

2022 Aims of Education Address

Agnes Callard

23 Sept 2022

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The Aims of Education Address is a celebrated tradition where a faculty member addresses the entering class on the unique aims of a liberal arts education at the University.

John W. Boyer, Dean of the College, will introduce Associate Professor Agnes Callard, Director of Undergraduate Students as the Aims of Education Speaker.

Learn more about the 2022 Aims of Education address: <https://news.uchicago.edu/story/agnes-callard-deliver-aims-education-address-sept-22>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pwl0Nu13GoQ>

Introduction

John: Okay, good evening. Good evening. Good evening. It's a pleasure to welcome you to the Aims of Education Address for 2022.

All colleges and universities have venerable customs and traditions, and the University of Chicago has far more than most. And appropriate to a university that was founded in 1890 as an engine, of educational innovation, one of our most esteemed annual traditions, involves thinking about and even debating the aims of liberal education.

Each fall, in the week before classes resume and the new academic year is upon us with full force, we invite a senior faculty member to address the entering first-year class and transfer students assembled in Rockefeller Chapel with her or his thoughts about liberal education and its meaning and value to our lives.

The general title accorded to these talks is adapted from Alfred North Whitehead's famous lecture on the Aims of Education, given in 1916 as a presidential address to the Mathematical Association in England.

The annual Ames Lecture at Chicago began as a student initiative in the 1960s, and over the decades it's become a sturdy and even venerable part of our common and shared history.

It is thus part of that system of shared values and our common citizenship that I discussed in the course of greeting you in the chapel yesterday afternoon.

The first Aims of Education address was, in fact, a series of lectures on liberal education held during the 1961-62 academic year. And an important feature of that particular event was the participation of President Robert Maynard Hutchins, who returned to campus for the occasion, having been retired from the presidency of the University of Chicago for nearly a decade.

Hutchins spoke here in the chapel from that lectern in the spring of 1962 before an audience as large as this one. And he spoke as he had always done as president in defense of liberal learning.

During his presidency, Robert Hutchins gave decisive shape to the traditions and ideals of liberal learning that still animate our college. And it is sitting that we honor his memory on this occasion and in this chapel.

The Aims of Education addresses are now published by the college in Hutchins' honor. Thanks to generous gifts from alumni who celebrate his role in shaping our ideals.

I should also mention that it is a central feature of this particular ritual that the Ames speaker has given absolutely no instruction or substantive guidance from the dean of the college or anyone else, or almost none, other than informing her or him of the time and place at which the lecture will be held.

To be invited to deliver the annual Ames lecture is a considerable honor, but also a daunting challenge. And it is no accident that most, if not all, of our Ames speakers in the past have been colleagues not only esteemed as foremost scholars, but also as brilliant teachers.

Our speaker this evening is Agnes Collard, Associate Professor of Philosophy in the College at the University.

Agnes is a distinguished and highly original scholar of Socratic and Aristotelian ethics, who joined the University of Chicago faculty in 2012.

But she also claims a deeper history with our liberal arts education, because she's an alumna of our college.

Her influential first book, *Aspiration, The Agency of Becoming*, explored the deepest value transformations that can take place in our lives, such as becoming a parent or changing political views, discussing in illuminating ways how such changes happen and how much control we have over them.

She's in addition the author of more than a dozen scholarly articles and the editor of a thought-provoking edited collection called *On Anger*, which was published in 2020.

Professor Collard is not only a scholar of broad erudition and analytic power, but a superb and imaginative teacher who uses a range of formats to engage your students and the public in the questions posed by ancient philosophy and ethics.

You can find her regular column in the *Point Magazine* or editorials in such media as the *New York Times* or the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.

On campus, her commitment to public philosophy has produced a popular *Night Owl* series, which features late-night faculty-led conversations on topics like divorce, the relationship between economics and philosophy, and artificial intelligence. Many of these are available on YouTube.

In 2017, Agnes was the recipient of the Quantrell Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching, which is the highest and oldest honor bestowed at this university for faculty teaching.

Her students have described her as a brilliant lecturer with unparalleled enthusiasm and passions. And routinely praised her ability to turn large classrooms into sites of genuine and engaging conversation.

