Agnes Callard Discusses Open Socrates with Elizabeth Bruenig

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BPL Presents partners with the Authors Guild Foundation to co-present Agnes Callard, an iconoclastic philosopher who revives Socrates for our time, showing how we can answer—and, in the first place, ask—life's most important questions. Callard will be in conversation with Elizabeth Bruenig. Socrates has been hiding in plain sight. We call him the father of Western philosophy, but what exactly are his philosophical views? He is famous for his humility, but readers often find him arrogant and condescending. We parrot his claim that "the unexamined life is not worth living," yet take no steps to live examined ones. We know that he was tried, convicted, and executed for "corrupting the youth," but freely assign Socratic dialogues to today's youths, to introduce them to philosophy. We've lost sight of what made him so dangerous. In Open Socrates, acclaimed philosopher Agnes Callard recovers the radical move at the center of Socrates' thought, and shows why it is still the way to a good life. Callard draws our attention to Socrates' startling discovery that we don't know how to ask ourselves the most important questions—about how we should live, and how we might change. Before a person even has a chance to reflect, their bodily desires or the forces of social conformity have already answered on their behalf. To ask the most important questions, we need help. Callard argues that the true ambition of the famous "Socratic method" is to reveal what one human being can be to another. You can use another person in many ways—for survival, for pleasure, for comfort—but you are engaging them to the fullest when you call on them to help answer your questions and challenge your answers. Callard shows that Socrates' method allows us to make progress in thinking about how to manage romantic love, how to confront one's own death, and how to approach politics. In the process, she gives us nothing less than a new ethics to live by.

`https://youtube.com/watch?v=GcLQLqNPsF4`

Joel Whitney: Hello, Hello, How are you? It's okay, you can answer that. We are going to ask you to participate. How are you?

All right, that's a little bit better. I don't like when MCs do that either. Leave me alone, I'm not here to talk.

My name is Joel Whitney. I am part of the team that runs the arts and culture events here at Brooklyn Public Library. It's nice to see you all and I hope you're as excited as we are about Agnes Coward, And Liz Brunnig on Open Socrates, is that why you're here? No one's here for the Socrates, the Plato Book Club in the second floor room? No? Okay, good. We are proudly doing this event with our friends at the Authors Guild. And of course, books will be on sale from our dear friends, Greenlight Books, after the event. And I'm going to set this up a little bit, but I want you to remember that you got those index cards for a reason. And a lot of the times, you're not thinking about

what question you're going to ask early enough, in my opinion. And therefore, my colleagues and I have to do some plant questions, because you guys are so enthralled by the conversation that you forget why you have those. So think about some questions you could ask even before you've heard a thing. Or maybe questions about why my introduction was so long, for instance. These are all valid. Tonight, we're going to be talking about Agnes's attempt through Open Socrates to get us to kind of do a process fix in our lives. At the heart of this book is a question about questions, really, a question about questions we can't answer, things we already think we know the answer to, and we can only answer them in dialogue. As Agnes recently told an interviewer, there are certain questions that you cannot pose to yourself. You cannot inquire into by yourself because you think you already have the answer. The example that she gives, what makes a good mother? We ask this, but we think we know. In other words, it's not an open question. She goes on, but in the presence of another person, this is the fixed part, and using a quite specific format, she says, Think about the book title. You can inquire into the question. Open Socrates, in this way, models a number of dialogues to find the ones that resonate with readers so that rather than making claims or advice, thinking for us, Callard is showing us how to think in dialogue with others. Sounds pretty basic, doesn't it? This is what I guess makes it so radical. Nota Bene, it's a philosophy book, as you know. She's also She's also saying that she's sketching A Socratic ethics. It's dialogical and it's addressed to readers. So it's trying to find a broad body of sort of dilemmas that readers will relate to in dialogue with the book. So with that in mind, we are doing this event with the Authors Guild. With more than 16,000 members, the Authors Guild is the largest and oldest organization of writers in America. The Authors Guild Foundation is its philanthropic arm. With censorship on the rise, books being banned at an alarming rate, and challenges to free speech threatening the foundation of open society, the Authors Guild Foundation raises essential funds to support its advocacy efforts ensuring that authors' voices are protected and the right to read remains secure. Beyond advocacy, the Authors Guild Foundation educates working writers by offering programs that help navigate the evolving publishing landscape, defend their creative rights, and build sustainable careers. Authors Guild Foundation also believes an abundance of free literary expression is essential to our democracy. And it enacts this belief by bringing authors and audiences together to highlight the importance of a rich, diverse literary community. If you want to stay in touch with the Authors Guild, their handles on social media are Simple Authors Guild. And if you've never been here before, our handle is BPL Presents. That's our arts and culture wing. And you can imagine how much we appreciate them as a place where librarians here really are on the front lines of defending our freedom of expression. So without any further ado, Elizabeth Brunnig is our moderator. She's a staff writer at The Atlantic, an opinion writer previously for The New York Times and The Washington Post, where she was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for feature writing. She's been a staff writer at the New Republic, a contributor to the left, right, and center radio show, and currently hosts a podcast, The Brunnigs, with her husband, Matt. Elizabeth holds a Master's

of Philosophy in Christian Theology from the University of Cambridge, And at The Atlantic, she writes on theology and politics. Agnes Callard is an American philosopher and an associate professor of philosophy at the University of Chicago. She has written for The New York Times, The New Yorker, The Atlantic, Harper's, The Point, and others. And if you're from Brooklyn, or even if you're not, please give them a rousing, rousing welcome to our stage.

Elizabeth Bruenig: Agnes, thank you so much for being here with us at the Brooklyn Public Library. I'm excited to talk to you about your book. Welcome.

Agnes Callard: I'm very excited to talk to you.

Elizabeth Bruenig: All right. So I'm just going to dig right in here. And, you know, so one of the big questions I had when I was reading this was what made you decide to write Open Socrates?

Agnes Callard: You'd think I have a ready answer to that one. I think I started to write this book in high school when like I sort of discovered Socrates and he showed up as like, he showed up as like this figure in the corner of my eye. He was kind of enticing. And then when I got to college, I kind of fell in love with Socrates, went all in. You know, I took a bunch of classes, wrote a bunch of papers. I learned ancient Greek. I studied Greek history. And like ever since then, for like the decades since, I felt there's something I need to make of this. Like there's, I need to articulate why Socrates has this kind of standing for me as like a guiding light. Not just articulate for other people, articulate it for myself. Like what am I learning? And so like put it in as like clear and direct a form as possible.

Elizabeth Bruenig: So could you just lay out the argument of the book?

