and his daughter is, of course, the whole Trojan War in miniature.

It wasn't the prospect of retrieving Menelaus' wife that launched 1000 ships, so much as the wounded pride of the men sailing in them. And so Socrates was right to describe the Trojan War as, in large part, ideological.

Okay, so now we see what ideological war is, right? Though I want to grant that in actual wars, these two elements, the pragmatic and the ideological, are often woven together in ways that are very hard to disentangle.

Is Elenchus, is Socratic refutation, is it like ideological war? I think Socrates' answer would be that it goes the other way around.

If we're defeating our enemies in order to prove a point or teach the world a lesson or stand up for truth, goodness, and justice, then the war represents A translation of an ideological dispute into a material medium.

So when it comes to military deaths, in addition to the bodily harm inflicted upon the soldiers and the emotional harm inflicted upon their loved ones, there's also the symbolic harm of the defeat of the idea.

A battle of thoughts has been mapped onto bodies.

But if ideological warfare and refutation are alike, that's really because the first imitates the second imperfectly.

That is, ideological warfare imitates refutation.

Exsanguinating the bodies of people who hold an idea is at best an indirect way of getting at the idea itself.

If the opposing idea were known, it could be taught, and it could thereby eliminate, fully eliminate the idea that contradicts it.

That's what refutation aims to do.

It's a battle to the death, not between 2 individuals.

but between the idea in one and the denial of the idea in another.

So A refutation really has the character of like a showdown in a Western, right? This town is not big enough for the both of us.

Except in the case of the Western, the claim in question is not ever literally true.

Two people could fit into just about any room, let alone a whole town.

But logical space, big as it is, is not big enough for both an idea and its negation.

If this is right, then what I described as politicization, for example, scoring points against the opposing side by translating A dispute about gender identity into the arena of pronouns, or making a petition to fight the forces of illiberalism, represents something like a nascent or failed attempt at refutation.

Politicization takes, displaces an ideological battle into a new domain.

It thereby substitutes a war of words for what you might think of as the very real civil war that could ensue between the parties if they were to fight with weapons instead.

Insofar as the weapons-based war would have been an attempt to adjudicate a battle of ideas, politicization is actually a step in the right direction.

It just doesn't go far enough.

Using cannons and rifles and guns to fight over ideas, real war, is a bad way of doing something else.

So real war is a bad version of something else.

Politicization, fake war, is an improvement on it.

Substituting words for weapons, but it's an imperfect improvement because the words are being used in the wrong way as weapons.

Refutation is what you get when you fully improved it.

It's kind of the perfection of ideological war. And in its proper home, the kind of zero-sum, competitive, destructive impulse, when you see it in the context of refutation, you see that it isn't necessarily anything bad.

There's a wonderful illustration of this in Plato's Euthydemus.

So in the Euthydemus, there's a pair of sophists.

professional arguers, okay, named Euthydemus and Dionysiodorus, and they ask Socrates whether he would like them to submit his young friend, Clinias, to their educational program, a kind of refutation program.

Here's the, this is Euthydemus, this is actually, I can't remember now which one, no, it's Dionysiodorus who asked this.

Tell me, Socrates. Dionysidorus said, and all you others who say you want this young man to become wise, are you saying this is a joke, or do you want it truly and in earnest? Do you really want him to become wise? Socrates enthusiastically affirms on behalf of everyone who's there that they, and that includes Clineas, Clineas is there, that they really want him to become wise.

So Dionysidorus concludes from this response, I'm not giving you all the intervening texts, that Socrates wants Clineas killed.

Then Since you wish him to no longer be what he is now, you apparently wish for nothing else but his death.

Okay, this is kind of a bombshell in the discussion.

It's some kind of an inflammatory comment.

Everyone gets offended and angry at each other, and they're starting to kind of get at each other's throats in the conversation.

But Socrates calms everyone down with the following speech.