One student wrote that, quote, Her technique of exploring Plato's arguments taught me more about Plato than I imagined there was ever to learn, end quote.

Great teaching lies at the heart of the central purpose of our university. Indeed, it should lie at the heart of any real university.

The efforts of our faculty over the past century to create and define this great university's teaching traditions were often complex, because they not only involved structural formalities, but because they were infused with a very strong sense of pride and a profound sense that our work as educators would have a dramatic impact on the resilience of the fundamental values that animate and define this university.

Many years ago, a past Aims of Education lecturer and a distinguished humanist, and I'm proud to say my friend, Professor Karl Weintraub, argued that teaching was not simply a way of valorizing the university's institutional mission, but it was also a confession of the power of the university in constituting the kind of power, the kind of world we want to bequeath to young people who come after us.

A teacher finds his satisfaction, Jacques insisted, simply in having raised consciousness by one little nudge.

It may make all the difference between mediocrity and excellence.

The quality of a culture ultimately depends on this long, the sustained cultivation of sensitivities, of refined taste, and of sound judgment.

There is no cheap, easy way to culture.

Much of the true cultural labor is not readily visible, but in this invisible labor, Jacques wrote, lies the great contribution that a university makes to all that is visible to the larger public.

The occasion of teaching has come to define the highest and best nature of this institution.

It is thus a great pleasure and a high honor for me to introduce a great teacher, my distinguished colleague and friend, Agnes Collard, who will deliver the 2022 address on the Aims of Education. Agnes.

Address Begins

Agnes: Thanks, John. It's an unspeakably great honor to stand here. The rest of my life is going to be downhill, honor-wise. You're laughing, but that wasn't a joke.

So I want to talk to you about your future. But I'm going to use that word future in a different way than people usually do when they stand where I am up on a stage in front of a microphone, addressing people like you who are on the threshold of a big life transition.

The future I'm referring to starts about 180 years from now, and it runs for a few thousand years after that.

A lot of the time, when older people address younger ones, we're moved to speak of the future that you will live to see and we won't.

We adopt the guise of Moses, having been divinely excluded from the promised land, addressing a crowd who will be permitted to enter.

I don't want to talk to you about the land you're about to enter.

I want to talk to you about the one you won't be able to enter.

I want us all to play Moses, peering into the future none of us will live to see, the future even your grandchildren won't live to see.

That's how I got the 180 number.

In 180 years, your last grandchild will probably be dead.

That's assuming people continue to have their last kids no later than their early 40s and that life extension technology doesn't add too many years to a person's life.

Those seem like reasonable assumptions to me since medical advances in delaying childbearing or extending lifespan seem to have stalled over the past few decades.

But if you're more optimistic than I am on those fronts, add the relevant number of years to the 180 starting point.

I want you to be imagining a time period in which everyone you knew well over the course of your life is dead.

As for the other endpoint of a few thousand years, I chose it because that's as far ahead as I'm comfortable imagining, which is probably a function of the fact that my own research focuses on a world, ancient Athens, that existed a few thousand years ago.

If I say to myself, imagine what the world will be like 10,000 or 100,000 years from now, I can say the number 10,000 years, but that's not really doing any work in structuring what I imagine.

I just don't have any kind of intuitive feel for what 10,000 years of distance in time is like.

I could look at a field of 10,000 flowers, but I wouldn't be able to translate that into years.

So I'm stuck limiting myself to thinking about the humans who are at most as far ahead of me in the future as Socrates and Plato are behind me in the past.

But again, if you're more imaginative or have studied even older cultures, feel free to add on some years at the tail end.

Okay, so we're looking at an era that starts around the year 2200 and ends by about the year 5000.

That's the framework we're working with. That's the period of history, future history, that I want to talk to you about. It's a time none of us will live to see, and no one we know will live to see it.

But I called it your future. And I do see it that way, as your future, and also mine, our future. What makes it ours? One suggestion might be biology.

Even if our grandchildren won't be around anymore, some of them will have children, some of those children will eventually have children, and so on.

So the claim is we're invested in this future, in our future, because we have biological ties to it. That answer is unsatisfying to me. It doesn't seem right.