Agnes Callard: Yeah, sure. So I think what I'll do is like actually just lay out sort of the opening of the book and then we'll maybe get into like, the book is divided into three parts. I'll lay out like the first part and then we'll maybe get into parts two and three. I hope we do. But there's a lot in the book and I don't want to just go on and on and on and on. So the book starts with the idea that kind of like how I just described Socrates, there are sort of questions that haunt us throughout our lives. And there are questions about, like, why are we doing any of the things that we're doing? What's the point? What's the meaning? And most of the time, we're just, we're kind of too busy with what we're doing to pay a lot of attention to those questions. But there's one guy, and I start the book with him, who, at a certain point in his life, he decided to, you know, kind of pause, and sort of turn his head and take a look at these questions that had been kind of bugging him or haunting him, but that he had been setting aside, and take them seriously. And the result was total life collapse, like suicidal ideation, thought that his life was meaningless. It just went terribly badly. This guy was not some kind of a loser. He was Leo Tolstoy, One of the greatest human beings who's ever lived, just in terms of achievement. I mean, he's got to be there in the top 10, top 20. You know, incredible novelist. He had, by this point, already written War and Peace and Anna Karenina, okay? Russian cultural hero in his own time, he already was. Aristocrat, family man, giant estate. You know, he had, like,

kind of... He had educational, he had sort of interest in social reform in how education was done in Russia. He made like textbooks for kids for learning languages and also social reform, the improving the welfare of the peasants, all of that. He was like a very active, you would think that if anyone would find the meaning of their life to be self-evident, it would have been Leo Tolstoy around age 50. But no, when he sort of took these questions seriously, he was drawn to this conclusion that His life was actually pointless. What questions? Well, they were questions like, what will come of my whole life given that I will die? Now, you might have thought, well, like Anna Karenina, War and Peace, aren't those answers? But he felt those were not answers. They might be answers for us. I mean, I get a lot of meaning out of Leo Tolostoy because I get to read his novels, but he wants to know what's the meaning of my life for me given that I will die. And So the book starts with the idea that there are these questions, but that we might really throw ourselves in danger by taking them seriously. That's how Tolstoy felt. But then also that that's not the only, the result, what happened to Tolstoy. It's not the only thing that can happen. There's another possibility. And so then I take up the fact that there was another guy who, at some point in his life, decided to turn his attention to fundamental questions. And the result for him was like, this is the best thing that's ever happened to me. And I'm not just going to do it for my whole life. If I get sent down and I get killed by the city of Athens and thrown into the underworld, I'm going to keep doing it in the underworld. I'm going to keep doing it even in my death. So in a way, my book starts with the question, why did these two people have these two very different reactions to the project of inquiring into the meaning of life? It threw Tolstoy into a suicidal tailspin. It made Socrates, which is the guy I'm talking about here, probably should have said that. It made Socrates kind of the happiest that he thought he could possibly be. And the sort of hypothesis that my book puts forward is that Socrates discovered a method for engaging with these questions. The key part of that method is you need to involve another person. That is, inquiring into fundamental questions is not something you can do by yourself. And the sort of middle part of my book is trying to argue for that claim, that if you want to explore What is the meaning of my life? What is the meaning of my marriage? What kind of parent should I be? That those are questions where you need the help of another person, because in the... In the book, I call them untimely questions. What I mean by untimely is there's a certain order that question and answer is supposed to go in. It's that order that I just said, question then answer. It's not supposed to go the other way. It's not supposed to go answer then question, but that's what untimely questions are. They're questions where by the time they show up for us, we're already presupposing some answer to them. And so the questions like, what's the meaning of, I'm already living my life, right? That's what Tolstoy, Tolstoy was like, look, what's the point of writing novels? He was already writing novels. What's the point of raising my children and caring about their education? He was already doing that. So when it comes to these untimely questions, you're invested in certain answers. And so you have blind spots and you can't inquire by yourself. You need the help of another person.

Okay, so the Socratic method is a method for inquiring into these questions. In the second part of the book, I explain why you need another person. In the third part of the book, I apply this method to three parts of life that I see as humanity's persistent problem areas. Romantic love, prospect of our own death, and politics. So that's the sense of the whole book. There's a lot more, but maybe I'll stop there.

Elizabeth Bruenig: Okay, so one of the things that I found a lot of things really interesting, and I'm sorry that these may not channel what the audience is thinking, but they're interesting to me. So you argue that Socratic ethics, one, exist, and two, are sort of, they're not business as usual. You can't just apply Socratic ethics to any existing moral system you have. and expect it to continue sort of uninhibited. But what is so disruptive about Socratic ethics? And what are Socratic ethics broadly?

Agnes Callard: Great, okay. This is going to be another long answer. Sorry. Socrates would dislike my long answers.

Elizabeth Bruenig: He was the king of long answers.

Agnes Callard: He didn't like other people giving long answers. So maybe I'm being Socratic. So So the first thing to say is just as a, if you take me and you compare me to other people who interpret Socrates, one of the moves I'm making in the space of Socrates interpreters, these are all my friends, these are the people I hang out with, people who interpret Socratic dialogues, is that I see Socrates as having a like substantive ethical theory to put forward. That is that he's someone like Kant, or like Aristotle, or like John Stuart Mill, who was like, here's how you should live, right? So an ethical theory. Where a lot of people, the way they read Socrates is that he was just kind of telling us to do critical thinking. Like he was just saying, well, whatever your ethics is, just think about it more carefully. Or just be more skeptical, or be open to inquiry, right? So that kind of critical thinking, Socrates, has less substantively to offer you in terms of how you should live. And my Socrates is like, no, he's got like a very challenging proposal for you as to how you should live. Okay, so that's just at the meta level of the kind of, the way I'm reading Socrates. I'm reading him as proposing a substantive ethics. So now let me just like tell you what, if you went to like a university around here and you took like an ethics class, there's like a menu of ethical theories that we, academic philosophers in the West, have to offer you. Option #1 is utilitarianism. So utilitarianism says that you should maximize maybe human happiness, pleasure, well-being in a certain way. You should try to achieve that for as many people as possible. So you should do the action that brings that about. It sort of traces itself to the 19th century. So like John Stuart Mill, also Bentham, then later also Sidgwick. So that's one item on your menu. Next item on your menu is Kantianism. So Kant says, treat people with respect. Follow the moral law. Respect the dignity of each rational being. That's not always going to tell you to do the same thing as maximize utility, right? There's in fact a set of famous examples called trolley problems that illustrate the possible tension between these two ethical theories. Okay, so those are your two... Let me just say how, right? So let's say a trolley is about to hit five people and they're going to be killed, but you could divert it and it would hit only one person.

Utilitarianism says, yeah, do it. have it kill one rather than five. Kantianism says you're not allowed to use that person as a means to save the life of those five people. So those are our two main contenders in ethical theories, Kantianism, utilitarianism. But the third is a kind of lesser stepchild, is Aristotelian ethics. So sometimes called neo-Aristotelian ethics or virtue ethics. And it says, no, don't maximize utility, don't like follow the moral law, treating people with dignity and respect. Instead, exemplify the virtues. So exercise justice and generosity and moderation, et cetera. Okay, so what I'm doing with Socrates is like proposing a fourth item on that menu. That is, I'm saying there's another ethical theory out there waiting to be considered as a possible guide for living your life. What this one says is not maximize utility. It's not respect dignity. It's not exercise the virtues. It is pursue knowledge. That is, it treats the pursuit of knowledge as possibly like a guiding ethical imperative, as something that's going to like help you live like as a good person through your life. Okay, so that's what I mean by Socratic ethics, and it's intellectualist, so I call it Socratic intellectualism. It is an intellectualist ethical theory. It says that knowledge can be the goal of life.

