

Capitalism and Kinship

Agnes Callard

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Contents

1. What Should I Do?	3
The Bodily Answer	4
The Kinship Answer	4
2. The Bodily Answer	4
Problems with the bodily answer	5
3. The Kinship Answer	5
Problems with the kinship answer	6
4. Solutions: Universalizing the 2 Answers	7
Universalizing Desire	7
Universalizing Kinship	8
Overview	8
5. What does that have to do with capitalism?	9
Some questions I think about	11
Audience questions	11

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BSQ4-vmsYx4>

Edmund Philips: It's a great pleasure to introduce our luncheon speaker, Agnes Collard. I'm not sure I pronounced it right. Collard? Okay. She is Associate Professor in Philosophy at the University of Chicago, specializing in the ancients and ethics. She has most recently taught courses on the phenomenon of self-creation, on the Chicago school of thought, influenced by John Dewey and William James, on courage according to the ancients, and many more. She made a big splash with her book, *Aspiration, The Agency of Becoming*, published in 2018, which focuses on major value transformations that shape our lives, such as becoming parents and acquiring new passions. She has several forthcoming papers. One of them is on the transformative activity in the book *My Brilliant Friend* by the popular author Elena Ferrante, another on Aristotelian deliberation, and another on anger. I turn the floor over to you, Agnes.

Agnes Callard: Hi. Okay, this talk is in five parts and we only get to capitalism at the end, but I will get there.

1. What Should I Do?
2. The Bodily Answer (& Problems with B)
3. The Kinship Answer (& Problems with K)
4. Solutions: Universalizing the 2 Answers
5. What Does this have to do with capitalism?

1. What Should I Do?

Everything that you do, you do for some reason. You do it for the sake of a goal.

So you act on the basis of ideas. That is, you live off of answers to the question What should I do? Obviously, you live off of other things too. Human existence has a biological infrastructure, but human agency has a conceptual infrastructure in addition.

So everything from changes at the cellular level to involuntary reflexes illustrate that our bodies can be moved in ways we don't control.

But most of what we refer to under the heading human life concerns all the ways we do control our bodies.

We choose how to position our arms and legs. We decide what words to assert. We do our best to hurl ourselves into one future rather than another.

So to engage in all these acts of self-control and self-management, we have to believe that something is worth pursuing, or at least more worth pursuing than something else. We have to, we need answers. We need to know what should I do.

But we tend to hit the ground running, needing to know those answers right away. We want to know the answers immediately without thinking about it reflexively.

And so luckily, we are supplied with free answers to the question, what should I do? There are two kinds of answers that we get for free automatically. And I'm calling them the bodily answer and the kinship answer.

The Bodily Answer

So the bodily answer tells you to do what you feel like doing. It is what is sometimes referred to as the appetitive desire. So all of us are ready to take guidance from appetites like hunger and thirst and lust and the pleasures and pains associated with their satisfaction and frustration.

And we're also moved by lots of other kinds of desires and pleasures that are associated with our physical vulnerability, feeling itchy, feeling cold, feeling wounded. Okay, so that's the bodily answer, right? Do what you feel like doing.

The Kinship Answer

The kinship answer tells you do what other people are doing. So like everyone in this room is really similar to everyone else in this room in a lot of ways. Like no one is just talking over me. No one is doing a funny dance. You're all like controlling and constraining yourself. It's hard to get a group of humans to just sit there like this for a while. We're doing that all day. That's because you have a sense, I have to copy what the people around me are doing. Otherwise, I'll look like a fool and you're all doing that. So that's the kinship answer.

We just unthinkingly follow and imitate the people around us.

2. The Bodily Answer

Okay, so the bodily answer basically says follow your appetites and the kinship answer is going to answer you in terms of your emotions, how you feel, shame or proud or angry about your relations to other people. Now I'm going to say a little bit more about these two answers. Okay, so In the Republic, Socrates describes bodily appetite as a source of answers to unasked questions. He says, wouldn't you say that the soul of someone who has an appetite for a thing nods assent to it as if in answer to a question? So like if you're hungry, right, your body says, yes, eat. And even if you're like, no, it's not the time, you know, I can't right now, your body's just still, yes, eat. That's what you're supposed to do. It keeps yesing that question. Aristotle gives a similar

gloss on the distinction between mere sense perception and desire. He says, to perceive is like bare assertion or thinking, but when the object is pleasant or painful, the soul makes a sort of affirmation or negation and pursues or avoids the object. So perception tells me what is the case. It informs me as to what items populate the world, whereas desire issues a command as to which of those items should serve as my target. So it's one thing to perceive a glass of water on the table before me alongside a book and a pen. When I'm thirsty, I pick out the water from the other items as the answer to the question, what should I do?

