

Courage, Meta-cognitive detachment and their limits

Agnes Callard & Eric Weinstein

24 February 2020

Contents

On Truth	8
Agnes’s Reaction to Episode 19	39

Philosopher and University of Chicago Professor Agnes Callard sits down with Eric on this episode of The Portal. Agnes is a champion of the philosophical tradition of attempting to detach the capacity for inquiry and reason from the fog of feelings and societal taboos that often keep us from delving deeper into the questions that animate our lives.

Agnes began this unusual back and forth by writing an article about status negotiation in first meetings shortly after the pair first met. Eric and Agnes then use the opportunity of this episode to continue this line of thought by exploring the limits of courage and meta-cognition within the examined life of a modern Philosopher. This results in a real-time exploration by two people who mutually respect each other as to whether they can actually negotiate a detached discussion in real time on the very issues of status, feeling, and taboo that may divide them and/or arise between them.

As Agnes has written thoughtfully about the many layers of anger, the conversation culminates by exploring dyadic feelings of hurt and indignation with which we all struggle and suffer in our relationships. Ultimately the two finish this experimental conversation with good cheer, together with a wish to continue the discussion at a later date under continuing mutual fondness and admiration.

https://youtu.be/hJtA-_pBg8g

Eric: Hello you've found the portal. I'm your host, Eric Weinstein. And today I'm here with University of Chicago Professor of philosophy Dr. Agnes Collard.

Agnes: Hi.

Eric: Agnes, welcome.

Agnes: Thank you.

Eric: I want to talk to you about everything. Do you mind? OK, so you just had an interesting and bizarre gambit. I didn't know that you were coming out to Southern California. And you said to me that after a meeting we had at in your office at the University of Chicago.

Agnes: OK, no.

Eric: Hey, you should take a look at this article I wrote, partially based on our meeting and the the the article is 1 about negotiating initial meetings and what are all of the layers of dynamics that are going on when two people collide for the first time.

Agnes: Yeah, I think that when two people collide for the first time, I guess there's sort of two things at the base level that are happening. One of them is like they're trying to figure out how to get along, how to cooperate and the other is they're trying to take the measure of one another. And those activities aren't totally separate from. Mother.

Eric: And. I've noticed a pattern with you, which is that you take great delight in talking about the things that many of us do sort of naturally or unconsciously and might be very uncomfortable to promote to full consciousness so that you can use your metacognitive facility to interrogate. And dissect what is going on on many, many different levels, some of them philosophical, some of them rooted in biology, some of them may be with allusions to literature. When you and I met, were you aware of what you were going through in real time, or did it come to you later? That this was going to be grist for an article.

Agnes: Ohh totally later I was my mind was completely on another article I was working on so.

Eric: Totally. You weren't concentrating when we were when we were meeting.

Agnes: On that? No, not really. I mean, I mean I think that a lot of the time, you know I I feel like a lot of the thinking that I do is like unpacking thinking I did earlier but wasn't realizing I was doing or something like that. So like.

Eric: Our meeting. Just love that. It's hard with this this language when you have to say I and you're actually realizing that you have so many different processes. Right, OK, keep going.

Agnes: Yeah, but I guess maybe 1 common threat I do like to. Yeah, maybe I I have a kind of affinity towards like the provocative or something, but maybe at A at a deeper level. I think that there's just like when we talk about ourselves, when we think about our lives, there are all these sort of cracks in the facade of like who we take ourselves to be and how we represent ourselves. And but The thing is that like. We've kind of convinced ourselves that the cracks are parts of the design because we've been looking at them for so long. Right, like, oh, what a pretty pattern. And I just want to split those cracks open and be like, look, there's something incoherent in the way that we think about ourselves. And we've covered that in. Coherence over. With certain kind of language and just a lot of the time, those cracks are to be found exactly in the places that you would call maybe. Provocative. Or something like that. But sometimes they're not, and I'm interested in them in those places, too. It's just other people who are not. Philosophers are less interested. In those cracks. Right, so I wrote my dissertation on weakness of will. Where I think that there's something basic.

Eric: Weakness will, like Ulysses, lashing himself to the mast.

Agnes: Well, that would be a case of strength of will, right? But yes, he's responding to the prospect.

Eric: Of the possibility of weakness. So he's using his agency ahead of time with a strong will so that he can actually go through an adaptive valley of weak will that he anticipates correctly.

Agnes: Yeah, he's sort of turning a synchronic problem into a diachronic problem right into he's giving a diachronic solution to a synchronic problem, but like, so which I could do, say, if I know that I'm very susceptible to certain forms of. Location. I could in advance make sure that I don't encounter those forms of temptation. Right? So what Ulysses is to see us doing. But I'm just. I was very interested in just how

we describe a situation in which we say I know I shouldn't have another cookie, but I take one anyway. It's totally familiar. We're totally comfortable talking in that way. I think it's an incoherent way of talking. So that's an example where that's an example where it's not particularly provocative. It's not like controversial in the sense of a sensitive topic. It's just a place where our speech about ourselves is cracked and incoherent, but we just have done it for so long that. We don't notice it.

Eric: Well, only because the cookie isn't a threesome or a pile of cocaine.

Agnes: No, I think it would be just as incoherent in those cases. If you could say. It to yourself.

Eric: No, but it would be provocative.

Agnes: Oh yes, absolutely, right, yeah.

Eric: So the issue of the the the issue of provocation doesn't have to do with the. Abstract universality class of the problem. It has to do simply with its particular instantiation.

Agnes: Correct, though I think that there are problems where even like they're the correct level of abstraction is to abstract from the difference between cookies or cocaine cookies and cocaine cause that difference isn't philosophically interesting, but there are some problems where the correct level of abstraction is the provocative level, right? So I think the status 1 is the provocative level.

Eric: Say more about that.