He says to his friends, if they, Euthydemus and Dionysidorus, really know how to destroy men so as to make good and sensible people out of bad and stupid ones, and the two of them have either found out for themselves or learned from someone else a kind of ruin or destruction by which they do away with a bad man and render him good.

If, as I say, they know how to do this, well, they clearly do, since they specifically claimed that the art they had recently discovered was that of making good men out of bad ones, then let us concede them the point and permit them to destroy the boy for us and make him wise, and do the same to the rest of us as well. And if you young men are afraid, let them try it on the carrion, as they say, and I'll be the victim.

Being elderly, I'm ready to run the risk, and I surrender myself to Dionysiodorus here, just as I might to Medea of Colchis, witch.

Let him destroy me, or if he likes, boil me, or do whatever else he wants, but he must make me good.

So one characteristic source of battles among people, like even one-on-one battles, fist fights, right, is the question, Which of the two of us is better? Which of us is superior? And I think culturally we've been taught that like to stay away from those sorts of battles.

There's something inappropriate, unacceptable about asking yourself with respect to another person.

Am I better than them or is he better than me? Socrates encourages us to just embrace those battles and embrace alongside it, persuade or be persuaded, right, the possibility that we may be shown up as worse.

Let yourself, yourself, which is to say, all that you take yourself to know, be killed and be replaced by something better.

Okay, so that's all on Socrates. And now just a final reflection on petitions, back to petitions.

Where does this leave me with respect to petitions, right? Do I still object to philosophers' petitioning? Do I still object on the grounds that it's a politicization of philosophy? Yes and yes.

But in light of the above, I want to distinguish two very different forms that objection could take.

The first form, and I think a lot of the people who agreed with me, agreed with me thinking the following, is that The petition adopts an unnecessarily negative form of politics.

If these two sides have legitimate aims, everyone can potentially get what they want without fighting.

We can work it out by tolerating differences, compromising on points of conflict, trusting experts, et cetera.

The objection speaks in the voice of positive politics and proposes to replace symbolic battles with activity that is more productive by being less combative.

Let's state our goals and work towards them together so that everyone wins. Okay.

But that's not the Socratic objection to using petitions.

The Socratic objection is not that they are unnecessarily negative, but that they're insufficiently negative.

They're insufficiently combative, they're insufficiently adversarial.

The battle implicated in the background of them is too symbolic.

They're not real politics.

A real battle has to have the character of an honest disagreement.

I try to prove you wrong openly to your face with the conviction that the only thing that stands in the way of you acknowledging your mistake is the quality of my argument, and with the understanding that I may be the one who's proven wrong.

I aim not to persuade, but to persuade or be persuaded.

The Socratic response to a disagreement among philosophers is to go ahead and fight, as long as we're prepared to fight real battles and not fake ones.

We of all people should be capable of completing the act of politicization.

Thanks.

Audience questions

Yeah. Hey, Sophia. Yeah, go ahead.

Sophia: The result of a reputation will, you know, say for example, A&B are having a Socratic style of reputation, and the result is that, you know, B is wrong and A, you know, emerges to be correct, then I was just wondering, as a result of this, you know, in the next discussion, because maybe I don't know if this is like an empirical thing or rather it's like a necessity that B will be, reduced to a class of, those who have had wrong ideas or somehow by having their ideas refuted, the defeated party lose some level of legitimacy in having like a rational claim.

to having ideas in the future in general, if that make any sense, right? So, if I admit that I'm losing this war, it somehow makes me less of a rational, maybe I'm proving myself to be less intelligent than you are, right? So, I was wondering, you know, on these two cases, you know, what we would say about the possibility of a Socratic style of reputation.

Agnes: Great, thank you.

Those are great questions.

Okay, so first of all, just a small correction.

So Sophia said that people are supposed to be just carriers of ideas, and actually, to be more precise, one of them is a carrier of an idea.

The other one is just trying to refute, right? The way that Socrates described that other one sometimes is that he's like a mirror, right? Allowing the person to see the defects of their idea, right? So in a way, that's what the difference between refutation and debate is, that in fact, there aren't even 2 carriers of ideas, there's just one.