I'd feel invested in that future even if I lacked a personal biological stake in it.

Some of you may be unsure whether you'll have kids or may have decided you won't have them.

That ship has sailed for me.

Some of my kids are here at this lecture.

But my oldest is 18, like you.

I don't yet know whether I'll have grandkids, so none of us knows whether we'll have an individual biological stake in that world. And yet, I claim that we do now already know that we have a stake in it, that it matters to us, that it is our future.

So recently, I read a book called *What We Owe the Future*, which tries to argue the reader into long-termism, which is the view that we ought to care about the future.

I was surprised that the author, William MacAskill, who is a philosopher, at no point in the book whipped out the philosophy thought experiment designed to show that we already do.

Why go to all the trouble trying to browbeat someone into caring about something when instead you can show them they already do care about it? Myself, I like to take the easy path, so I'm going to tell you about that thought experiment.

Suppose we find out tomorrow that over the past few months, another virus, alongside COVID, has been creeping silently around the globe.

The disease caused by this highly infectious virus is largely asymptomatic, which is why it took us a few months to notice that just about everyone has been infected by it.

In fact, assume that by the time we figure out exactly what the virus does, everyone on the planet has been infected.

I'll admit, it's a little hard to imagine exactly how the virus is supposed to have found literally every last person, from a baby born in the Falkland Islands off the coast of Patagonia and Argentina to a grandma living in Yakutsk in eastern Siberia.

But one of the perks of being in the thought experiments business is that you get just to posit stuff.

If you think poetic license is good, you should try philosopher's license.

So I am positing that everyone has been infected by this virus. And that we know this, and I'm also going to posit what the virus does.

It makes you infertile.

The virus gets called sterilavirus because its only medical effect on those who may infect, whether they're male or female, is sterility, the inability to have children.

Okay, so what I want you to think about is, what would be your reaction to learning that an epidemic of sterilavirus has swept the globe? While you're thinking about that, I'll tell you about my reaction.

When I really start to vividly imagine us being the last humans, the last generation, when I let myself take seriously the thought that the youngest people alive today would be the last people on Earth, that after they die, our cities will decay and no one again will read our literature or look at our art or learn our languages or engage with our theories and arguments, When I envision the vast silence blanketing our once-chattering globe because the human story has come to an end, and let me tell you, it is not easy to force myself to really enter the world of this thought experiment, because you have to do more than just say the words to yourself.

You have to actually form the mental images and make yourself into a spectator of this barren Earth.

But when I do manage to work myself into it, my reaction is that I feel sick.

I get this sensation in the pit of my stomach that I sometimes also get when subjected to certain physical forces.

So a month ago, I was on a boat on very choppy waters between the North and South Island and New Zealand, and the boat would rise up high on these waves And then as it fell, I would feel my stomach falling.

It didn't feel as if I was falling.

It felt as if my stomach itself were falling freely on its own within the space of my own body, lower and lower, running the risk of dropping out of me altogether.

That is what it feels like when I think about the infertility scenario.

Okay, I'm borrowing the outlines of this thought experiment, including the label, the infertility scenario.

from philosopher Samuel Scheffler's book, *Death and the Afterlife*, though I've modified it a little. And Scheffler is himself drawing on the P.D.

James novel, *Children of Men*, which Alfonso Cuarón made into a movie with Clive Owen in 2006.

The movie differs from the novel in a lot of details.

Both are good.

But something they share is a focus on just how dystopian our world would get in the decades before our time ran out.

In the movie, governments collapse, and the few that don't turn into police states.

In the book, there's a civil war, and both the book and the movie depict humanity in a state of widespread lawlessness and disillusionment.

No one seems to really care about anything.

Everyone, but especially the last people to be born, who are called omegas in the book, seems to have lost the ability to care.

Scheffler points out this is surprising.

Each of us knows we're going to die, yet we take this in stride and live productive lives.

Somehow it's when we're confronted not even with the deaths, but just the non-births of future people, which is to say people who could have existed but didn't.

It's in the face of this weird metaphysical lacuna that our ability to cope somehow fails us.

Again, it wouldn't be surprising if we were upset by the prospect of a meteor coming and killing all of us, because that would cut our lives short, and some of us would die in great suffering.