Agnes: I think that I guess I think it's not the case that the problem that I raised there about status about you know wanting on some level to be worth more than other people, but then also recognizing that that desire is somehow not one that you can ask another person to recognize, right that problem. Isn't some instance of a more general problem? I don't see it as an instance of a more general problem where the solution would lie at that abstract level. I think that's the correct level at which to address it.

Eric: Why do you imagine that? Why do you imagine that status? So in your article you say that the status game is 1 in which you can't really discuss your desire or need for status. Is that true?

Agnes: Yeah, it's not. It's not true in all contexts like I could like I, you know, I wrote a column about it. So obviously I can discuss it and I can discussing it with you right now. But there's this. UM. There would be something wrong like. You know, I had this interaction with somebody who I felt was asking me to acknowledge their status recently, and I had this instinct to say I would like to acknowledge your status. You're more important than me now, can we just go on? And I couldn't do that. That wasn't allowed. I knew that was not allowed in the game. That would been offensive, right? So. It's a rule of the game that you have to pretend that you're not playing it, but you can then sort of like, take a step back, right, and then be like, ohh let's and you can. Do that and I'm sorry you can't always do it, but you can sometimes do it. But that's not this. That's almost like putting the game on pause and then stepping back and analyzing what was happening.

Eric: So in other words, you have the game in a debugger and you're stepping through line lines of the code in a different facility than that which is actually running the code. Yes. OK. So if that's the case. Why is it?

Agnes: Sorry, can I interrupt you there? There. There's no guarantee that you won't. Then be reprising the game at the second level.

Eric: Well, so that's the issue, which is that each layer of analysis that you put on it becomes non meta relative to the following level of meta analysis that includes that layer. And then you have a question of convergence in essence where you have an initial game, then you have a meta game. So your article was ostensibly in the second. Level of that game, but then effectively what you did was you communicated to. To me, whatever status game you and I negotiated in your office, I have a different status game, which is that I have access to a a, a, a learned journal in which I can write articles. I thought you important enough to write an article in part inspired by our meeting, and then I'm communicating that I too. You know, have levers that may not be available to you, and I wish to let you know that you are both important enough to. Different this thinking simultaneously. Don't think that you got away with something because in fact I can see things.

Agnes: Awesome. Yeah, I think that's right. So I think what that reveals is like I've, so I've noticed you used in a couple of your packets where metacognitive and. I think that I'm much more of a skeptic about how much work the media can do, at least immediately for exactly this reason. I think that like like when you step back, it doesn't matter what you're stepping back from. Like like you're in a situation like let me step back and think about this or let me step back and cool my, you know, from my emotions. Let me step back. You're never stepping back. You're always just the same person you were. It's an illusion to think you can step back. But I think what what does happen when you step back is like stepping back happens at least a moment. Later then what was happening before.

Eric: I I don't think so in some sense, because really what I the way I. See it. And I'm eager to hear if I'm wrong in your eyes. Is that? What we just did is we had a 0 width layer which is our initial meeting. Then we had the. Issue where you wish to notify me that you had written an article partially inspired by this and then I wish to bring this up on the podcast, which is the next layer and then we can talk about the fact that I just and and and my point in doing this is that we build an infinite tower.

Agnes: Huh. Yeah.

Eric: Of analysis at the previous level analysis, so meta is not a different facility, but simply the recognition that layer I plus one is commenting on layer I.

Agnes: Right. But the thing that that the metaphor of the tower, the problem with it is that it's synchronic. And so I think that I've changed. Between our initial meeting and like the writing that article, it wasn't like I just sat down and wrote it. I had to think really hard about that meeting. I had an initial version that was totally scrapped. I learned in between our meeting and writing that article, and I've even learned in between like you know.

Eric: OK.

Agnes: Talking about it with you and now, right. So I'm like a different person. You're talking to a different person than you were talking to when we first met. And in one sense, yes, in the sense that I've it's not a tower. Like I've I've sort of incorporated some of the lessons from that interaction.

Eric: In one sense.

Agnes: So. And I think one thing is like, you know, it's a little bit like I remember there were these when when my my son's preschool, when he first started, there were these charts that were like diagrams of how kids move around a room in, like, a. So he's like 2 or. Three years old, right? Like so. It was like this line like first they go to the sandbox and they go to the blocks and. Right. So what was amazing is you look at the lines for like a, A, a three-year old and it's like just this like, scribble Scrabble. They randomly wander around and then, uh and you. Then they had these diagrams for, like, the five, you know, not even. No, I think it would be like a couple months later towards the end of the year of the same. So they're the same age where they're like a little bit older.

Eric: Yeah.

Agnes: And they're like much more organized, right? So. I see that as happening with conversation with you, where part of what's happening is like learning to focus and that's not really well captured. I think with the idea of a meta level.

Eric: Right. Not sure that I understood that.

Agnes: Well.

Eric: The so. So can we talk a little bit about the particular status game and our and our subsequent interpretations of what it meant? OK, so it was very interesting. I was just talking to you before the show. You talked to me about it saying I'm not even sure that status is exactly the right word for what we were negotiating. And that was an intuition. Where it hadn't grounded yet in language, it's in some sort of more primitive. Kind of intangible state and I had forgotten exactly what the issue was, but that you'd known you'd known very little about me. I think Tyler Cowen had maybe alerted you to me.

Agnes: Yes, yes.

Eric: And that wasn't particularly surprising to me. I didn't don't expect people to know who I am. But what? What little you did know about me was that somehow I was part of a money machine as a Managing director of a family office, and that that was going to be kind of the expansion point that that was going to be like. The 0 width approximation, and then we'd add first and 2nd and 3rd order approximations based on that expansion point, which drove me nuts.

Agnes: Right. Right.

Eric: Because that would never be the expansion point that I would choose for myself, nor do I think it is the correct one. And then we had some interesting other issues, if I, which is that I've heard a great deal about you more than I've read of your thinking and work and many people that I like.