Elizabeth Bruenig: So, and I think this is related, there's a place where you say, you know, in terms of explaining bad behavior, it would have to be chalked up to a problem of ignorance.

Agnes Callard: Yes.

Elizabeth Bruenig: So, as the kids would say, pill me on this, because I initially revolted against it with my belief in evil. So what is the Socratic answer to the problem of evil? Does it exist? What is it?

Agnes Callard: So So there's a lot in this book that you don't already think. And you may or may not be convinced by it, but that's one thing to tell you, is that it's not a book where you're going to read every sentence and be like, oh, yeah, that sounds right. You're going to read some things and you'll be like, that's crazy. So all evil is due to ignorance, on Socrates' view. That is, why do we act badly? Why are we cruel and unjust and unfair? It's because we don't know. how to do the right thing. Anytime anyone knows what the good is, they would do it. Why? Because everyone desires the good. There isn't anything else that anyone desires but the good. In fact, the good is kind of the constitutive object of desire. It's part of what desire is, that it aims at the good. We all want to live lives as good as possible. If we knew what those were, we would just live them. The way that I argue for this thesis is not at that level of generality, but I pick out some specific kinds of cases of what looks like, knowing what the right thing to do is but not doing it, and then giving you a Socratic analysis of those cases to try to convince you, right? So here's a really simple kind of example. Suppose that I know I shouldn't eat another cookie, okay? But I'm really tempted. I'm like, I know full well I shouldn't eat another cookie, but I still eat one. That's called weakness of will, or akrazia in Greek. And Socrates is like, yeah, that didn't happen. That is, what you described didn't happen in the way that you described it. You misdescribed it. Why? Well, the situation is that you have too low a bar for what you're willing to call knowledge. That thing you called knowledge, right, was something

like, the thought fluttered into my head that I'm later going to regret eating this cookie. That's not what knowledge looks like. So part of why we're so confident that you can act against knowledge is that we're confident that we have knowledge, right? We're like, I know what that's like, but I sometimes act against it. And so Socrates wants to make the case that there's something incoherent in the way that you've described your action. And I go into that in detail in the book. and that the way to rescue the situation or to explain what's really happening is just to say that you called something knowledge that wasn't knowledge.

Elizabeth Bruenig: So say a little bit more about that. What is being misdescribed as knowledge and what would aptly be described as knowledge?

Agnes Callard: Yeah, good. So what Socrates thinks happens is like you think you shouldn't eat the cookie beforehand, like early in the morning where you're like, I will eat at most one cookie when I'm offered it, right? You think you shouldn't eat second cookie. Then You're faced with two cookies, and you're like, oh, it would be delicious to eat the second cookie. At that moment, you think you should eat the cookie, and you eat it. And then later, you're like, I shouldn't have eaten that cookie. Okay. So that's the basic story of what happens. But Then you want to say, okay, but look, even as I was eating the cookie, I said to myself, I know I shouldn't eat this cookie. Socrates is not going to deny that you said those words to yourself. He's just denying the words are true. He's not denying that you've said them. And what he wants to say is, look, the thing that you're calling knowledge, it's really just that you have a kind of imaginative access to your future state of regretting this. It's like, I can, while I'm eating this cookie, know that I'm, be like, oh, I know what it's going to be like when I'm going to regret this in the future, right? Just as before I eat it in the morning when I say I'm only going to eat one cookie, I can represent to myself what it will be like when I'm really tempted to eat it. But that doesn't mean that that's what I actually think. It's just that I have a representation of my future self as either thinking that it's good to eat the cookie or thinking that it's bad to eat the cookie. And what Socrates thinks is that what's really happening is that we're changing our minds all the time. But we're creating this illusion of stability in saying, I knew it all along. where that thought that you knew it all along is really just that you were able to kind of predict that you would have this feeling later of regret.

Elizabeth Bruenig: So how does that, you know, cash out in terms of, say, assigning liability or accountability or criminal penalties or whatever, where oftentimes what's being stipulated is in fact that the person knew better and did wrong?

Agnes Callard: Yeah, good. So I think that like the... One big lacuna in this book is like Socratic criminal justice, right? Suppose that all wrongdoing, all wrongdoing is involuntary because it's all a result of ignorance. Socrates thinks that certain things in criminal justice follow from that. So he thinks it follows that one should never get revenge. Revenge is always a mistake, and any form of criminal justice that is glorified revenge, like retribution, is a mistake. That doesn't mean that you can't punish people, right? You might punish people as a deterrent, and you might, even

more fundamentally, for Socrates, punish people as a means of educating them, if in fact it educated them, right? That would be the most valuable thing, would be educating them. But I think apart from the injunction against revenge, the question, like, how shall we organize criminal justice is, it's like a question that he didn't take up. because there was a certain kind of politics he didn't do. That is, he didn't participate in the assembly and suggest like how to reorganize society. He says he didn't do that because if he did that, he would have been killed like even earlier than he was killed. And that's an interesting and significant fact about Socrates, right, that he withdrew from politics in a certain way. He says in another way, I'm the most political man in Athens, right, in a sort of abstract way. in the sense that he's telling you what politics should be about. But so I think that it suggests something about our, um, a set of retributive impulses that we have. Um, those are, like, grounded in a mistake. Like, it's a very deep mistake that we're inclined to make. Um, but then it doesn't suggest how we should deal with problems like, um, like deterrence or even like education.

Elizabeth Bruenig: So another thought that I had, we'll have to bracket Socrates' Criminal Justice Policy Wonk, which is a great forthcoming book. What is living this way like, though? Because it seems like you're doing something quite risky interpersonally when you ask someone to essentially scrutinize your ideas. Because you could be proven wrong, and then that feels really bad, and then you're in this back and forth. and you're sort of caught flat-footed. So is that why people shrink from these kinds of interactions? And what do those emotions say or should they teach us?