In the infertility scenario, no one or love is dying prematurely. And yet, P.D.

James and Alfonso Cuarón seem to think that in the period after humanity learns that they're in the infertility scenario, but before they actually go extinct, human life on Earth would become a living hell.

Scheffler conjectures that such a world would feature, quote, this is a quote from Scheffler, widespread apathy, anomie, and despair, the erosion of social institutions and social solidarity, the deterioration of the physical environment, a pervasive loss of conviction about the value or point of many activities.

My gut tells me he's right.

But why? do future generations matter so much? Scheffler's explanation, which I find plausible, is that absent the prospect of future generations, Human life seems to lose its meaning.

That is, the meaning of our lives now relies, in ways we don't always notice or take into account, on the existence of future lives.

Scheffler says, quote, the coming into existence of people we do not know and love matters more to us than our own survival and the survival of the people we do know and love.

He thinks in the infertility scenario, the time after death becomes, quote, a blank eternity of non-existence.

But what is it now? he compares it to a party we have to leave early.

His thought is that a lot of the most meaningful activities that we engage in are parts of ongoing traditions.

It matters to us that the party, be it about scientific achievement, political struggles, religious observance, literary appreciation, not come to an end with our contribution to it.

Here's a quote, another quote from Scheffler.

Our conception of a human life as a whole relies on an implicit understanding of such a life as itself occupying a place in an ongoing history in a temporarily extended chain of lives and generations.

If this is so, then perhaps we cannot simply take it for granted that the activity of, say, reading the *Catcher in the Rye* or trying to understand quantum mechanics or even eating an excellent meal would have the same significance for people or offer them the same rewards in a world that was known to be deprived of a human future.

So what I notice is that my response to the infertility scenario is very different from a scenario in which I simply don't have biological descendants.

If I were to learn that none of my children were going to have children, I might be a bit saddened.

Please have kids, guys.

But I don't feel that vertiginous loss of meaning.

I wouldn't even feel it if I learned that no one I currently knew would have any descendants alive in 100 years, as long as other humans did have descendants.

So It looks like I don't especially care that I survive, or that I or my associates leave a chain of descendants behind us.

What I seem to care about is a set of people who haven't been born yet, who I have no personal connection to, the humans of 2,200 to 5,000. And the question I want to ask is, what does it mean to care about them? One obvious answer is, Caring that they come to exist, right? So we care that human existence not be soon snuffed out by environmental catastrophe or world wars or stray meteors or pandemics.

Another answer is that we care how they live.

We want them to have a good quality of life.

We don't want life expectancy or literacy or other signs of well-being to plummet.

We might have moral ideals, perhaps egalitarian ideals about wealth distribution, or perhaps ideals of tolerance for a variety of choices about how to live, or the eradication of various forms of prejudice that we would like to see instantiated.

So we hold these future generations to moral standards.

We might also care that they be similar to us in a variety of respects.

For instance, that they organize their lives in terms recognizable to us, such as work and play and family, that they continue to preserve various cultural institutions that matter to us, like I guess opera lovers will hope that future humans are still doing opera, that they continue to preserve wild nature, forests and jungles and other species and so on.

So we may be disturbed by the prospect of a future in which humans inhabit a virtual reality, having uploaded our brains onto computer servers and having refashioned the Earth so as to optimize for running and cooling these servers.

No more trees or birds.

That world is so different from ours that it might feel like our party has ended and a new one has begun.

But I say might, because people differ on these questions.

I have a friend who wrote a book describing a civilization of such brain emulations.

It's called The Age of M, and he doesn't think it sounds so bad.

How similar does the future have to be for you to view it as a continuation of the present is a really interesting question, worth examining further, maybe when you get back to your dorm rooms, but I'm going to move on to a different one.

My question is, how else might we care about our descendants besides working to ensure their existence, their quality of life, and some similarities to us? Those 3 categories exhaust the recommendations that McCaskill gives in his book, the What We Owe the Future book. And yet I think they leave out the most important duty we have to our descendants.

But in order to explain this duty to you, I have to correct something that I said.

Really, it's something that Samuel Scheffler said.

It's his explanation for why future generations matter to us.