Problems with the bodily answer

Okay, so there's some problems with the bodily answer, two problems in particular. The first is temporal reversal. So we're liable to want something and then later think it would have been better not to have that thing. So should you have an extra piece of cake that morning, you wake up with the goal of being healthy. I'm only going to have one piece of cake. But then at lunch, you're like, let me have an extra one. It looks yummy. And then later on, you feel sick to your stomach and you regret it. So this is really common that our appetites mislead us, right? They tell us, yeah, do this thing. And then later, they tell us, you shouldn't have done that thing. Other problem is that our bodies put us into conflict with other people. My body does not know how to care about your pleasure. So it's like if there's one piece of cake for the two of us, I want me to have it.

3. The Kinship Answer

Okay, kinship answer. So what is kinship? Each of us stands in a variety of overlapping bonds of affection, reliance, support, and identification with a group of people that I call mine. So I think I gave some examples here. Yeah, my family, my friends, my colleagues, my neighbors, my city, my country, my religious community. So hold on. Okay, so I'm using this word kinship to cover a big variety of like these overlapping bonds of affection, reliance, and support. So there isn't a perfect English word that covers this broad and heterogeneous group of connections that we have to other people. So I'm taking some liberties with the word kinship, which usually refers to family relationships grounded in marriage, and so I'm stretching it to cover all this territory, just so you know. And I mean, my justification is something like, the bonds that I have to the various groups that I'm in could be understood as the ways in which all these people are akin to me. But it's important to notice that due to communicative advances, we can have non-geographic kinship groups, right? So people can identify with, because identity is just a word for a kinship group. They can identify with people who share their sexual orientation, gender, race, politics, disabilities, tastes, right?

So what is the kinship answer? It answers these sorts of questions: Which people and activities and places matter most to us? Which days do we celebrate? Under what circumstances are we willing to fight and die? Do we believe in God? What kinds of jobs, social gatherings, hobbies, music, home decor, dress, et cetera, are appropriate for people like us? Who is in charge of our group? And quite generally, how are we supposed to behave in relation to each other? Like what kind of clothes are we supposed to wear? What kind of facial expression am I supposed to have on my face? How should I just sticulate? All of that is determined by like rules that we all have about how we're supposed to behave.

Number one rule of pretty much any kinship group is don't hurt other people in your kinship group. Always prefer to hurt people outside in your kinship group rather than inside if you have to hurt someone.

Problems with the kinship answer

First, we are members of multiple kinship groups, and they don't always all tell us to do the same things. Okay, so that's conflict. And then the second is the problem of revenge. So kinship tends to generate relations of anti-kinship. Okay, so the idea of multiple kinship groups, the fact that you're part of multiple such groups, is just endemic to the phenomenon of kinship. There is no fundamental unit or building block of kinship. And this is what just so much Greek tragedy is about. I'm not going to go through all these tragedies and explain why they instantiate this point, even though I would enjoy doing that. But basically, you know, Greek tragedy, I'll just, let's just say Oedipus, okay? He's like, the big problem is that he's like both a husband and a father, right? Both a son and a brother. And so the two families, the family of origin and the family that he originates, are like smooshing into one, and that's the horror. But in a way, the problem of the family is just that these two families are separate, right? So your duties to your parents can conflict with your duties to your children because you're part of two families, and those don't always make the same demands on you. So even the smallest unit of kinship, the family, is conflicted. That's what Greek tragedy is about. It's a tragedy of kinship.

Okay, so this is a big problem, that we're part of these different groups, and they make different demands on us, and if you notice that people who have, say, the same political views often has similar religious views, similar dress, similar taste in movies, there are all these other correlations. One way to think about that is that it's helpful to like bundle together all of your identities, that is conformism pressures, to like bundle together all of your identities, mitigate this problem of the kinship groups asking different things of you.