Agnes: Yeah.

Eric: That regard you highly and I thought, OK, well, this is likely to be a singular person and it would be a shame to lose a singular person. Based on a wrong expansion point in a conversation. So there was sort of an emergency need to rebase the the conception of of the other around. A more fruitful point so as not to lose a potentially interesting interaction. And then when I communicated this to you, you and I both share an aversion. To talking about the world of exceptional people, which often the members of the world of exceptional people constantly regard themselves and and the other is exceptional, and that kind of self congratulatory display, so the whole thing kind of descends into an **** of. Analysis on analysis and analysis and I wonder. Why we're not just more capable of doing this more simply like, hey, I'm worried you're forming an incorrect impression of me, or I need some acknowledgement from you that there is an an issue of accomplishment or you know, so you don't start lecturing me about basic mathematics. If I'm a mathematician. Let's say.

Agnes: Right. So first of all, like I think I actually do think this is probably a sort of a difference between us and that suppose that I thought you knew me as just all that you knew about me was that I was a mother or something like I'm not sure like I I guess what I thought you knew about me was that I was like an academic or something.

Eric: OK.

Agnes: And I'm not sure that that would have mattered to me. Like which of those pick you had picked, but so, so so. But in terms of why we can't just directly ask for this, I think we could have if, like we were like teenagers or something, but I think we learned not to do it like we learned. We learned how to interact with people, and that's a rule. And so we're both following the rule.

On Truth

Eric: Yeah, the. Right. Somewhat. I mean I I think that there's also this problem, maybe I'll pose it to you. Why truth doesn't work like I I'm not a huge fan of truth the way some people are. And I...

Agnes: I'm a huge fan of truth so.

Eric: Ohh I that's beautiful. So I posed them the problem of. If I have only mildly bad breath and you wish to let me know that for my own benefit, what's a way in which you could communicate to me that I have mildly bad breath and I've actually never met anyone who solved this puzzle? So you should try the zeroth order first, and we'll see why it gets. Into trouble.

Agnes: Right. So that would just be saying you have mildly bad breath.

Eric: Right now, because of the context of that, the interpretation of that statement is my God is such a taboo to talk about someone's breath that it must be horrible for you to say that it is mild. And So what you've done is you've communicated an

untruth, even though you intended. So then you start thinking about the problem of, like, your eyeball is distorted.

Agnes: Must be horrible.

Eric: So you need a second distortion in this in the. In this case your spectacles, so that the aggregate of the two is undistorted.

Agnes: Can I give my? Answer yeah please. I think I think I would be like, Oh my God, I can't believe this is actually happening because this one time I talked to Eric Weinstein and he posed this as a problem. What do you do? What do you tell someone when they have mildly bad breath? And now I'm in that situation. That's what I would say to the person.

Eric: You're the philosopher. It's gonna be awesome. Do you think it gets read that way?

Agnes: I have no idea. I mean, I'm giving you an answer in the abstract, abstracting from the person, right?

Eric: No, I'm. Right, But I'm trying to. I'm trying to make the point that.

Agnes: My point is that would be a cool way that like I would say that just because I would be curious with how the person's gonna respond. So like, there's a question, how do you how do you do this, what's a successful interaction right. For me, that's a that's a promising response because it might generate an interesting conversation.

Eric: Well, we'll generate an interesting conversation. The the issue though is to my way of thinking that you have to give up on truthful communication. Because of its impossibility, in order to start seeing what is possible, where truth is a component and an an interest, but it can't be a goal. In other words, if I say, you know what is the fractional representation of Π , doesn't mean you can, can't come close. But you're never going to get there with two integers. Dividing one by the other. So my claim is is that it's very important to give up on the possibility of truth from the from the get go.

Agnes: So that that doesn't seem right to me. So I mean one thing is it may be that I cannot immediately communicate to you the truth. I think we're often.

Eric: But as I learn you then I then I will realize that you speak in an undistorted fashion you believe.

Agnes: No, I think that one thing that happens is that people. They learn like a new shared language, like they learn how to communicate with one another. Right. And they become better at doing that. And it may be that it it, it seems to me that the goal of that process is always to communicate better and more truthfully, though, it's also, I think, really important to distinguish which truths are important and are unimportant to communicate or less important to communicate, because you have to focus somewhere too. Right. But I think that the only goals you can have in modulating that process, the only possible goal is. Being able. Not, and not just to communicate, but to learn truths from that person. That's the fueling the whole process. Otherwise. What? What? What? What would you be? In it for.

Eric: Well, the, the, the four things that I try to reduce. My objectives too, and I'm this is subject to change. In fact you you somewhat frightened me. Maybe I will have to change it based on what you're about to say next. Our truth meaning fitness and grace. So something can be truthful, but it can lead to a reduction in my fitness as a creature. So a self extinguishing truth is not an interesting truth to me. Jordan Peterson tried to fold fitness into truth itself, and he got into trouble with Sam Harris, who was having none of it. Then there's a question of meaning. Maybe I'm something is true and it means that I will be fit, but it actually robs my life of meaning. When somebody I care about deeply is regarded as an aggregate of. Hadrons and leptons, and force particles that may be true, but it it completely robs that person of meaning. If if I realize that, you know with 26 letters, let's say and, and a few spaces, I can take, let's say an alphabet of, I don't know 40 characters or less. And raise it to a very high power and and say that Hamlet is somewhere found within that. Is that may be truthful, maybe that there are a finite number of works possible in Shakespeare, merely selected one from a giant lookup table, but that tends to rob the work of any Majesty in meaning. And then there's an aspect of grace which is that even if I can find meaning and fitness and truth together, if the solution is brutal. And cruel and lacks some sort of inevitable quality of of mercy and. And and and. Kind of. I don't know. Simplicity of heart. I tend to turn against those things where one has to do something absolutely despicable, for example, to perpetuate one's group's fitness. So I don't know how to get beyond those 4. Object those those 4 subcomponents of an objective function and what I'm always astounded by is people who are crazy about truth.