But now to get to your question, I think that The thing that Socrates, the kind of battles that Socrates is trying to have are really hard to have, and they're hard because they're scary. And we feel ourselves being on the line in some way. And so we have, all of us, a lot of tendencies to retreat elsewhere.

right? And one of the forms of retreat that we take is just trying to get along and be nice to each other.

So like a theme that I noticed in Socratic dialogues a long time ago is that if you search for words that involve laughter, those often show up in a negative context in Plato.

Like Plato doesn't seem to be a fan of like laughter and fun.

Because laughter is often the way of just resolving attention, right? In the direction of a kind of pleasant, you know, like just when you thought things were getting philosophical, right? Comedians are in some way quite philosophical.

but they know how to resolve it.

They know how to make the philosophy go away.

So now the point is, we all know how to make philosophy go away. And there are some pleasant ways, and then there's some unpleasant ways, right? And we even have defenses built up in advance, right? And so this stuff about various ways in which you can challenge someone standing to speak are defenses that we have against having a philosophical conversation.

There are lots of others that we encounter in the classroom.

the idea like, who's to say is like a line, or everything is subjective, right? Those are defenses, right? It's like, we don't even have to get into this question because I already know in advance that there's no possibility of getting anywhere.

That's another kind of defense.

So what do we do about the fact that people have all these defenses? It's sort of like you're asking me, how do we do a thing that's really hard? And Socrates' answer is, you need to have virtue. And his thought is that, There is no position or stance that

a person takes, which is such that if you don't, like if you have the requisite amount of virtue and you ask them the right sorts of questions, it would be impossible for them to move. And in a way, the idea that someone's saying to you, well, I'm going to discount you because you're a woman or because you're not a woman, and that poses a permanent block to having a conversation with them, is itself such a defense, right? It's like, well, you just got to try and do your best.

So a really big part, I think, of Socratic philosophical conversation is having a set of virtues that both maintain your own courage in sustaining these conversations and in leading the other person to have the conversation.

But there isn't, this kind of conversation doesn't presuppose that the people who walk into it are all like Socrates, right? And part of what it is to be Socrates is to manage the anger of other people. And you might be like, not such a great job.

He got himself killed.

But you have to notice that he mostly didn't get himself killed.

He was old by the time they killed him, right? So the impressive thing about Socrates is how long they didn't kill him for, right? He went around doing this because he had a certain kind of virtue, a certain kind of excellence.

Your second point about if you lose legitimacy.

So another really, I think, important part of this sort of virtue is that it has to become clear that what's going to win the argument is the best idea, not the smartest person. And the way that works is, suppose you're smarter than me, right? And we're having this argument, and you see objections to your own idea that I haven't come up with yet.

Well, it's your job to tell me those.

If you have the relevant conversational virtue, you're going to tell me those, right? And so it's the best idea that's going to win, not the smartest person.

Socrates often actually makes a big show of saying, I'm not the smartest guy in the world.

In fact, he actually says he's kind of dumb.

I have a bad memory.

I'm not good at speaking.

All the things that were tied in sort of ancient culture to being smart, he disavows, right? What he wants to do is make sure that the best idea wins.

Okay, so those are my answers.

Yes, this gentleman up here.

Audiance member #1: I'm wondering if this kind of Socratic politics only a kind of private practice or it can be a public fire, a public practice or something.

Because I remember Socrates said, if I do this, I come into politics, I will die.

very young and in apology. And also we know that Socratic dialogues always ends in aporia in those kind of confusions. And if that happens, it seems to me not be able to rule a country or something like that, manage a government.

Agnes: So, what Socrates does is, in a lot of senses, public.

Like, he's speaking in public places and people are often watching, right? But what he means specifically is speaking at the assembly, right? Speaking in front of law courts.

He doesn't have experience with that.