Agnes Callard: So like, I think if you take one thing away from my book, it should be like, being proven wrong is good for you. And anyone who ever proves you wrong does you a favor. That's somewhere on these pants. I made these pants, they're just Socrates' sayings. But you can't really read them from where you are. I didn't think about the reading problem when I made them. But that's on here somewhere. So I think that was like one of Socrates' deep insights was that people who prove you wrong give you a kind of assistance. He says that that's actually the greatest favor one person can do for another. I think the reason he thinks about it that way is that it's the kind of favor that only a person could do for you, right? Like it's like someone could save your life, but also like the wind could save your life by blowing you out of danger, right? But the wind can't show you that you're wrong about something. And it's another person who can kind of dig around and find exactly what you have failed to think about and then rub your face in it. So that's like On A Socratic view, that's just what other people are for. Like, that's why we are together on this earth, is to help each other do something that we can't do for ourselves, which is see what we're wrong about. And so, yeah, that's what living Socratically is. It's like seeing other people that way. I think that it's the kind of thing, and maybe this is like the naive Socratic in me or something, where it's like, it's almost, it's the kind of thing where if you just practiced it a little, it would stop being so scary. But One of the kind of hopes that I have is that to sort of see that there are sort of Socratic openings in conversations that we're already in, like the conversations you're already having with the people around

you, your spouse, your kids, your best friend. your siblings. Like there's like moments to challenge them or to hear that they're challenging you, like to choose to hear the challenge and what they're saying. Because often there's like multiple ways. People are very delicate about posing challenges, right? Because they know you might get upset. And I think there's a thing you can do where you can choose to hear the challenge and then be like eager to hear it. That those are opportunities that are already out there, but you can listen for them. It's kind of like when I was first pregnant, all of a sudden there were pregnant people everywhere. And like they were there before, but I never saw them, right? And so I want the book to be like, there are these opportunities all around you, and you can grab them. And that's what it is to live Socratically, is to listen for the challenge version of the thing that someone is saying and fasten onto that and be grateful for it.

Elizabeth Bruenig: There's something that seems a little naturally didactic in that, if you're proving someone wrong and it's helping them in the sense that their idea is now refined. Is it not in some sense the case that you're doing something didactic? And does that seem, that seems to be maybe the nut of why Socratic thinking strikes people as so offensive in some way. What has your experience been like living Socratically? I know periodically you pose questions on Twitter and people have a really hard time with it. So what is that experience like?

Agnes Callard: So I think that one of the hardest things to control is other people. And especially when you're having a conversation, a conversation is a very delicate exercise in control. when I hear, I listen to what you're saying, but I also listen to other things you could possibly be saying, right? And then as I'm talking, I'm thinking about how you're gonna hear what I'm saying, and I'm tailoring it. I'm trying to guide you towards the interpretation of what I'm saying that's the right one. That's very delicate. And to do that online... you need some very special gift, I think, to be able to sort of predict and sort of control how other people, how so very many people are gonna react to a thing that you say. And I sort of, I've learned through experience that I don't have it, that I don't have that ability. But there's just an open question that I don't really address in the book But that I want to think about like what does it even mean to do something like inquiry on the scale of Twitter or online or even in a written text? and so So I think that Yeah, there are a lot of problems with with trying to do that. Socrates ran into problems of just like, he might be having a conversation with someone, there might be people listening, right? So that's like Twitter, listening in on this conversation. The conversation might be going well from the point of view of the participants, but the person who is listening, this happens in the Meno, Anatus is listening, while Socrates and Meno are talking. Anatus is one of the accusers of Socrates, right? So it's not a coincidence that guy's like, wait, this is terrible. So it's very, like, it kind of follows from the very idea of Socratic intellectualism that it's going to be very, very hard to talk to people who aren't talking to you. And that's what sort of a lot of social media is. It's the attempt to talk to people who aren't talking to you.

There was one other thing I, let's, I'm talking for too long, so I wanna, it's okay if I forgot.

Elizabeth Bruenig: I think one sort of dark direction someone could take all that and go in is essentially the Straussian direction. Like, okay, most people are not up to the task of doing philosophy. They can't handle it. You have to address your questions such that a few people who are capable of having these sort of back and forths where there's some distance between the positions being debated, you have to look for them and single them out to have these conversations with. But is your view... that everybody is up to this? Are people natural born philosophers? Does this work with everybody? Or are there a select number, a few conversation partners out there we should all be competing for?

Agnes Callard: So, okay, just an interesting demographic fact is that there's a, I really like how you pose that as a question, but when I've had events with philosophers, and I mean academic philosophers, the thing that they find incredible in my book is the idea that ordinary people would want to or have an interest in doing philosophy. And they actually see my book as kind of offensive because I'm saying that ordinary people aren't good or are less good because they're not living these philosophical lives. Whereas what I'm trying to say is like, no, they actually can do it. But so the people who find it sort of most hard to believe that there's a widespread interest in philosophy are actually philosophers. Like in my experience, I'm that's just empirically what I've encountered so far um Like I guess I don't You know I found that my kids could be philosophical like at the age of like two or three so that suggests like kids at two or three are very bad at almost everything and Including like all cognitive tasks so you know, that suggests a low bar. Um, I think that, um, I think that, like, my book is, like, addressed to someone that, where there are certain things that haunt them. And I don't know who those people are, um, but it's, in a way, it's not about a bunch of people and whether or not they can do philosophy, it's addressed to people as proto-philosophers, and is trying to bring that out in them. And I guess at least as a kind of regulative ideal, I tend to, yeah, make that assumption about the people that I encounter.

Elizabeth Bruenig: Does Socratic thinking, you know, insofar as people adopt it, and maybe you've been able to observe this a bit with your students, But does being exposed to Socratic thinking in a sort of long-term, the course of a class, say, change the way people think generally, or is it just a method you engage when you need to find the truth?

Agnes Callard: So, and one interesting place we could look for results is the Socratic dialogues, because Socrates has all these conversations with people, and like... Most of them just go back to their everyday lives and it never has any impact again, as far as we can tell, right? So that's like 1 datum right there. Now, what Socrates says about this in the Theaetetus is like, people leave me too early. They don't spend enough time with me. And so I think, so then there's a question about a class, like a single class, right? A single class is longer than a Socratic dialogue, but it's shorter

than a whole lifetime reading Socratic dialogues. And And I think that I definitely, I have students who come back to me like after years, right? And have something to say about like the way in which the sort of Socratic approach kind of hooked into them and into how they approach things. But I haven't like done some kind of systematic study of all of them to figure out how common is that. So I sort of suspect that It's the kind of thing where you start to see the point and the value of doing it as you do it, and you see it more and more clearly the more you do it. And the question, how long of a lead up do you, it's like pushing a kid on a bike, right, where they can take, like how long of a lead up do you need of me pushing you before you can kind of then pull in other people, is going to differ from person to person.

Elizabeth Bruenig: So I have a few more questions. Someone summarizing your book very inaptly might say, well, this is just about how important it is to debate. But what is the difference between a Socratic dialogue, the kind of thing that you're trying to instigate, and just a general debate. I'll take position A, you take position B, we'll fight it out.