Okay, other problem with kinship group is revenge. Revenge is how a kinship group adjudicates some conflicting demands. So we decide that our kinship tie no longer counts if the other person rejected it first. So a person can transform themselves from kin to sort of anti-kin. And you're then allowed to hurt them now if they hurt you first.

And it is a way of trying to determine which kinship bonds count. But it often has a kind of Hatfield-McCoy character where each side decided that the other side started it first.

4. Solutions: Universalizing the 2 Answers

So these are our two basic answers that we rely on. This is pretty much it, I think. This is what we get for free.

What should I do? Either do what you feel like doing or do what people around you are doing.

And then these answers have problems.

The bodily answer wavers over time and is selfish.

The kinship answer has multiple conflicting answers adjudicated by revenge.

Solution is add reason, universalize in both cases. So instead of just pursuing what you want at this moment, like pursue what's useful for all of your bodily demands, weigh the present against the future, weigh my benefits against yours. You know, do the math to figure out what's best overall. So it's like a way of pursuing the body's desires, but more systematically and more rationally.

The kinship answer? Same solution, add reason, universalize. So no more revenge. Instead of revenge, we're doing accountability. And we're going to have universal kinship relations to everybody. And so there's just going to be 1 consistent set of rules we can follow.

So maybe I think if I had to say what's the most interesting point of this talk, it's the thing that I just said, which is when you add reason to these two different answers, reason does different things. It's like you give like a growth hormone to two different animals and they grow in really different ways, right?

So the rationalization of these two answers takes them in really different directions. So I'm going to go through that, sort of the, how that develops philosophically in a very much of a whirlwind tour in the history of philosophy.

Universalizing Desire

So we're going to start with Epicurus. Okay, so ancient Epicureanism was the first attempt to give a kind of enlightened version of the bodily answer. It was an entire worldview organized around the possibility of picking out in a consistent way the set of pleasures that are natural to us. And the, you know, the Epicurean asked the person to eliminate unnecessary sources of pain, like the fear of death, and to apply diachronic standards of rationality to the pursuit of pleasure. And so a lot of, like, calculative maximizing rationality, that stuff, that's in Epicurus.

But then, you know, okay, we're jumping pretty far ahead to like John Stuart Mill, Bentham, the early utilitarians, they referred back to Epicurus as their kind of

ancestor, right? And they took it one step further. They want to universalize, they want consistency not only over the course of your life, but over the course of everybody's.

So the idea is my future pains matter as much as my present pains, and your pains matter as much as my pains. In order to figure out what we have to do, you just do the math. So there might be a complex problem, but there is going to be 1 fixed, stable answer to the question, what maximizes the expected utility? And that's what you're supposed to do. That one thing, and it's not going to vary, it's not going to fluctuate, right? So that's a big improvement. That's utilitarianism.

Universalizing Kinship

Okay, universalization of kinship. So my kin are the people who are mine or who are on my side. They're the people who, like, so long as they're not reasoning incorrectly, have interests coinciding with mine. So the universalization of kinship dictates that everyone is in that group. Fully rational people cannot really have conflicting interests. So this philosophical version of the kinship answer makes the power of recognizing others as kin the only criterion of group identity. and it makes it the sort of substance of the recognition that underlies each person's existence as a social being. So the correct action on this theory is the one that's consistent with the respect for the activity of rational thought in myself and every other being, and thereby allows me to see myself as a member in an ideal universe of beings capable of such mutual recognition.

Okay, so the theory that answers to this schema was put forward by the philosopher Immanuel Kant, and it's sometimes called deontology. It included a test called the categorical imperative that offers up a fixed and unwavering answer as to what action is permitted or not.

I forgot about stoicism. I feel so bad. So Kant, just like the utilitarians are developing Epicureanism, Kant is developing stoicism very explicitly. Kant says this. So The ancient Stoics were, they believed that our true attachments were not to our families or our associates, but to a world governed by fixed universal laws, and within which they can't be any conflicting interests, and you never have any reason for anger or envy or revenge. These bad emotions. So Stoic cosmopolitanism is the ancestor of Kantian deontology. Imagine I said that at the beginning.