So that's the contrast he's making in the Gorgias. And those kinds of speeches have a special character and they're inside of a majoritarian structure.

right? Where what happens is often in his conversations, people try to turn them in the direction of those, and he resists. And I think his thought is I wouldn't be able to resist that turning in those contexts.

So the public-private distinction, you could make it in a couple of different ways, but I think it's plausible that what Socrates is doing is in some sense in some sense public.

I think once, what you get with Plato onward is you get philosophical schools, which really, to a great degree, sort of privatize these conversations within communities.

But that was less true of Socrates. And then I wanted to say one quick thing about, the dialogues don't all end in operia.

The Gorgias ends with a list of claims that have been established with chains of argument as strong as iron and adamant. And Socrates lists them, right? So it's a weird thing that everyone thinks that all these dialogues end inconclusively. And I'm not sure where it comes from, because if you wanted to write a dialogue and say, everyone keeps saying that about my dialogues, I'm going to write one where they can't make that mistake, you know, you'd write it the way Plato wrote the Gorgias.

He's like, now let me list all the things that we have proven to be true and that I will always hold on to in every context and that you all have to agree to.

So, but I do think that, so I think Socrates thinks, no, there are things that get established through argument, and they repeatedly get established in his conversations.

They always end on certain claims, right? You know, it's better to suffer injustice than to do it.

Virtue is knowledge.

It's being good rather than appearing good that matters.

Weakness of will is impossible.

These are some things that get established over and over again.

Everyone desires the good. And I think he thinks they absolutely could get established and agreed to, but once again, it would require a certain virtue of sticking to the argument once you've been persuaded of it, which is relevant to the credo, right? And so the kind of Socratic politics does require a kind of virtue among the citizenry.

Yes, in the back there.

Audiance member #2: So refutation presupposes that the other person will listen to your arguments. And agreeing on having this kind of argument, it's a form of politics that cannot be established through refutation because if the other person doesn't listen, the form of argumentation is different.

So cannot we see the act of signing a public petition as a way of making a public statement that this is a move in the refutation game, and many people think this way, so you cannot ignore us now.

So it sounds very Socratic if you look at it this way, and not as the other kinds of politics that you have described.

Agnes: So I think that's a really good point.

I think that if you see the petition as opening the question rather than us closing it, that's quite different, right? If you say, look, we're trying to draw attention to this idea, we're prepared to be persuaded out of it.

We could be wrong about it, right? That's not the spirit of most petitions that I've seen, right? But I do think it's a conceptual possibility, right? I think that What's really wrong is trying to close a question by way of a petition, saying this settles it somehow.

If all the petition is trying to do is get attention to an idea, I would say that's not Socratic.

That is Socrates, he never, he doesn't do that.

I mean, like people sometimes want to walk away from him, they just walk away.

He doesn't have like, wait, no, I'm going to force you to pay attention.

I'm going to, you can't ignore me now.

He never says anything like that, right? You can ignore him.

What he does instead is try to argue in such a kind of generous and charitable and interesting way that people don't want to ignore him.

But I think, so what I would say is, the use of various sort of spectacular methods to draw attention to something, I think you're right that figures in contemporary politics, and it would go along with those other positive politics methods, right? So it could set up the possibility of a conversation.

It could, potentially.

I think that's not mostly what it, as a matter of fact, does, but there's no principled reason why it couldn't.

Yeah, over here.

Audiance member #3: Yeah.

so one way of thinking about like the debate about politicization itself and whether it's like its value or disvalue is going to be like, you can think of any entry in that debate as having to do with resting on like a conception of well-being, right? Because that seems to be the case for Socrates, right? Like, or in Plato, et cetera.

Like, is supposed to be like the most effective or throw method for resolving these questions.

But the reason we even want that in the 1st place, like the reason we want the most effective method to get to the right answer is because having the right answer is going to make our lives go better.