Agnes: Yeah. Good. So. Maybe can I defend being crazy about truth? OK, so. So first of all, like, I think anytime you divide things and like, philosophers disagree about this, like some philosophers are fine with the sort of thing I'm about to describe. But like, I think you can't just divide things into four things. You're like, here are the four things. These are the things I found. I'm like, well, what's the principle of division? Like, is that just something you made-up like?

Eric: The floor is the earth.

Agnes: What if we come up with a fifth one, so I want to understand, I want to understand sort of how the whole is articulated into those things until I understand that, I just don't feel like I've I've understood anything like, why not OK, why not pleasure? Why isn't pleasure one of them? Enjoy.

Eric: I'm totally amenable to.

Agnes: And.

Eric: Well, in part that is part of meaning and it's also part of grace is as long as the the proximate of pleasure. See. Pleasure arises in my concept concept as the as proximate to fitness. So the way in which that we're structured as as animals is that our ultimate concerns like nutrition. And reconsolidation of long term memory. Are encoded as hunger and sleepiness, and the the PROXIMATES cause us to take actions to service the Ultimates. So pleasure is the is in some sense the divorcing of

the proximates from their ultimate goals. I just ate a. Cupcake. And I really shouldn't have. But the proximate pleasure because my my body. Thinks that I'm starved for sugar when in our current environment it's about. So I I'm always.

Agnes: But you you just gave an argument that suggested that pleasure does not fit into fitness because the proximate forces.

Eric: Pleasures can be divorced from its ultimate goals.

Agnes: Right. So at least some people might think that would warrant putting pleasure into its own into a separate category, right? But what I'm saying is the fact that you don't want to. That indicates that for some reason you're wedded to this quadripartite division, that it's which is.

Eric: But I don't want it.

Agnes: Not like.

Eric: Did you just say quadripartite?

Agnes: Yes, but so let me let me tell you how I would divide things, OK. So I would start with thinking, OK, there's thinking right. Anytime you do. And I think conversation is a form of thinking. In fact, a lot of times it's the best form of thinking.

Eric: I've never said that.

Agnes: And I think that any thinking has to have a goal. Well, there's an exception. But OK, the the main case thinking is to have a goal. And I think there are two goals that. Thinking can. Have one of them is understanding OK where truth is a necessary condition. It has to arrive at the truth in order to be understanding. It's not sufficient cause you there are just truths that are not important to. And so so a lot of thinking that we do will end when you've understood whatever it was you're trying to understand. You're like I got it there. We're done. And some forms of thinking are wonderful. Like a lot of mathematical forms of thinking are wonderful precisely because you wreck. It's really clear when you've gotten to that point and you have this like, aha moment. Plato actually described that as almost like you're remembering something you knew before because it has that recognition. Memory. OK, that's under. Running. Then there's another kind of thinking, and I think of it as very different. And you are right that some people want to collapse these two, and I don't think they should be collapsed, which is thinking that aims at the good in some way. And that's deliberation. So it's reasoning about how to achieve some good. And I also think we often do that with other people, right. And so we might want to bring something about and we think about how to do that. OK. I think those are the basic aims of thinking either understanding or some good that we're trying to bring about. And I don't think they're the same. And some people like especially like some like economists, I think, are especially prone to collapsing them. You know, Mark's idea, the point of philosophers have tried to understand the world. The point is to change it. It's amazing cause the Humboldt, the philosophy department in Germany in the. The you know the the Humboldt University actually has that as their slogan. And I was like guys, you are philosophers. How can that be your slogan you're trying to? You're not trying to do this. You're the one people who should not have this as your slogan. But in any

case, that idea that marks but not just marks is trying to collapse the theoretical and the practical. The idea that understanding is a goal and it's like the only reason you would ever have to understand is that you want to achieve some good. That's a way to collapse the two. So I don't think they should collapse. I think they're separate. But that's the basic division. I actually think we do some thinking that doesn't fall into this division. That's very, very interesting. I think some of. The. Kind of emotional upheaval in our life doesn't fall into this division, but for me, see, that's a principled division, right? And truth has a part in it. Now. I think a lot of the things you're worried about with meaning, like. Are there these truths that rob my life of meaning? What I would say is that those are situations. In which you have accepted a descriptive analysis as a reductive 1. So like it's true that I'm made of atoms. OK, that's true. I think it's true. But that doesn't tell you who I really am. It's it's a truth about me. But it's not a good answer to a certain question. And so you shouldn't confuse the idea that something is a true proposition with the idea that it's a good answer to a question. In a in a sense, the question who I who am I really, is like the question you were seeking an answer to when we first. Matt and and if I had said, oh, I'm a bunch of atoms like that wouldn't have satisfied you. It would have been an answer to your question. So I would fold the meaning into understanding with the proviso that you have to, you have to hold on tight to your question and make sure that what someone has said in answer to it isn't just a true statement, but actually an answer to the question.

Eric: To to my way of thinking, I would not say it's a category error that questions or as physicists would call them observable. Are tied to a strata and that there are certain questions that are badly suited to a particular strata. So your description is atoms and your description is Agnes correspond to two different let's say effective theories, which is sort of the tower of lies, where there are more lies. When when I call you Agnes than when I. Specify each of the atoms in your body, but the point is is that the question about what is Agnes like is not really a question at the atomic layer. It's a question that this personality layer with it with. So in fact it is a kind of category error to explore, meaning doesn't belong at the atomic layer. There is no atomic meaning.

Agnes: Right, exactly. But that's why I think that you don't need a separate meaning box. You just need to keep track of your questions.