So for him, there's just a kind of brute fact in our needing our way of life to continue.

We don't want the party to be over.

If our ways of accessing meaning don't continue, then they lose their meaning.

I think that's got to be wrong, because if it's right, human meaning is a pyramid scheme, which is to say a...

big, giant lie.

If my life depends for its meaning on the next generation, and their lives lack meaning unless there's a next generation, and so on, but not ad infinitum, because this planet of ours will not be habitable forever, and if we escape to other planets, physics will find a way to kill us.

There are many things we don't know, but there are some things we do know.

One of them is that everyone in this room is going to die, and another is that all life, human, animal, alien, will eventually come to an end.

So if each generation leans on the subsequent one for its meaning and we know that the generations eventually give out, then we know that final generation will live meaningless lives.

But that means the second to last generation who is depending on the final one for their meaning also have meaningless lives.

At that point, the problem shifts to the third to last generation, and so on.

It doesn't matter whether that last generation lies thousands or billions of years into the future.

Logic is logic, and the backward causal chain eventually reaches us, sucking our lives dry of meaning.

If Scheffler were right, our concern for future generations would rest on an illusion.

It would be the kind of illusion entertained by someone who sees the fact that they're not dying now, or now, or now, as reassurance that they'll never die.

Okay, so I want to offer you a different explanation for why we care about future generations, one that avoids this cosmic game of hot potato.

When I reflect on my own horror at the thought of being the last generation, I notice that it's less like the pure abstract terror that I feel in the face of death, And it's more like the terror that I feel in the face of dying before my kids grow up, or before I turn in the final draft of the book I'm working on, or before giving this lecture, or before Sunday night, when I'm talking about Jurassic Park and the Meeting of Dinosaurs with Dan Morgan.

You're all invited.

It's our first night owls of the year, 6:30 p.m., Ida Noise.

Okay, so I have some specific things I want to get done, and I would be upset for them to be interrupted by my death.

So the way I would paraphrase my horror is, it only came to this.

It only got this far.

We didn't get a chance to finish.

We didn't get there.

What's sickening to me is the thought that the quest we are on, all of us, everyone in this room, but many others for many thousands of years now, this human quest has not been brought to its proper end point.

All right, I'm going to tell you more about this quest in a minute, what we're looking for, how we're looking for it, but just to be clear, that is the thing I think we fundamentally owe future generations.

We have to hand down, first, the idea of this quest, second, whatever progress we manage to make on it, and thirdly, and most importantly, the hope for its completion.

The quest is what we owe the future.

Our tie to them is not genetic, but inquisitive.

If humans start to die out and aliens come to Earth, and they're willing to learn our ways and read our books and attend our universities and inherit our questions, I'm OK seeing them as our descendants.

I don't mind if future people have robot bodies with 11 arms.

As long as they're willing to inherit our quest, I'm willing to hand it over to them.

But what is the quest? All right.

It's a little bit challenging to tell you what we're looking for, because you think you already have it.

Or if not, You're pretty secure in the feeling that you'll get it later when you finish college.

I mean, maybe not right after college, but eventually when you have a job.

Maybe not your first job, but once you land a really good job and a house and a car and a family.

Or maybe you think we could all have it if we were less capitalist, or more capitalist, or less racist and sexist and transphobic, or more rational about doing cost-benefit analysis when it comes to questions of public health, or more technologically advanced, or more staunchly committed to freedom of speech, or more staunchly committed to economic equality, or more religious, or less religious, or more environmentally conscious.

You think that if only you could change external circumstances, either just yours personally, or also those of the people around you, or maybe those of everyone in the whole world, if you made certain specific fixes, then surely we'd have it.

Then we'd know.

Then it would be clear, and we'd all be sure what we're supposed to be doing.

That's it.

That's the problem.

We don't know what we're doing.

Each of us is born into a world that is already up and running, and we are born without knowing the rules.

If you've met any babies, you've noticed this fundamental fact about them.

They have not got a clue what they're supposed to be doing.

Babies are completely lost.

Their only guide is bodily sensation, hunger, cold, pleasure, pain, and eventually their ability to copy what the adults around them are doing.

Adults are not that different from babies.