So that's the ultimate reason to do any of this. And so it seems like when you look at it that way, so engaging in a lengthy refutation involves some risk, right? Because

you have to take the time and effort to engage in that, you have to make yourself vulnerable, and you run up against the risk that the other person, the people on the other side are universally not open to being disproven in that way, right? So it seems like Among people who defend politicization or defend like closing the question in this way, the most circumspect of them tend to do so in terms of well-being, like to the effect that, look, I agree that like in a perfect world, elenchic refutation is going to be the best way to get to the right answer here, but this like this claim that I'm opposing, this claim that's at issue is like so imminently threatening to so many people's well-being or whatever that we don't have the luxury of engaging in elenchos.

So I just wonder, that seems like something that would be important to respond to for your project.

It's a great question.

Thanks.

Agnes: So I think the thing that I would note is that approach presupposes that we have a conception of well-being that's independent of anything we achieve through Lenchus, right? So Socrates thinks it's not at all obvious that death is bad for you, for example.

right? That's in fact a view that he comes to as a result of Elenkos.

Most people think death is super bad for you and you've really got to avoid it, right? So it may be that what we're doing while avoiding Elenkos is chasing these things to protect ourselves that are not even actually good, right? But I do think, you know, one way to think about it is like, I think the idea that Elenkos is somehow ideal politics is right. And I would put it this way, not everyone is equipped to live in that ideal world at all times.

What it is to be a philosopher is to try to live as much as possible in that ideal world all the time. And to think that a lot of the other things that you are sort of risking or might lose are just not as important to see, that they're not as important as the values of that ideal world.

But I think Socrates thinks we should be incredibly forgiving of the fact that most people are not in a position to see that. And they're driven by fear and by an assumption that they know what's bad when they don't. And he thinks that's the main thing that screws up people's lives, is that they think they know it's bad when they don't, right? And so he doesn't think you should blame people in that position. And I think he would even grant that he himself experiences these kind of illusions of it's hard not to see being put to death as bad.

I think he struggles not to see it as bad.

So yeah, I agree that Olenkos' ideal politics And the idea is not to blame anyone for not engaging in it, but just to try to engage in it.

Yes, over here.

Audiance member #4: So I had a similar question, but I want to look at it a little more through kind of the lens of experts, because something that you said and that I hadn't given a ton of thought to previously is the distinction between technical

and moral experts, right? You know, someone who just knows how to do something versus someone who's allowed to prescribe. And When you said that, I almost thought, wait, if we get rid of moral experts, then that feels almost like a slippery slope into almost moral relativism, where every person is able to think of their own version of morality. And so I guess my question comes in with, how do you reconcile a world in which people can have their own versions of what is right and what is wrong, and then still have this Socratic discussion, which, you know, would assume is based on everyone having at least some sort of shared belief system in which to argue, right?

Agnes: Yeah.

So we're not getting rid of moral experts.

We're trying to become them.

They're just, it's not that they're impossible.

There just aren't any yet.

I mean, maybe they are and I haven't met them, right? But I haven't met any so far. And that was Socrates' situation too.

He absolutely believes that the idea of a moral expert is possible. And that's what he wants to become, right? So, but in the meantime, right, we have to inquire. And we also, to say that we don't have them isn't to say that we don't make any progress.

So I think human beings have made substantive moral progress.

That is, we have more moral knowledge than Socrates had.

We have it through having conversations and doing philosophy.

So I think, personally, think that the single greatest human achievement in any area or any field is the idea of human rights.

That in some way springs out in some way of the Greek and the Judeo-Christian tradition and then gets articulated more in the Enlightenment and is still getting articulated today when we think in a variety of contexts about what it means to treat someone with dignity and respect.

right? So, and I think we've made real progress there, which is to say, I think we know more than we did before, right? So I don't think we're just in a position of, we know nothing, right? But our knowledge isn't complete, right? And I don't think we really know why people should have rights. And I'm not sure we know what they are.

So that's like, it's progress, but there's a lot of work left to be done.

I don't think we know what rights there are.

I think the concept of right isn't quite the right concept for the thing that we want, right? So we're working on this.