Eric: Well, that would be it. You know, just the way you polar versus rectangular coordinates are two different ways of talking about something. I think you could you could make that point. But what I think what I'm trying to get at is that. I watch people. You know the reason I've never taken a particular interest interest in philosophy is that once you've taken a particular interest in mathematics, you understand just how sensitive many of these things are to small issues of language. Right? And this is partially what happened to philosophy is that there were a lot of big, interesting questions. And then there was a period of time. Where it became a focus on language rather than on big, meaningful meaty questions. I don't know that the human layer

supports this level of analysis because of some of the reasons that we're talking about so. You know, we can notice. I mean, I don't even think, for example, that there is a status game. I think that there's a panoply of status games and that they're taking place simultaneously in a million different dimensions. And the key question is can we isolate the principal components of some of those so that we understand, like, what what is, what is, where is the majority of the action happening? Or are we actually doing violence to the problem by virtue of the fact that we've singled out a few of them, and then we've misnamed it? Well, that was going on in the status game. So for example, any univariate. Measure has the property that it has an ordering on it, but every bivariate measure, unless there's a metric, does not imply. An ordering like if you have one attribute that's positive that is greater than mine, and one that is worse until we can say in some sense how those two things interrelate, we can't say Agnes is better than Eric or Eric is better than Agnes. However, if there's only one attribute. You. Like who can run faster than one of us is better and the other of this is worse, unless there's a. Bizarre tie now. What what I'm trying to get at is here we are 21st century beings. And we're outside of the confines of the Academy. And the key question is, what is this philosophical modality doing in our lives? What is it? Is the is the examined life. Really aided by philosophy? Or is there a sort of infinite tower of questions and that it's sort of an intellectual check kiting scheme by which you keep getting into deeper and deeper water by noticing something only to find out that the noticing created a larger problem than the previous one that you had?

Agnes: I think one way to put. The case for philosophy is. Like you have to have a right you have to. You can't just draw a distinction, you're just not allowed to just draw distinction. That's why I said the thing about the quadripartite you're not just allowed to slash the world up into bits. The place where this come, the place where philosophy comes from is permanent. Profanity was really the first philosophy, OK? And you know this is pre Plato, right? This is the pre Socratic philosophers. And you know, he he like Zeno's paradox is are sort of woven into parmenidean ISM. But the basic idea of basic permanent basic thought is that there's only one thing you can say. It is so there's just. There's just one thing, it. And there's one thing you can say about it that it is and you're like, well, pennies. No. Look, there's also, like, this chair is. And primates is saying says, well, if you say that the chair is and you want to say that the chair is something and it's different from, say that table right, then you're saying that the chair is not the table. So you're saying that the chair is not? But you're also saying that it is. Amenities and generations of people after Parmenides thought this was like just this really terrible puzzle about how non being can be, how can how can there be anything that isn't? Like this chair not being this table. And the the the the problem of non being is has a lot of different manifestations. So difference is 1 manifestation change over time. How can the chair at one time exist and then later it's collapsed and it's not there anymore? And you know, Parmenides thought was that our like our thinking cannot support this way of talking. It's like it's just words. When we when we when we talk about the diversity out in the world and there's only one thing we can

coherently say, there's only one thing where when we say it we've understood what we said and that's it is. Now Plato comes along and he's like no primaries. That's nuts. We have to be able to talk about some kinds of difference. But you're right that the entire world as we see it, right, the entire sensible world, that's just nonsense. That doesn't make any sense. That's a bunch. Contradictions. But there are these things called forms. OK, like the beautiful or the just or whatever. And at least the beautiful. It's always beautiful. The only thing that's true about it is that it is beautiful. And that's something I can say. The beautiful is beautiful. The just is just so at least I'm. I'm like, one step beyond profanities. Right. I'm like, I can talk about these forms. I still can't talk about the chair. Right. OK. And then you get Aristotle and Aristotle is like, no guys, we have to be able to talk about like human beings and things. And and we need to enrich our language further. Now the reason I bring all this up is. That the basic philosophical impulse is that when you draw distinctions and you carve things up and you talk about layers, OK, you've in a sense you've, in a sense, collapsed your own thought into a bunch of different things that are, like, not unified. Right. And you need to be able to see the unity of them. If you can't, you haven't actually had a thought like you haven't thought anything. You've just said words, so philosophers are constantly attuned to this worry that we might just be saying words and not having thoughts, and that there's a standard for the unity of a thought. That's like a pretty high standard and. And so like, if you draw a distinction, you need to understand the unity that underlies the distinction and what legitimates the distinction. And so like, if I say, you know, if I say even, like I ate the cookie, even though I knew that it wasn't the right thing to do. And you're like, well, wait a minute. You freely ate the cookie you chose to eat the cookie. Yes. So that was an intentional action. Yes. So and intentional actions when we have a reason, yes. So reason means that you think that's all things considered, the best thing to do, yes, that's what a reason is. Wait a minute. You just said you thought it was, all things considered, the best thing to do. And you thought there was something better that you should do. You just contradicted yourself, right? And permanently thought that contradicting yourself was written into this is a chair and this is a table, right? And so you know, so we've come really far. We can talk about so much now, but only I think because only if we can sort of back those checks that these distinctions have some way of, like holding together.

Eric: Breathe with me. Yeah, I don't. I don't know why I'm so singularly unmoved by this kind of thinking.

Agnes: Well, object to it. What did I what? Where did I go wrong? Find one place I went wrong.

****Unknown Speaker:**** Well.

Eric: I don't know. You know, Hegel at some point said the absolute idea. The idea is unity of the subject of an object of idea is the notion of the idea, a notion whose object is the idea is such and for which objective is idea. An object embracing all characteristics in its unity.

Agnes: OK.

Eric: When I talk like that, I sound insane to myself. And the key question for me is what is an idea that settles down? When its analysis doesn't sort of alter and destroy it, it's sort of a fixed point if you will, under analysis. So. If I communicate the problem with let's say with the status game with which we began our discussion is is that in some cases when you call attention to your need for status.