Agnes Callard: In a debate, there are two positions. In A Socratic dialogue, there's only one. So in a Socratic dialogue, right, so Socrates, well, let's say ask, let's say you're Socrates, because you're asking the questions here, right? And so I'm Meno. And you ask me, what is virtue, right? And I give an, well, I don't give an answer. First I say, oh, that's so easy, Socrates. Anyone could answer that Socrates. That's such a simple question, Socrates. You're asking me something like, I'll do that for a while. And then I'll be like, virtue is just like being powerful. So now there's a view on the table, virtue is being powerful. Okay, Mina doesn't quite say that, so he gives a bunch of answers and there's one that's similar to that, but we'll just stick with that one for the moment. And then you might be like, okay, so we have a view on the table, virtue is being powerful. And then you want to say, well, Is it power used in any old way? Or does the power have to, for instance, be used justly in order to count as virtue, right? And I'll be like, oh, it has to be used justly. And then you might say, well, okay, so now you've defined virtue, the general concept, in terms of something, justice, that is one of the virtues. And then we might have a problem with that, and the discussion might go on. So what's happening there in this Socratic inquiry? So in a debate, You're trying to argue for the truth of your view, and I'm trying to argue for the truth of my view, but in a Socratic inquiry, you're just trying to argue against my view. So we're both devoted to me. One way that Socrates puts it in the Alcibiades, which I find very beautiful, is he insists that he's not talking. He says to Alcibiades, you're the only one talking. And Socrates is like, what are you talking about? You're like, you're talking way more than me. But, you know, you might be like, well, Alcibiades, do you agree that if a person doesn't know what justice is, then he can't teach it? Yes. And Socrates is like, okay, so which of us said that if a person doesn't know what justice is, he can't teach it? Was it me who just asked the question? Or was it you who said yes? And Alcibiades is like, oh, I guess it was me. And so that's one way to describe the difference. In a debate, there are two people talking in the Socratic inquiry. In a sense,

there's only one person talking. The way that I would put it is just there's just one view being examined. Another thing to say about debate, so Sectes is against debate. I mean, he explicitly argues against debate and refuses to participate in it in the Gorgias. Debate is a politicization of argument, right? It takes an argument or a disagreement and it sort of maps it on to like, which of the two of us is stronger in some way, in some kind of rhetorical domain. And it's like, but suppose that we actually want to figure something out, which is like, am I right? We could just go on in on the project of, am I right? Both of us trying to inquire into that, and that's what Socratic inquiry is. Basically, you can only investigate one claim at a time, would be the thought.

Elizabeth Bruenig: So in the middle of your book, you give us a rundown of the three paradoxes involved in the Socratic method. Could you speed run a quick note on each one of those paradoxes? I love this part of the book.

Agnes Callard: Thank you for loving it. is, oh, it was questions. I will, here's a little thing though I will say. If you get the book and if you read the book and if you're in the middle of the book and you hate it, and it's sort of like, you feel like you're in a forest and you don't know which way is out, and why am I going on for 10 pages about different ways of analyzing the problem of someone losing their keys, then know that there's a release in the last part of the book and maybe even just skip to the part about love and death and politics, okay? But now, I love the middle part of the book, too. So it's where I talk about a set of philosophical paradoxes that I think get resolved if you allow for the possibility that more than one person is trying to do the thinking. So the first one, okay, this is an awkward situation because I think there's this really good paradox and I've come up with a really good solution to it, but I also came up with a paradox. So I came up with a paradox and then I came up with a solution. So the paradox is, I call it the gadfly midwife paradox, which is that Socrates in the dialects is presented as a gadfly. He is a he's someone who tears you down, who makes you feel like you don't know anything, who takes away the wisdom that you thought you had and makes you feel bereft, who makes your mouth feel paralyzed. Mina says that, like you can't talk because everything you say comes out stupid. So he is a kind of like inhibitor and eraser of knowledge, right? That's Socrates, the gadfly. But then elsewhere, he presents himself as a midwife who is helping to birth these beautiful idea babies of other people. Oh, all I'm trying to do is like get your wisdom and bring it out and like show how wise you are like by helping you give birth to this beautiful true idea. We're inquiring together and we're like going to get this beautiful truth. It seems like these are like two different people, right? The guy who like destroys you and makes you feel like you're nothing and you don't know anything, and the guy who like helps expose your wisdom. That's the paradox I made-up. I shouldn't have had to make it up, right? This is like a big problem that Socrates has described in these two ways. And what I say is that what appear to be two Socrates's is really Socrates having discovered that refutation, namely the process where you show someone that they're wrong, and inquiry, namely the process by which we move towards the truth, are just one and the same process. So like when I'm Meno and I say virtue is power,

and you're like, here's why that seems wrong to me. You're refuting me, right? You're trying to prove me wrong, but we're inquiring into what virtue really is at one and the same time. I could say more about exactly how that works. I have a lot more to say about that one, but let me say the other two and then if there are any questions, I'll have occasion to go back to that. So the other paradox is Moore's paradox. So this is a, this is something that, like if you're an academic philosopher, Moore's paradox should really, really bug you. Like it should just like bother you deep in your heart that there is Moore's paradox, which is like suppose that it's raining outside right now, okay? but I don't know it. I don't know that it's raining outside. Suppose you all know it. Suppose you know that it's raining. So you might say, it's raining, but Agnes doesn't know it. That's a thing you could say. It could be true. It's a truth about the world, that it's raining, but I don't know it. But I can't say that truth. I can't ever know that it's raining, but I don't know it, even though it's a way that the world is. You might think this is not some big problem, that there could be this truth about the way the world is that, I mean, that you can't know, because it's like, well, look, as soon as you find out that it's raining, you don't anymore think that it's not raining, and that's why. You yourself can't say, it's raining, but I don't know it. But it turns out that this runs very deep. Again, I could go more into why, but what I try to argue is that sentences like that look unassertable, and that in most contexts are unassertable, become assertable in the context of a refutation. Now, that's really what a refutation is, is getting someone to see that they're wrong. 'Cause what is it to say, It's raining, but I don't think that, except I'm wrong. It's a way to say, I'm wrong. Is I'm wrong a thought that someone could have? The answer, I think, is yes, and that Socrates shows you how to have that thought, but you need another person's help. Third, paradox is Meno's paradox. How can we search for something when we don't know what we're searching for, which is always the condition that we're in when we're searching? How will you even know that you found it, that that's what you were looking for when you find it, unless you know from the beginning what it was you were looking for, but then in a way you already had it? I'm going to stop at that level. I can say a lot more about any of these, but yeah, I'll let you, if you want to follow up on any of them, you can.

Elizabeth Bruenig: So, in terms of Moore's paradox, how do you get around to resolving that with refutation?

Agnes Callard: So, I mean, the way that I resolve it, like the first pass is just I show a Moore sentence in a platonic dialogue. That is, there just is one. There is 1 where somebody in effect says, P, but I don't believe it. And I show that it makes sense in the context of the dialogue and it fits. And so like, that's the proof that it can happen is that it does happen. It happens more than once, actually, in that dialogue. The way in which it's possible, the way in which it's made possible in the dialogue. So I sort of explain it in a variety of ways, but maybe I'll use for the moment a sort of metaphor. How can you see that you're wrong? How can you know that you're wrong? So what Socrates says, the way Socrates explains it, maybe that's the way I should put it, the way Socrates explains it in that very dialogue, in the dialogue where the

more sentences occur, is that seeing that you're wrong is almost like the equivalent of like seeing a blemish that's on you, but not like on your arm. Like if I had a blemish on my arm, I could see it, right? Because I can do this with my arm. But, you know, suppose that the blemish was like, on my face, then I couldn't see, but maybe I could if I like turn my eyes down that way. Or maybe imagine that my eye could protrude on a little antenna, right? And then I could see all the blemishes on my face. But what if the blemish were in the very part that sees? Right? So what if the problem with you is a problem in the thinking apparatus that you use to think about the world? How are you going to see that there's a problem in that? The answer is a mirror, right? If there were a blemish in that very part that sees, I could still see it in a mirror. And Socrates says, that's what another person is. Another person is a mirror for you. They allow you to see the mistakes that you yourself are currently making. Let me stop there with that answer. I could say more, but...