We pay a little less attention to our bodily sensations and a little more to what other people are doing.

We all talk like the people around us.

We dress like the people around us.

We pursue what they pursue.

We get angry when we predict they would get angry.

People tend to criticize being a conformist as though there were some clear alternative.

When they say, don't conform, they often mean conform to what I want you to conform to instead of what those people I don't like want you to conform to.

Now, you might ask, why exactly is conformism so bad? I think copying other people wouldn't be such a bad plan if the people you were copying weren't themselves copying other people.

As it is, we seem to have run into the pyramid scheme problem once again.

The teenage years are often when a person starts to wake up to all this.

Wait a minute.

Does anyone out there actually know what they're doing? But we comfort ourselves with a thought that we'll figure it out when we're a bit older, a bit more independent, or maybe after bringing down capitalism.

This is all very abstract, so let me make it more concrete by using two examples.

One of them is sort of small and personal, and the other is big and political.

Okay, my small personal example is the extra hour.

Suppose you have an extra hour.

Because you arrived early, because it's daylight savings time, because you got the time of a Zoom wrong, because you missed an appointment and now you have that hour free, because it's an hour until the cafeteria opens and there's nothing you have to do between now and then.

So what do you do with your hour? You could read a book, you could mess around on your phone, call your mom, wander around your dorm and strike up a random conversation, play a video game, lean back in your chair and rest your eyes.

Whichever one you choose, Do you have a sense that you made the right choice? Do you know what you're supposed to do with your hour? At the end of that hour, will you think, I spent it well? And if you do think that, will you know that you were right to think it? If your answer to these questions is no, now consider that your entire life is just one hour after another.

You get to choose how you spend each one.

Sometimes people will put a lot of pressure on you to do a certain specific thing during your hour.

For example, there was a lot of pressure on you to spend this hour here listening to me.

But other times there's not much pressure.

We call those our free hours.

Really, it's all up to you.

Even the question of how much pressure people are going to put on you to spend the hour one way rather than another is somewhat up to you.

So I'm going to confess that a lot of the time I sit in my office in Stewart Hall, where I hope some of you will visit me during office hours, And I say to myself, okay, I could read some Aristotle, I could answer emails, I could listen to music, I could go on Twitter, I could think about whatever problem I'm working on, I could buy those plane tickets for my next talk, or set up my kid's dentist appointment, or start randomly doodling in my notebook, and I don't know which one of these things I should do.

Sometimes I look around at my colleagues, who all seem to know that they should be doing a specific thing at a specific time, and I'm amazed.

Until I remember, they probably don't know either.

We're all just pretending we know how to spend our time, guessing at it, taking stabs at doing something worthwhile, hoping for the best, trying to keep our associates from getting mad at us or judging us to be flaky.

Okay, that's my first example, the extra hour.

My second example is Twitter.

I'm picking Twitter because that's the part of social media I know, but substitute your favorite online experience.

So the online world is new, and that gives it a bit of a Wild West character.

Social norms have not yet been established.

We don't know how much time to spend online, and when we're there, we don't know how to behave.

When I joined Twitter a few years ago, I was shocked.

I took a look around me, and I thought, whoa, why do people think it's okay to talk to each other like that? Two sentiments that are very common on Twitter are mockery and outrage.

Can you believe so-and-so did such-and-such? People are amazed that other people don't seem to know how to act.

So it's both that we don't know how to behave on Twitter and that we use Twitter to observe, more generally, that we don't seem to know how to behave.

Now, I'm not going to say we know nothing about how to behave.

There's been a pretty substantial amount of progress on that front since the time of the philosopher's eye study.

Aristotle, arguably the greatest thinker who ever lived, also defended slavery.

Cicero reports that Aristotle thought he had just about completed philosophy. And predicted that it would be surely completed within a short time after his death.

He might have overestimated himself just a little bit.

But it's very hard, maybe especially when you're as great a thinker as Aristotle, an expert on everything from physics to dolphins to poetry, when you're literally the guy who came up with logic, it's hard for such a person to imagine just how much more there is to know.

Since the time of Aristotle, the biggest human achievement I can see is the discovery of human rights.

The thought that every human being has a certain inherent dignity that constrains how we treat them and dictates what they deserve.