****Unknown Speaker:**** Mm-hmm.

Eric: You diminish your status.

Agnes: That's also true, though I think that's not the only reason. Why you can't call it?

Eric: But there are ways in which you can try to call attention to your status in which the amount of status that you achieve by calling attention to your status remains constant, that the calling doesn't effectively alter the problem. For example, you might signal that you're comfortable enough in your own skin. To talk about a part of your minds, petty needs and a part of your minds reasonable needs for status. I have both, for example, and I don't think it's a terrible thing to say that there are times when I simply want to be regarded because I am, and that there are times that I want to be regarded because. It is important not to derange a conversation. Let's say I only have 45 minutes for something, and if we begin with the wrong notion of who I am, it will take too long. Mm-hmm. So there's always this question in in the bad breath example, the problem is, is that the talking about it has to do with an interpretive complex or on client side. And your internal inside your interlocutors mind. And so your input stimulates a process. That is transpiring within the client side architecture and it leads to an uncomfortable and unpleasant and not untrue outcome. If I could find the input which when processed, remains the input.

Agnes: MMM.

Eric: Right. In other words, it's like an eigenvalue of truth, an eigenvector of truth. Then that's something which is philosophically interesting to me. What? What concerns me is the tower of. Concepts and conflicts which don't seem to settle down the more we understand them, you know.

Agnes: So one thing is I really like what you said about Hegel when I talk like that, I sound crazy to myself. So I think that is parmenides's point about saying that something is not. Parmenides is the guy who realized when I talk like that, when I say the chair is not the table, I sound crazy to myself. You're really used to talking that way because that's just how we talk. I mean, he saw the giant crack and everything, right? And. And so if you think about how, like, when I hear someone say, I know I shouldn't have this cookie, but I really feel like it. So I'm going to have it. If I talk like that. I sound crazy to myself and so I'm like, I can't. I can't talk like this. I have to find another way of talking.

Eric: OK, so that's the idea that at some level, first of all you need a primary description of the most of us understand weakness of will intuitively, but we don't understand weakness of will as a as emergent from fundamental principles.

Agnes: And I think you don't understand it intuitively, you just think you do.

Eric: Well, again.

Agnes: You can pick out the phenomenon. You can point cases of it.

Eric: It may, but to your point about the practicality, you may be able to work with it at a practical level. So for example, I might be able to sell a product where you put cookies in a time release, say. And so you can't get at your own cookies until 1 is dispensed to you. People will immediately understand that. But the key question is, you know, can I take a placebo and get the placebo effect if it's labeled placebo, you know, these are the sort of unstable non fixed points of the philosophical problem. One of the reasons that I really love physics as an alternative to philosophy at its ground level is, is that it tends to be stable under analysis. When we have an idea of it now. Quantum. Mechanics. The propagation in quantum mechanics has a very stable interpretation, and it may be wrong, but we think we know what's going on when we're asking how an electron moves. It's when an electron gets measured. When you're asking a bad question, which is are you in state A or state B and it was in state $A+B$.

****Unknown Speaker:**** M.

Eric: Then the multiple choice nature of that quantum mechanical question is bizarrely accommodated by the system. Somewhat randomly falling into state A or state B is a weighted probability. Now that bothers us because we have the sense that. Maybe that's not really a fixed point. Had we known what we were when we asked the question? Were we part of the quantum system? Did we hold ourselves aside and keep ourselves classical while asking that the electron be considered quantum mechanically? Was it in a semi quantum semi classical state? So we're not really sure whether we've committed a sin against God and logic in that case.

Agnes: Yeah. Good. I mean, I think that a lot of your worries about the tower and the I, I still think they go back to something. There's a question whether we ever make any progress in a conversation that seems to me to be the real question there. Like, can we learn from each other and can we learn from each other in some sense?

Eric: Hmm.

Agnes: Without. Making any. Without taking as the frame of our conversation, something that we just happened to get slotted into and that we don't question right and and I actually think that it's true about philosophy that you are not guaranteed in any way that the answer to that question is yes. You don't know that it's yes. And there.

Eric: You've had epiphanies in conversations which have changed your life.

****Unknown Speaker:**** Uh.

Agnes: My problem is that I have too many of them, but yeah, it's not. It's not, it's it's not a dearth of epiphanies, it's a total instability. But can I just say there's a there's, there's this moment, OK. Like, I feel like you're you're mean. OK. This is the soccer. This is Plato's meno. And they're having this conversation, Socrates.

****Unknown Speaker:**** OK.

Eric: That that, that must be an awesome life.

Agnes: Just like you're you're a big opponent of excellence, Socrates Mino comes to Socrates. He's like I want it. I want excellence. How do I? How do I get it? And soccer, he's like, well, let's start by figuring out what it is. And I mean it's like that's not hard, right? That's super easy. Mino says it's easy about like 7 times in a row. It's really funny. He's like, here's what it is. Here's what and soccer he's like. Much times and at certain point he knows like, look, this is not going anywhere. Like obviously you can just sort of come up with more words against my words. How do we ever know we'll ever get anywhere with this right? And Socrates, actually at that point turns to math, and they use a mathematical example about finding the double square. So if you have a square and you want to find the square whose area is twice as big as that square, and how somebody who goes into that problem making a certain set of assumptions will never find the answer, we can talk about you. It's a great example. But the point is afterwards. Which is like, yeah, the truth is. There is no guarantee. We don't know, right? But. I think that it is better we will be better men. And braver if we believe that we ought to inquire, then not. And you know, you say you like physics, but I don't see it as an alternative in the sense that it's not going to give me. It's the layers levels problem, right? It's just physics is not going to give me the answer to the questions I have. And I can't just abandon those questions. And I would be a coward if I didn't try to find answers.