So, anyway, deontology is the philosophical theory that universalizes the kinship answer.

Overview

So now, if we have this universalization of the body and kinship, there's this question sort of like, what does the doctor order? How are you going to get what's valuable in each of these universalized versions of these answers? How are we going to, in some sense, satisfy our appetites and our emotions?

Roughly speaking, in the case of the bodily answer, it's going to be increased wealth, economic growth, that allows us more money, allows us to satisfy our appetites better.

And then with the emotions, it's going to be something like, very roughly, politics of equal recognition.

So that's what I meant by the growth hormone that injects you inject into them, and it goes into different directions.

So there are some problems for both of these, universalizing these theories. They're well-known philosophical problems with utilitarianism and Kantianism. There's trolley problems, which are problems where we have, sometimes we have utilitarian intuitions and sometimes we have Kantian intuitions. And you put the problem in different ways and you'll trigger different intuitions. Basically, the situation is, We have these two basic impulses. We have these two ways of making these impulses rational. They're not consistent with one another. They're not the same system. So we're all operating all the time with two systems. Okay, that's just a situation we're in. If you want to know, okay, but what's the philosophical theory that puts all of this together into one big theory? No one's caught up with that yet. So we're working on it for you. But that's where we stand in philosophy.

5. What does that have to do with capitalism?

So, one thought you might have about making these things consistent with each other, and people do have this thought, is to say of either one, no, it's really just a version of the other one.

Okay, so, you know, sometimes I think the phrase I'm using for this is like homo-economicus and homo-sociologicus.

So like you could say, look, don't worry, I can universalize the body. in a way that includes kinship. That is, I can subordinate kinship under body, because moral preferences are just another kind of preference. Social norms are just another kind of incentive. We can even think of family relations in terms of economics.

So there's a kind of well-known, you know, totalizing of utilitarianism, right? Utilitarianism encompassing everything. And there's a similar move on the part of the Kant-inspired people.

This is not Kant himself, but this is like his, you know, contemporary inheritors. who say like, don't worry, I can universalize kinship in a way that includes the body. And I think the most salient thing here is like someone like Tim Scanlon who says like, look, if you ever act on a desire, if you're ever satisfying your appetite, really you are endorsing that desire. You're not merely responding to an urge, but your endorsement of that desire has to be consistent with your self-respect, right? So it's almost like even satisfying your desires is a matter of like recognizing yourself as a member of the Kingdom of Ends. So that's, in effect, trying to subsume the utilitarian inside of the Kantian, the ontological.

So these are the ways that people try to square this circle. They try to say that one of these things really belongs inside of the other one. I don't think it works either way. To me, they seem really independent. Okay, and the good in each of these, like if you want to satisfy lots and lots of people's bodily appetites, the thing you need is wealth. And if you want to satisfy people's desire to be seen and recognized as an equal member of a community, what you need is respect. So just really, really different like goods in these two different spheres.

Okay, and now I want to explain why where capitalism sits and all this as I see it. So as I see it, capitalism supports and promotes the our rational pursuit of the bodily answer, better than anything human beings have ever come up with. It's awesome at that. Basically, because it makes us richer, and that's what we needed, was to become richer in order to satisfy our bodily appetites. So people, because of capitalism, people are not starving as much, right? So they're able to give, to answer their bodily needs.

However, capitalism does not symmetrically benefit the kinship side. That is, it doesn't, it's in effect pro-body in the sense that the effects on one's kinship relations are either maybe to be made worse or at the very least not to be made better.

Let me try to say one sentence about why I think that's true. So no one has said yet what capitalism is. And so I think in a way, I have like a super simple answer, which is that capitalism is just trade, which is to say it's just exchange for mutual gain between people with weak kinship ties. That is, it's exchanges for mutual gain that are not predicated on a close kinship relation.

So my exchanges with my children are predicated on a close kinship relation, but if I'm exchanging, you know, for mutual gain with someone who's selling me something, I don't need a kinship tie.

But that's not quite right about the person who's selling me something, because the person who's selling me something might be like my local grocer who I know and I'm good friends with, and And so I might have a weak kinship tie.