Elizabeth Bruenig: Right, just before we turn to questions, I wanted to give you an opportunity to talk a little about Socrates and love, because I think this is a very natural place for you.

Agnes Callard: Yeah. So maybe, so if you're an intellectualist like me, you might think the least promising place to be an intellectualist is romance. That is, by love, I really, I mean romantic love, I mean like the space of like dating and falling in love and marriage and relationships and all of that. and that like we should take all of that and we should intellectualize it and we should view it as like a space to like argue and think. And that might strike people as crazy and maybe here's a way, a way to sort of, a way in to why you might think something as spooky is going on in romance that is, that makes us ripe for intellectualizing it. So if you had a friend and they were banging on the doors of a restaurant, and you go to them and you say, this restaurant's closed. And they're like, well, I have to get in. And you say, but the other restaurants on this block are all open. They're like, no, I can only go to this one. And they say, and you say, well, like, is it the food is so good? No, I hate the food. Okay, you would think there's something wrong with my friend. Like they need help, maybe mental health services, right? Something is going on with them, right? But like what I just described is like totally routine and normalized with like romance, right? Someone is broken up with this person. There was a toxic relationship and they finally got out of the relationship and now they want to text their ex, whom they hate, right? Because it went terribly, but they just kind of, they don't feel like they have closure. And like, actually I need to show him. And you're like, don't text him, don't text him. But we get into these kind of toxic, obsessive, psychic organizations in the area of romance, not in the area of food. It doesn't happen with food, but it happens routinely with romance. And we just think it's normal. We just think that's okay that people are doing that. people are like texting their ex whom they hate, who they wouldn't want to get together with even if they could, but they want to turn them down this time around, something like that. All that, that's all insanity, right? And so Socrates' thought is, the reason you're being insane, one way to put it is like, it's like you come from another place.

Like your soul has another home. It's not like this. It's somewhere else. And you're sort of applying the standards of that other place to this arena. And it seems crazy. But what we can do is we can actually just take that activity that you're doing and we can align it better with the kinds of ideals that seem to be guiding or relating to this other person. And we can straighten up this activity. And you can actually get what you really want to get out of other people, which you're not even coming close to getting using your system. So that's only the very beginning of a kind of making the case for the radical Socratization of your love life. But yeah.

Elizabeth Bruenig: So I'm going to turn now to audience questions, if that's okay. Somebody points out Tolstoy eventually finds his way out of his depression through faith in God. And for them, this raises the question of whether our dialogue partner needs to be physically present. Can we adequately reason in our own heads with an imagined other. This is something we were talking about before we came in, was our internal husbands.

Agnes Callard: Yeah. So my answer to the question, can you adequately reason in your head using an imagined other is no, you cannot do it. Let me say a little more, but actually before I say more, let me talk about what happened with Tolstoy. So what happened with, it's correct. So if you read the text, Confession, in which this episode in Tolstoy's life shows up, you know, what he says is that what rescued him was sort of a religious faith that did not give him answers to any of these questions, because he continues to conclude that they're unanswerable and sort of unopenable in a way, but that allowed him to set the questions aside somewhat. it's very clear that they still nag at him because Death of Ivan Ilyich is written later after this period and he's still obsessed with the same problem in that text. And what he says in Confession is he really envies the peasants who appear just never to have opened the Pandora's box of these questions and they have the right kind of faith. The real religious faith is the one that has never even been troubled by these questions. So Just to be clear, that Tolstoy didn't take himself to somehow answer or resolve or settle these questions by means of religious faith. He sort of escaped from them, is how he saw it, but his escape was only partial. And the better Rd. would be to never have even examined them in the 1st place. That's at least the view that he puts forward in Confession. Okay, so it's not that what happens later is that he has some internalized interlocutor with whom he has these conversations. But now let me say why I don't think the internalized interlocutor model works. It's because it does work a little bit. It just falls apart at a certain point. And the way the people who know the best that it works a little bit are actually professional philosophers. Because I think what philosophical training is, like if you go to, if you take philosophy classes in undergrad and you go to philosophy grad school and you start going to conferences and writing papers and all of that, what you are getting trained in is anticipating the objections that people are going to make to your claims. To write a philosophy journal article is to be able to successfully anticipate at least most of the referee's objections. So that's what you train in, right? And so that was my training, and I practice it, and when I give a talk, before I give the talk,

I've done this thing of anticipating my interlocutors, right, and thinking about what are they gonna say, and how are they gonna respond to these objections? And I'm like, let me reply to them in advance so that my talk will be perfect. And I give the talk, and then usually there isn't even a break between the talk and the Q&A. So the hands go up immediately. So no time has passed between when I gave the talk and when they have to come up with objections, and immediately there's stuff I didn't think of. So I try, I know it doesn't work, because I try it over and over again to simulate my interlocutors and to come up with all the best objections against my own views. And it turns out that other people are better at that than I am. They're like persistently better at it, even when I've been trained on it. and even when I try it as hard as I can. And I think it's just like there's always something you really don't want to see about your own ideas and how they might be wrong. And that person you're calling the internalized other is like, that's still you and you're still going to rubber stamp yourself. And so like luckily for my husband, you know, I still need him because even though I have a version of him that I've internalized, I have to actually talk to him and he'll be like, well, no, you know, you think you, The thing you thought I would say is okay is not okay.

Elizabeth Bruenig: Do you ever sort of brood over an idea you have? So in my case, I'll have a great idea, in my opinion, and then I'll think, I don't want to bring it up with Matt, because he's just going to prove it wrong, and then I'm going to feel bad. So I'll just nurse it privately. But how do you deal with how unpleasant it is to go and seek out opportunities to be own, as it were, to be proven wrong.

Agnes Callard: Yeah, good. So like, okay, so like one Socratic principle, I think, is you don't understand anything until you've seen the good of it. Socrates never said that, but I make up a lot of things that Socrates didn't say and just attribute them to him sometimes because like Plato wasn't around all the time. He might have said it, right? And it's consistent with stuff Socrates thinks. Okay, you don't understand anything until you've seen the good of it. So including that practice, that practice of trying to protect some of your ideas from refutation, because I do that too. And I do it in particular, like there's particular people where I shield certain ideas from certain people for at least a little while. And I think what it is that often when I have an idea, I've jumbled together a bunch of things, some of which are good and some of which are bad. And what might happen if I put it before someone, who's gonna show me why it's wrong, is that they'll show me why part of it is wrong and I'll dump the good together with the bad. And so what I have to do is learn how to be more sort of discriminating and learn in a way how to, it's my own cowardice, right, that I'm afraid of. I'm afraid I won't fight for what's good in my idea. I'm afraid I'll let the good go down with the bad. Obviously, anything that they prove wrong, I've been benefited by them proving it wrong. But it's like my fear that I won't be able to stand up for the good parts is really what's inhibiting me. And maybe it takes a little ways of developing the idea before I have the confidence in myself that I will stand up for whatever is good or

worthwhile in the idea, where then I'm willing to expose it to have its bad parts be refuted, or to have it be entirely refuted if it's entirely wrong.