Eric: Ohh Coward is in a very high state of the stack. I mean high level of the stack right? In some sense the questions that really have have come to animate me throughout my adult life have to do with this question is how how can we improve upon it is without involving ourselves. In the equation.

Agnes: Maybe that's a good. I'm mostly interested in the equations that essentially involve me. Right. So that may be a big difference when you say coward. Like I think. In some sense, courage is what makes life worth living. Like I wouldn't if I didn't. If I thought I was.

Eric: You look for ages person.

Agnes: If I thought I didn't care about courage, like if I thought I was OK being a coward, I would think that my life might not be worth living. I think courage is the sense the at least the sense of the importance of courage is the sense that life is not merely a biological.

Eric: Yeah.

Agnes: The life is. Worth something?

Eric: Well, OK. So I mean, first of all, let's just say something about your background, you are not only Jewish, but Hungarian Jewish.

Agnes: There are conditions under which I. Would rather. Yes, that's correct.

Eric: Notice anything? I mean, you want to talk about a group of non cowardly human beings? I would say Hungarian Jews are about one of the most courageous groups of people I've ever dealt with. Ethnically. Courage is a huge trait, different even from other parts of the Ashkenazim.

Agnes: I I think it was very courageous of my parents to come here. Yeah, but I don't think that they like.

Eric: Yeah.

Agnes: I don't know. Did they? Did they? I don't think courage is something you can like hand down in that way, though I do think that you can facilitate the conditions of its acquisition and you can kind of help someone.

Eric: I'm just saying there's a system of selective pressures that existed in Hungary in the Jewish community that produced an exaggerated extremophile response. Right. I mean Edward Teller came from a firmament. There was the he. You know, you can't look at a giraffe in isolation from the trees on which it feeds.

Agnes: Sure that that could be right, that mood of thinking is one that it's a little bit like the atoms. You know, it doesn't for me shed light on like like the circumstances in which I have to fight and what I have to fight for under this.

Eric: I have more courage and take. Another look at it. I mean, in other words the the this is the. This is part of the problem, which is is that there there is that which you feel and I'm I'm not gonna use anything personal because I I it's chew going into somebody like I you know I had this ***** actress in your chair not too long ago and I didn't want to ask her about the details of her sex life I wanted to talk around sex not. About her sexuality, which is what happens in every. So I don't wanna talk about anything that you haven't already surfaced, but for example, you held a seminar at the University of Chicago with an ex-husband. Talking about divorce now, that is an incredibly courageous position from many from many perspectives.

Agnes: Yeah.

Eric: Right. Because you're you're dealing with something that would usually cause feelings to well up and might touch on things that would actually alter and perhaps deform your life, but you felt that you had enough ability to do that with. Strength and distance. That it was something that you were not only willing to do but interested in doing in front. Of an audience.

Agnes: Right. So maybe one thing, it's interesting about the personal. You know, I think I wrote this to you in an e-mail that I it's just I guess this is a just a psychological fact about. No, it isn't just I think it is it's connected to some philosophical things, but I don't. Things that other people would find, like too personal and uncomfortable to share. I often have to consciously classify in my head which of those which are those things and be like.

Eric: Because they're not tagged that way to you.

Agnes: Don't say this. Yeah, yeah. And so like I like, I've just learned by experience and will make other people uncomfortable. If I say things to somebody, I don't know that are too personal, but it doesn't make me uncomfortable, so I don't have an inner sense of that, so there isn't really anything where I would be like. I mean, maybe there is, but I can't think of it.

Eric: There is, I can think of it, and it wouldn't be. Interesting for me to go there to prove to you that that exists for you.

Agnes: Right. But that's relevant, I guess to the divorce thing like I think it's not as courageous as it would be for other people because.

Eric: I think it's not as courageous for you as it would be for other people, but are you really looking? Like I I think you know another person who sat in that chair was Brian Callen, the comedian and actor. And he made the point that there are no tough guys that ultimately. The human condition is so frail and so prone to abuse and insult that in the face of actually. You know, incredibly destructive pressures we all fold. And you can discuss. OK, so then courage is also important to me. One of the reasons I'm doing this, this show and and the whole idea of naming the intellectual dark web and all that stuff has to do for me with answering the question, what would I have done during the McCarthy?

Agnes: I think that's true.

Eric: Is that I watched my family terrorized by this government, and I wanted to know, would I, would I? Have. Stood up? Or would I have cowered under a table? So it's a particular kind of courage. And by the way, it's been very unpleasant many days. But it's also a kind of courage to which I am partially well suited. OK, so my question is. Isn't it a question of marginal courage and the marginal courage to which you, in particular, Agnes, are particularly well suited? I mean, the act of bringing another life into the world turns us all into cowards. I guarantee you that you are a coward when it comes. To your child.

Agnes: I actually think that question of courage with respect to 1's children is much, much more fine grained like it comes up 1000 times a day and my interactions with them. So it's but certainly certainly there are circumstances in which that you can say I'm a coward with respect to my children and other circumstances. I think I have to. Exercise a lot of courage with respect to them. No, no, but.

Eric: I don't want to talk about your child because I find it. Actually, I I brought that up and I would like to. That would be the last time I would actually bring up your actual child.

Agnes: OK.

Eric: If I think about Sophie's choice, I get very angry at the existence of that.

Agnes: Yeah.

Eric: Book. Right. Because the issue of deforming people by choices involving their own children where they lack the power to choose what items should be on the smorgasbord and are forced to choose between the Shih Tzu fle, the shift salad, and the shift soup.

Agnes: Yeah.

Eric: There's an evilness to simply making us participate. I'm thinking about Saddam Hussein's penchant for executing a family member and selling sending the bill for the ammunition used to the family so that they're forced to become complicit. Right. Everyone who brings a child into this world is it. Almost without exception, either a monster or a coward. And in fact, this is the Abrahamic sin.