So it's a kind of progress where what isn't known is, it's very important to keep that in mind as a kind of humility when we see other people going wrong.

It's like, well, none of us knows yet, right? But that's not to say we're not getting anywhere. Yeah.

Audiance member #5: Hi, that was a great talk. And so related to the previous two questions, I'm trying to think sort of in the context of say something like anthropogenic climate change or something like that, and you could imagine, sort of from a

political perspective, and you say it's very politicized. And we've, you know, you've talked about this kind of natural stopping point where You get these extremes and then that's good and then you kind of battle it out and one wins.

But one of the way this is being discussed is the kind of belief systems and facts and the whole system is politicized and split. And is it possible that there is no stopping point where one wins, that it just ends up just getting worse and worse and doesn't converge?

Agnes: So I think that it's hard because those, when what you have are these like two sides, that's not the same as a conversation, right? And I guess I think I see sort of roughly 2 approaches to that situation.

The one is the one that like economists and tech people favor, which is the positive politics of like, we can innovation ourselves out of this problem, right? And the idea there being like, let's just, this is just an ordinary, the ordinary sort of problem where we just need to compromise more and have gains from trade, and then we'll all like, right? That's one kind of approach. And so some people want to depoliticize climate change battles in that direction.

That's the positive politics direction. And then there's the people who are like, this is a kind of ideological war, right? And in fact, science is being sort of occupied by these ideologies, right? And I guess I think that at the very least, what this framework could do is help you separate out those two approaches, right? And then to think, okay, let's just set aside the economist one for a minute, right? That may handle some of this war may be pragmatic, but like a lot of it seems to genuinely be ideological, right? And if there is an ideological war, then the thing to do is to see what is it at bottom that we're fighting about, right? We seem to be fighting about a bunch of things, but if those battles are symbolic, there's actually another battle we're trying to have. And I think that, and I guess I think that the job of philosophers would then be to try to locate what is the actual battle so that we can fight it.

So long as it remains symbolic, it's going to be very hard to be making that kind of progress about it.

You could just make the other kind, right? But I guess my thought is like, once you do, you can just genuinely resolve it once you find out what that battle is really a battle about.

Do we, one more? Okay, go ahead.

Right here.

Audiance member #6: So it seems like you've just made an argument for the Elenchus itself.

Now, And it seems like you think that more people should take it up as a way of resolving things.

Now it seems like we would need to persuade people to take up the elenchus.

Is this itself an elenchic activity? So for example, does Socrates ever persuade anyone to take up the elenchus? And if so, how does he do it?

Agnes: Yeah.

So it would be an elenchic activity if what I were trying to do would be to either persuade you or have you persuade me that it's a mistake, right? That's what would make an Alexic activity.

Does Socrates persuade anyone? Yes, very many people.

So after Socrates, there was basically a generation of Socrates imitators who not only did the Elenchus, but they also tried to dress like him and talk like him and go barefoot like he did, right? And actually, Plato was quite worried about this, that he was going to become kind of like a cult leader type.

He was almost too persuasive in a certain way.

But in some way, the persuasiveness of Socrates is why we have philosophy, right? So, I mean, he persuaded Plato.

So he was quite persuasive.

But I think that in many of the conversations, at least, Plato shows him as being very open to the thought, for instance, that he is harming the person he's talking to and should stop, right? So in the Mino, Mino says, like, you're hurting me.

I used to have this skill to make speeches in front of people, and now I don't have it anymore because of you, you've messed me up. And Socrates thinks he has to defend himself, right? And that if he really were hurting people, he should stop.

In the apology, he's defending, right? So I think that that's what would, you know, like, presenting a lancos elenctically is a matter of presenting it in a way where you open yourself to refutation and you are straightforward and open about its defects as much as you can be.

Because if there's something wrong with it, you'd want to know.

Thank you all.

Agnes Callard
2021 Nuveen Lecture on Socratic Politics
October 12, 2021

The University of Chicago Divinity School.
<www.youtube.com/watch?v=uHCNXHzMRuc>