Elizabeth Bruenig: So these, it's a wide range of questions here. Someone asked where they can get your shirt. I believe I asked that as well.

Agnes Callard: I made the mistake of making exactly one of this shirt. It's a pretty bad mistake because I'm doing four events in a row right now and I can't wash it. So like, I, that's why I'm wearing two shirts here so it doesn't get as sweaty. That was not a wise, I don't know what I was thinking, having one shirt made. But But I'm taking this input very seriously, and I will look into the possibility of making more Socrates head shirts.

Elizabeth Bruenig: Yeah, the people demand the merch. How can we use the Socratic method and other philosophical tools to engage with the dangers and opportunities of AI technology?

Agnes Callard: The way I use it is I try to have philosophical conversations with AI at its various stages of, as it progresses, I keep trying and keep failing. It doesn't work very well. It's good at some things that relate to philosophy. So it can be quite good at summarizing positions at a certain level of abstraction, which sometimes is the level you want. You don't always want all the detail. Once you get down into the detail, it gets stuff a little bit wrong. But it can summarize, but I actually find it really striking. There's a striking encounter with it in terms of what's missing. At least my experience is that what AI is missing, and when I try to have a philosophical conversation with it, I'll be like, refute me on this or whatever, is any desire to know anything. That is, I mean, it sounds banal, but my prediction is that there will be AI therapists that will be taken up even more broadly, well before they're AI philosophers. Because A therapist's desires, their cognitive desires, are supposed to be kept out of the room, right? So if I'm your therapist, I might be curious about your relationship with your mother, but that curiosity is not supposed to guide me in what I say to you. I'm supposed to be guided entirely by what you need to know about yourself, right, to move forward in your treatment. I've got to take myself out of the picture in a way. OK, if you're like a Freudian, then you might have counter-transference. But really, counter-transference, the way to think about it is that it's the fact that I kind of can't fully keep those desires out, but that I have to learn how to do the best I can. So if, in a way, the ideal therapist is someone who's able to not have desires, to not have their desires intrude, then maybe there can be an AI therapist, right? But I think the ideal philosophical interlocutor has their own desires for what they want out of the conversation, and that's really important. It's important to the conduct of the conversation. And it's like, you're asking me questions, right? And you have interests, like, you have interests in what is a philosophical marriage, and you have interest in retribution and punishment and forgiveness, right? And your questions to me are coming from that place of there are things you want to know. And that's important to me in talking to you, that is, I'm guiding what I'm saying with a view to like, there are things you want to know and someone with the audience. And if none of you wanted

to know anything, I just wouldn't know how to talk to you. And so that's what I see as the obstacle with AI. I'm not saying it couldn't develop these desires. I just don't think it has them now.

Elizabeth Bruenig: OK, no one asked this. I'm sneaking in another one of mine. So describe for me a Socratic marriage, what that looks like.

Agnes Callard: I love that question, and I have not gotten it before. I think that the sort of principle of it is one that Socrates says to two of his partners, not sexual partners, but romantic partners in their own way, namely Alcibiades and Crito, and he says it to them both in a moment where they're asking for a non-Socratic relationship with him in two different ways. What he says is, let's just figure everything out together. So Alcibiades is asking for sex, right? He's like, I want to have sex with you, Socrates, because then you're going to really value this relationship. Like, I can give you sex, you can give me knowledge, it'll be a great trade. This is not weird in the context of the ancient world, because this is kind of how things work. So it was like, it was kind of a social cultural norm that Alcibiades was going for there. And Socrates is like, look, instead of that, let's just figure everything out together. With Crito, it's Crito is like, Socrates, you're about to be killed. You're in jail. You're going to be poisoned unjustly for things you didn't actually do. How about I bribe the guards and we run away from here? Because I'm your friend. Don't you love me? Don't you care about me as your friend? Let's get out of here right now. Socrates is like, Crito, let's just figure everything out together. And the thought is that both Alcibiades and Crito have this kind of feeling of desperation. They want to possess Socrates. They want to own him. They kind of want to control him. And he's like, look, I'm not going to do anything unless you agree that it's the right thing to do. But we can expand the scope of what we're figuring out together. So the conclusion might be that I should stay here in jail and die. That might be the right thing to do. If we both agree on it, I'll do that. where from the point of view of which Crito was asking the question, he wanted to rule that out. He's like, but I love you, Socrates. You can't die. And Socrates is like, well, shouldn't I die if we figure it out together that's the right thing to do? So I think a Socratic marriage is where in some way, like everything is figured out together and there's a kind of lack of terror about the prospect of that. And maybe one way to put it, if I want to be really, if I really want to push this line of thought, I said at one point, Okay, there's actually a dispute between me and my husband over which of us said this, and his memory is way better than mine, so he's probably right. Marriage is a preparation for divorce. Because one of the questions that should be open in a Socratic marriage is like, should we stay married? Right? And there's this question, how about that conversation, the conversation where you decide whether you should stay together? Could you conduct that in a respectful and civil and actually inquisitive and curious and loving way? I think if the answer is yes, you have a Socratic marriage.

Elizabeth Bruenig: In chapter 8, you wrote a person who sees himself fighting for injustice as being engaged in a symbolic contest. You cannot fight injustice. Interesting stuff going on with verb conjugation here. Can you elaborate?

Agnes Callard: Yes. I think you cannot fight injustice. And I argue for that in the book. It's one of the, like, it's not only the love parts that are crazy, they're all this crazy spread throughout the book. So I think that there are things you can do in relation to injustice. For instance, you could prevent injustice. You could prevent all future injustice, for instance, by killing everyone. Then we could have no more injustice after that, right? So a lot of ways to prevent injustice, some of them you shouldn't do. And You can kill people, let's say, who are unjust, right? But you're not killing me in justice. You're just killing the person. So what I argue is that in any fight, there is a disagreement that is at the core of that fight. That is, anytime two people are fighting, they are fighting over or about something. That question that they are fighting about where one person thinks one thing and another person thinks another thing. That's the core of their fight. And the resolution of that would be to figure out who's right. But fighting cannot determine who is right. It can only determine, for instance, who stays alive or who's physically on top or who can win the support of some other group of people. And the actual question that divides you is left unanswered. So what I say is that fighting is a politicization of argument. That is, fighting maps an argument onto a symbolic contest where there's a winner and a loser. In the actual argument, if you are refuted, you win, right? So you can tell that fighting doesn't solve the argument because if it did, you would win by losing the fight.

Elizabeth Bruenig: Interesting. What do you think our emotional life has to do with untimely questions?