We're still working out the details of that idea.

What do we have a right to? What do we do when rights conflict? This is something that we collectively spend a lot of time thinking about.

The story of human rights is the story of humans working together, which is to say thinking together, over millennia so that the light of understanding, understanding what sort of thing we ourselves are, should gradually dawn upon us.

There are some pretty gigantic technological innovations, too, before the time of Aristotle.

The discovery, first of language, later of literacy.

Language and literacy were huge for us humans.

Language allows us to work together in thinking about how we should live, and literacy allows us to save our work and to communicate with the dead and with future people.

More recently, radio, telephone, and most of all the internet have allowed us to communicate faster and further.

Of course, each of these innovations also serves to expose us.

Each new medium reveals the degree to which we've been relying on convention, copying, in the old ones.

The fact that we find ourselves in a Wild West whenever we encounter other humans outside the constraints of convention, for instance on Twitter, that just shows us how much more work there is left to do.

Most of us are still pretty lost much of the time.

We're lost about what to do.

We're lost about how to treat each other.

Just about everyone I know, including me, spends a lot of time in denial about this, because how else are you going to live? But there was one person who didn't.

He wasn't in denial.

I'm going to end this talk by telling you about him, because he is my hero.

So 29 years ago, I sat where you sat, an intended physics major. And not too long after listening to this lecture, I went to my first class.

It was the humanities core.

The teacher handed out a photocopied page with an excerpt from a speech, and somewhere in the middle of the page, there was the following question.

Who has knowledge of that kind of excellence, that of a human being and a citizen? Okay, now that question contains a bunch of questions, so let me unpack them.

First, what properties make a person a good person? Second, what properties make a person a good member of their community, a good citizen? Third, are those different properties? And finally, 4th, who has the answer to those questions? Who has knowledge of that kind of excellence, that of a human being and a citizen? I still remember looking at those words and feeling unhappy, grumpy, really, though I didn't let it show.

As much as I wanted to raise my hand and say, me, yes, I was that kid, I was weighed down by the awareness of my own ignorance.

The answer wasn't me.

I wasn't the one who knew. And yet the questions gripped me.

Those questions were Socrates' questions.

The text was Plato's apology, which presents Socrates' speech at the trial, which ended in his being put to death by the city of Athens.

Socrates did not persuade the jury to vote in his favor.

They voted to put him to death.

But before he died, he did a lot of persuading.

Something people often fail to appreciate about Socrates is, yes, he was killed for doing philosophy, but before that happened, he spent a long time doing philosophy and not getting killed for it. And that's pretty amazing.

He would walk up to people, often the most powerful and influential people in his society, and he would find a way to ask them, do you actually know what you're doing? Hey, Euthyphro, I know you're a priest, but do you actually know anything about what the gods want? Hey, Laches and Nicias, I know you guys are generals, but can you explain courage? Hey, Alcibiades, I know you want to rule the world, but are you sure you wouldn't be better off enslaved to someone wiser than yourself? Hey, Gorgias, I know you're supposed to be a professional speaker, but are you able to even tell me what speaking is? Or what, cat got your tongue, Gorgias? Are you unable to talk about talking? It goes on and on like this, dialogue after dialogue.

Sometimes it's hard to avoid the impression that Socrates was trolling Athens.

He calls himself a gadfly.

He gets called a stinging fish.

It's tempting to compare him to an animal, because there never was, and there never has been, another human being quite like him.

He was an incredibly persuasive person, so persuasive that many Athenians let him take a battle axe to their lives, let themselves be split wide open, so that together they could take a good, hard look at what they saw.

The result was more questions than answers.

The result was the entire discipline of philosophy.

So I said I was an intended physics major, but that intention didn't outlast my freshman year.

Before long, my heart belonged to Socrates. And although I retain to this day an interest in understanding the physical structure of our world, I'm most compelled by questions about its human and social structure.

Somehow I ended up inheriting Socrates' questions, especially the one about that kind of excellence, that of a human being and a citizen. And I'll try to hand them down to you in my humanities course class, along with Aristotle's and Sophocles's and Humes and Descartes' and Shakespeare's questions.