And so what capitalism does is it supercharges trade by way of large scale production and by way of the separation of owners from managers. And the result is that the set of people that I exchange with like explodes. So I'm not just like buying something from the person near me who grew the crops, right? The people who are growing the relevant crops that go into the thing that I'm getting, like I'm not any kind of come anywhere near them.

So I'm having these exchanges with people with whom I have virtually no kinship ties. So capitalism, like I would just say, is sort of like free trade 2.0 or something. It is a set of exchanges. It's a system within which there are exchanges for mutual gain between human beings who have little to no kinship ties. And that already tells you why it would not tend to promote kinship.

Some questions I think about

That's basically my whole talk. I'm just going to leave you with some questions that I think about.

Why doesn't capitalism promote kinship? Is the problem that kinship doesn't scale? that if I have someone as my kin and then I have someone else as my kin, that takes away somehow? Is it somehow 0 sum? Could it be that kinship technology just has yet to be developed? And it's like harder than biological technology. Arguably, we're trying to do that with like phones and social media and whatever, where it becomes easier to be in touch with people who are farther away. But it also seems like, what ends up happening, if you're, say, on social media or you're using this, in effect, kinship technology, you end up with all these weaker kinship ties, right? So it's not just that we're doing more kinship, it's that we're doing more, but they're all weaker.

So here's another interesting question. Why do people, when free to choose, often choose weaker kinship relations, which is a fact, right? So they choose to move away from their parents. They choose to have fewer children. They choose not to live near their friends. They choose not to call, but to text instead. So we may be in a tragic situation where we have weakening kinship ties everywhere. I think that is probably true. But the weird thing is we seem to be choosing that. Why?

Economic equality. So I hear that word a lot in this conference and somehow like people who talk about capitalism a lot, which I don't normally hang out with you guys, you also talk about like equality A lot. It's like this weird pairing. And so you might think maybe the kind of obsession with economic equality has something, it's like a mark of the prospect of unifying the two commands, right? It's like somehow we can get, because equality is really the kinship idea, right? It's with our kin that we're really obsessed with this question of like, are we recognizing one another as equals? And so the idea economic equality is sort of the idea, well, maybe we can get everything we wanted out of the kinship side by just like becoming economically equal. I'm very skeptical about that. I think it might amount to inflated hopes for capitalism.

So could there be, independently of capitalism, a secondary system for kinship, like kind of like religion redux, okay? Not religion anymore, but something else.

And then finally, could we just come up with new answers about what should we do, new ones that are not either body or kinship?

Okay, thank you.

Audience questions

Edmund Philips: Well, thanks Agnes for that brilliant talk. Now we usually accept some questions from the audience. Richard.

Richard: What about the ties between co-workers and enterprise business? There seem to be very deep, meaningful ties.

Agnes Callard: Yeah.

Richard: Maybe kinship ties. Thank you. I said, what about the ties between coworkers in a business? And I don't think you have capitalism without those social relationships that take place within a firm. What does that count for?

Agnes Callard: Absolutely. So I don't want to say that where there's capitalism, there's no kinship. As I said, I think the effects might be, they might be null or negative, but there's plenty of, like anytime people are hanging out around any other people, there are going to be kinship ties between those people. The question to ask about the kinship ties between people and their business associates, in a way, is like, what are they displacing, right? What other kinship ties would be in place if those were not in place? But I certainly want to grant that there are going to be kinship ties. And as I say, even between people at work, and it's not that capitalism has somehow destroyed kinship. They've, they've, they're like, they're coexisting. It's just not obvious that it's promoting it overall.

Richard: Another question.

Agnes Callard: There's one right here. I'll repeat it.

Richard: Could you just amplify one point? You have these two different systems, and you mentioned in one of your bullets here on the left side, you mentioned Becker, the family, and so forth. Why not extend that notion to a broader notion of altruism? You somehow dismissed that. You said in the passing that So it's not just the feelings of kinship that I have within the family, but I have some broader sense of empathy for the human race. And so that really brings the two together. I have my bodily functions. I also have my love of humanity. I trade them off, but they're both together. They're both operating. That's why I don't see the duality here.