Agnes Callard: A lot. So untimely questions are these questions that come at the wrong time. They come after you already have the answer. And they are a pretty good guide to what we have emotional investment in, right? So the things you really care about are going to be the things where you take yourself to have a settled answer about what you should do, who you should spend time with, what you should celebrate, how you should organize your day, et cetera. And our emotional, it may not be all, but... I think maybe it's going to be all of our emotional investments correspond to answers to these questions. One thing that I describe in the book is that I haven't gotten into here, but that, so you might say, well, look, if we didn't ask these questions, where did we get the answers? That is, the answers came before the questions. Where did they come from, if not through inquiry? And I distinguish two different sources, namely our bodies, what Socrates called the appetitive part of the soul, pleasure and pain and fear of death, and Desire for wealth goes along with that. Okay, that's one set of answers that we sort of get automatically. And there's other people. So like you all are like sitting in a really similar way to each other and have similar expressions on your faces and like nobody is like spinning or like jumping up and down, screaming, whatever. So like, you know what rules you're supposed to follow in being in the social situation, right? So a lot of our answers to how I should live come from other people. So one just thing I can say about our emotions in the relation to untimely question is that I think that, very roughly speaking, there's the set of answers that come from the bodily answer considered very broadly correspond to the emotion of sadness. And the set of

answers that come from the other people answer, consider broadly, correspond to the emotion of anger. I say more about that in the book.

Elizabeth Bruenig: Does Socrates offer an epistemic standard which would qualify the types of knowledge that should be pursued in his ethical system? Seems plausible that one may reach different ethical imperatives when using specific knowledge systems, and it is not clear which system would be correct.

Agnes Callard: I think that he more offers something, wait, even this is not quite right, standards for, so there's a, when do you have a real question on your hands? I take to be a very important meta question about Socratic inquiry. What should I inquire into? What's worth the time to inquire into? And there I think, like, you're going to be guided to those points in your conversations when you start looking for the opportunities. So they have to be real, what William James called like live questions, right? So like, if you're just like not interested in the question, does God exist? If that's just like not a live question for you, not like something that kind of compels you in some way, then the inquiry into that is not going to like, it's not going to like help you live your life, right? We're looking for inquiries that are going to allow you to live your life better, with a better grasp of what it is that you were already doing. And so that's a criterion on the questions. I think Socrates is not going to give you a criterion on the knowledge, because the thing about knowledge is, well, you'll know what it's like when you have it. That is, it's the knowledgeable person who knows what it is like to have knowledge, not the ignorant person like us. I do think you can see progress. So you can track improvements, and Socrates has a way of describing those improvements. They are. that your positions start to be tied down with arguments. Best of all, arguments of iron and adamant, as Socrates says in the Gorgias. That is, you're able to explain why you think the things that you think better and better. That's a mark of you're making progress. But that's not a criterion for the end state, because you don't know what the end state is. You can't really grasp it from the outside. You'll grasp it once you're there.

Elizabeth Bruenig: All right, do we have time for one more question? Okay, this should, this is softball. What, first sparked your interest in Socrates? And this is a long, Socrates appears in so much of your work. So what is it with you and Socrates? What's going on there?

Agnes Callard: I think that, so I tell a story in the book about something that happened when I was in college. which is, I described to you guys this period where I got super into Socrates, right? And I was like taking all these classes and learning Greek and really trying and writing these papers and professors would read them and be like really good insights, you know? And there was something dissatisfying about it. Like I was like, this isn't what I wanted. I didn't want to write essays about Socrates. I wanted to be Socrates. And so I tried to do it. I was living in Chicago, and so I thought, the closest analog to the Athenian Agora in Chicago is the steps in front of the Art Institute, with the lions. This was back when there was only one entrance, okay? So now there's two, but at the time, that's where everyone kind of hung out, kind of like

in front of the Met, right? That kind of scene. So I went to those steps, and I walked up to people, and I said, Do you want to have a philosophical conversation? Okay, surprisingly, most of them said yes. I actually thought this was where it was going to fall apart. My prediction was this was where it was going to fall apart. But they didn't, they said yes. And so then I was like, great. So then I'd be like, okay, what is art? Or what is the meaning of life? Or I cycled through a bunch of them. And here's what I expected. I expected it would go like what happens in the Socratic dialogues, which is like the guy says, oh, that is so easy. That's no problem. I can answer that, no problem. And then I'm like, yeah, but give me the answer. And then they say, well, like, art is what gives you pleasure. And then I'm like, well, does everything gives you pleasure count as art? And they're like, OK, no, it's maybe only subset. And then we would be off into an anchoring to what art is. That's what I imagined was going to happen. But it's not what happened. What happened was that people were very unhappy with me. They felt very uncomfortable. They wanted to get away from me, but they didn't want to tell me that. They seemed like just kind of scared of me and unsure of what I was doing and what I was up to. And it was just a complete failure, like this little experiment of trying to be Socrates. And I tried several people and they all failed. And And I think that, I think I've just spent my whole life trying to perfect that act basically ever since. Where part of what I've realized is like, you kind of have to make people come to you. Socrates kind of did that. He did not actually walk up to strangers and be like, hey, what is virtue? There's always a setup. There's always an introduction. There's always a reason why he's asking that question of that person. And And so I realized that I didn't know how to talk to people. That's the kind of talking I wanted to be able to do, and I didn't know how to do it. And this isn't so much an answer to the question, like what's up with you and Socrates, as sort of like an answer. It's like, I can't explain why Socrates became my role model, but sort of once he did, I came to realize just how hard it is actually to have what, it looks easy in the dialogues, to get people to talk to you about something that matters where you challenge them. And maybe they feel a little upset and maybe they feel a little offended, but they still keep going. And the dialogues, they keep going, even when they're a little bit upset and offended. And you actually make progress. Like to me, there's just something magical about that. that's like, That's like the fundamental human encounter. That's like what other people are for. And Socrates could somehow do it. And I'm just like trying to, I'm still just kind of trying to get there.

Elizabeth Bruenig: All right. Thank you so much. Thanks, everybody, for being here.

Joel Whitney: And before you go, and before you go, and before I tell you about the signing, let's just thank our moderator, Elizabeth Brunnig. Let's thank our partners at the Authors Guild, please. Greenlight will be selling the book. You don't have to thank them, just buy at least two copies. But let's thank Agnes for being here once more.

Agnes Callard: And if you buy a book or if you already bought one and you brought it and you want me to sign it, I'll sign it. And also I have stickers.

Joel Whitney: So, got to get your stickers. If you want to buy the book, Greenlight is selling through these doors. If you want to get your book signed, I would line up through these doors. Please stay in touch with us. The end of the month, we have a couple things, including University Open Air at our newest branch, which I hope you'll learn a little bit more about if you don't know about. And we're doing a debate. sort of, among the opinion editors at the New York Times on April 29th. That's a drop-in that just went up on the website this weekend. Times opinion writers talking about Trump's first 100 days. So check that out. Our landing page, Brooklyn Public Library's website slash BPL dash presents. Stay in touch. We'll see you at the signing. Thank you again for being here. We can't do this without you. Welcome back.

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