Though, of course, I'll be competing with your physics teachers and your history teachers and your language teachers.

Did you think we weren't competing over you? Every teacher in her heart of hearts loves her subject the most and wants you to love it as much as she does.

It's a healthy competition.

It brings out the best in us.

I welcome the challenge of being surrounded by excellent, passionate educators bent on luring you towards their questions away from mine.

But speaking of that, do come tonight, Owls, Sunday night, 6.30pm.

I don't always.

Look, I have an advantage here.

I'm not going to not press it.

Okay, we're running out of time.

So I'm going to end with a Socratic apology.

A Socratic apology is not an actual apology.

Anyone who reads the apology quickly discovers that Socrates is not even a little bit sorry.

The Greek word apologia does not mean apology.

It means a speech of self-defense. And I want to defend something I did in this talk, though I'm not sorry I did it.

I made you think about death, your own death. And I did it right at the moment when, I'd guess, you were filled to the brim with energy and optimism about embarking on your lives. And I did it on purpose.

Socrates says in the *Phaedo* that philosophers are experts in dying and death, and that philosophy is itself a preparation for death.

Ever since Socrates, philosophers like me have been obsessed with death and with reminding everyone that it's coming.

So it's fair to accuse philosophers of death-mongering.

But we don't do this to dampen your spirits.

Actually, my motivation is the opposite.

So you know how, if you want to throw or hit a ball a great distance, you have to follow through with the motion, even after you're out of contact with the ball.

More importantly, for my purposes, you have to plan as you're throwing it to follow through.

The time when the ball won't be in your hand anymore plays an important role, representationally speaking, in how you throw it. And that representation is part of what determines how far it eventually goes.

I think it's pretty well generally agreed that we are living in fragile, changeable, and important times.

The way you conduct yourselves over the course of your lives will have a big impact on future people.

No, you'll never meet those people, but you care a lot about them anyways, as Samuel Scheffler and I have argued.

They matter to you.

owe them something.

Something big.

I've noticed that a lot of times when I tell people to think big, they do not follow my instructions.

I say big, and they seem to hear medium.

So I've given you some examples of big.

Language, literacy, human rights.

Maybe the internet, depending on what we do with it.

Big ideas take a long time to work themselves out.

They're the collaborative work of many people over many generations.

Big does not mean non-extinction.

Yes, it's important that we avoid nuclear war and bioengineered pandemics and environmental catastrophe.

It's important to maintain our quality of life, including its moral quality.

We want to keep going, but keeping going is medium.

Finding a reason to keep going, that's big.

Figuring out how to talk to each other, that's big.

Coming to know, and I don't mean just copying what the people around us do, but really knowing for ourselves how to use that extra hour, that's big.

A long, time ago, a group of animals started off on an adventure.

Though it wasn't until much later they realized that's what they were doing.

Like all the other animals, they lived their lives buffeted at the small scale by the winds of desire and chance, and at the larger scale by forces of evolution.

Like all the other animals, they were subject to forces outside their control.

But, in addition to that, these animals were adventurers.

They were on a quest.

We are their descendants, and we share their quest.

The reason I talked to you about your desk was to give you a sense of the scale of our collective project and of what's at stake in finding what we're all looking for.

I want you to know that the big ideas, the really big ones, are out there, that it's your job to find them, and that we, your teachers, are here to help.

Welcome to the University of Chicago.

Audience: [Standing ovation]

John: Okay.

Yesterday, at the end of my talk, I said, I think I used the phrase, 'now is the time we must divide'.

Well, tonight it's 'now is the time we must unite'.

We're all going to go back to our residence halls and have, I hope, a stimulating and certainly a passionate conversation on the past, present, and future that all of us inhabit and this great university has represented.

I want to thank Agnes for this stimulating and very thoughtful talk, worthy of an alumna of the college.

She happens to be a professor, but a real mark of distinction is not, and she's one of us.

She's an alumna of this great college.

Thank you very much.

Have a great evening, and please return to your residence halls.

The Ted K Archive

Agnes Callard
2022 Aims of Education Address
23 Sept 2022

The University of Chicago. <www.youtube.com/watch?v=PwlONu13GoQ>

www.thetedkarchive.com