Agnes Callard: Yeah, so I agree that there's such a thing as love of humanity. I just think there are two loves of humanity corresponding to each side. So one love of humanity is I really like want humanity overall to be benefited. And so if there's like starving people far away from me, I really care about that. In fact, if there's starving people in the future, I have like a 0 discount rate. I care about those people just as much as people now. That's one form of love of humanity. That's the love of humanity that's on the bodily side. Then there's the other kind of love of humanity, which is going to more care about the humanity near you. It's going to be like, oh, my fellow person who lives near me is the one who I look in the eye is suffering, and I need to uphold the relationship that I have with that person by treating them in certain sorts of ways. And that might privilege the people that are closer to you. That's also love of humanity. So love of humanity doesn't get us out of that problem, because there's just two versions of it corresponding to the two answers.

Audience member #2: Another question from here. Thank you. Are you telling us in indirect words that we have read that in Adam Smith's in *Moral Sentiments* when he used the phrase empathy and would that be replaced now with kinship?

Agnes Callard: Yes, I think empathy falls on my on the kinship side, that's correct.

Audience member #3: When we think about how relations are governed. In one side, in kinship, we think of trust. And on the other side, we think of the rule of law. But we also think, realize that, in fact, a market economy can't work without some trust. If you have distrustful people like some people we all know, the market economy breaks down. Do you want to comment on the move of law and trust and how that...

Agnes Callard: Yeah, I mean, in a way, it's just very close to the points that I'm making here, because that's a way of saying... you can't get rid of the kinship demands, right? And so like, and that's, it's related to the question about the co-workers, like you need, sometimes you will need to do, I don't know, like the hesitation over firing people, right? Like it's hard to fire people, and that's because of these kinship bonds, that is, the workplace is not totally dictated by economic considerations, right? And so similarly, like our society is just not, it's not a 100% bodily society. We have these kinship needs, and we're not even willing to take food I mean, in the ancient world, people were not willing to take food from people if they didn't know that person. So yeah, I think that the way in which the, in effect, there's a kind of minimum of like kinship, there's like a minimum kinship requirement that even the market has to meet. And that minimum might not be so low, but it kind of depends on which market. But yeah, I think that politics is largely, like, or a lot of politics is about the kinship answer. It's about who's in my group and how does our group, how do we see each other?

Edmund Philips: We have room for one more. Yes.

Audience member #4: Thank you. That was an interesting way of carving things up, and I'm trying to fit Rawls in here.

Agnes Callard: Yes.

Audience member #4: And you had him over on the kinship side.

Agnes Callard: Yes.

Audience member #4: But actually, it seems to me that the later Rawls, when he wanted to break away from his Kantian foundations and do political liberalism, that actually, it seems to me that he's on both sides. So wealth, which was on the The bodily side is one of his primary goods, and respect is another primary good. But where I'm going is I'm not sure this helps us with capitalism, because I don't think Rawls wanted to talk about isms. So I think in a way he was trying to set up what you're doing along these lines. So capitalism won't develop kinship ties exactly, but the respect thing can make us appreciate others, and it's a matter of the reflective equilibrium and balancing these two things. And so in that way, I think Rawls fits into what you're doing, but I just wonder if you would comment on what you thought about him in that regard.

Agnes Callard: Yeah, I was really thinking of theory of justice and the simple Rawls that most people are likely to grasp, and that's why I'm using him as an example. And so my thought there is that is the difference principle, that's what I was thinking about, that's just my example there. I think that anytime you try to subordinate these things, it's like what the Persians used to say about medizing, right? Where like the, like the Persians conquered the Medes, but then the Medes got in a way, the Persians

became Medes when they, right? So you try to like assimilate a view to yours and then you also become that view. So like did Rawls eventually kind of, you know, get pulled over to their side? I don't know. But I still think, yeah, Rawls was trying to put these two things together. to fit kinship – sorry, to fit sort of the benefits from the, like, economic advancement that you get from inequality, to sort of shoehorn that under equality by saying it has to benefit the worst off. And that's just, to me, it's a good example of how you try to fit these things together.

Edmund Philips: Thank you very, very much.

The Ted K Archive

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Agnes Callard is a philosopher (Ancient Philosophy and Ethics) and Associate
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Organizers: Center on Capitalism and Society at Columbia University

Location: Columbia University Faculty House

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