Agnes: I'll tell you the version of that thought that I have and then I want to answer the marginal question about courage, the version I've. Thought of that thought that I've had is. Like there are things that so when you invest yourself in anything, right, it's a point of vulnerability and. If it's your child, then in a sense you've invested like your mind into them in this way where there are things that could happen to them that you would never recover from. And so it's almost like you've made yourself someone who could become insane because you have opened your mind to be wounded by the world. In certain ways that you cannot control anymore. Right. And I don't know what that is. I don't know what the name for that. If that's it, certainly in order to prevent those things from happening, you might do anything. And so that would be the cowardice maybe, right. But it's more than that, right? It's this kind of this kind of exposure of yourself where, like, in a way, your mind. Isn't your own anymore that in a way, maybe that's even deeper than the question about. Courage. Marginal question, about course. So the way Aristotle think. About this is that. There's a lot of different circumstances a person can be in and we call them courageous relative to a set of circumstances that are also relative to them, and that's how you think about the marginal point. So like, there are certain circumstances so extreme that we couldn't expect of anyone to do anything but be crushed by the pressure of the circus. Frances and we wouldn't call them a coward for not responding, but then they're also circumstances where we would sort of expect of anyone that they would stand up and we would call him a coward. Right. And then there's the intermediate case. And of course, it's intermediate relative to us in some way. So what I mean is you have to care about courage, and that is a way of putting the margin, the point about the margin I have to I have to care about. Not just not just immediately caving to certain pressures. I mean, can I? Can I give an example that I actually think is a better example than the divorce one?

Eric: Please but total I will never attempt to interrogate your person if you don't offer. It up OK.

Agnes: Yeah, that's, you know, in a way, this, this, this, this sort of reveals our difference. It's like I think through my personal life that that's like the the lens or something.

Eric: So you think you think through your personal life but there, but there are levels at which I could interrogate that would be different than the levels at which you're interrogating.

Agnes: That's also true. Yes, absolutely. But I might still have those in my head even if I don't say them.

Eric: OK.

Agnes: So like when? When I like having that conversation with my ex-husband, who I'm good friends with, we were divorced, you know, 2011. It's a long time ago, right? That really wasn't so hard.

Eric: Yeah.

Agnes: But there's a thing I did in 2011, which is that I gave a talk about getting divorced in 2011. Because our divorced caused a huge he's faculty member at Chicago

and it caused this huge sort of emotional response in the whole community and a lot of people hated me. A lot of people still don't really talk to me as a result of it, but.

Eric: Just because of your divorce, even though the the two of you have. Accepted yourself.

Agnes: Correct. But it was like, you know, sometimes there are wounds that are created and then they get. Supported the they they, they they. I I don't know the right word is. It's like they they get scarred over.

Eric: Doesn't sound like it comes from the divorce. It comes from the etiology of the divorce.

Agnes: Yes, right. So it, but I give a talk about this about getting divorced and falling in love and what love and marriage and divorce are. And I gave this talk because I was worried. I didn't mind if people were didn't like me or my choices or. Ever. Except my students. I was worried about my students. I was worried that if the students that I had taught came to. Sort of. I don't know. Accept a bunch of gossip and rumor about me that I would that it would both undo the teaching that I had done of. Them. And get in the way of potential teaching in the future that it was like a professional. Obligation that I had to clarify the situation for my students, like I don't mind if people gossip about me, but I do mind if the. People I'm trying to teach.

Eric: But I don't even think you're. I mean, I don't believe you that you don't mind if people gossip about you. You may not be able to hold it.

Agnes: Sorry, I do. I I right. That's all I meant. What I meant was I don't have a moral obligation to. Try. To correct that, but I did feel I had an obligation and there was a lot of pressure like people, you know, through back channels were telling me, like, don't give this talk. Do not like, you know, do not give a public talk about your life and and it was like.

Eric: Can you say what the contents of the talk were about or is that is that is that if it's not a OK?

Agnes: Absolutely. And someday I'll publish it. Someday it was. So. I mean, really the in some ways the talk was quite academic. It was a talk about love. So it was it started with the circumstances which is. I was married to someone and I fell in love with. Someone else?

Eric: OK.

Agnes: And then I was like, I didn't think that that was like the kind of person I was, the kind of person to whom that could happen. But it did happen. And I tried to explain it, and I tried to explain it using some of. Some of the tax. That, I think shed the most light on my own situation. So they were I I think I talked about this passage from Henry James as ones of the dove and from Plato symposium about what I thought love was and how it was related to the kind of quest to become a person. So that that's what the talk was about.

Eric: OK.

Agnes: But it was like it was like I wanted to give to my students my own understanding of what had happened to me. I felt very much like this might be self

aggrandizing, but I felt like Socrates, when Socrates says in this in the apology. I want to show to you the meaning of what has happened to me and he's speaking there after they've condemned him to death and he says, and he's already spoken to the people who condemned him. He's like to the people who voted not to condemn me to my students and my friends, I want to show to you the meaning. I want you to understand. And it was really important to him that those people understand. Because he didn't want to sabotage the educational project that they had been involved in. And that's what I felt at that time.

Eric: So in other words, in order for me to infer why you would do this because it's a rather odd thing to do at one level and very understandable and. Other I would have to surmise and infer that you would in. Fact. Invested certain teachings of yours to your students with the personal. Therefore, calling in you see one thing that.

Agnes: I see. No, I actually. No, that's not quite right. So first of all, I don't have any teachings, so I didn't. I hadn't invested any teaching.

Eric: You teach ethics. Absolutely. OK. I can't imagine wanting to teach ethics. Because if I'm aware of my own ethical failings and you know, there are many, there are many and varied and unremarkable.

Agnes: Yeah.

Eric: The idea of getting up and talking about ethical failings of others and why you shouldn't fail ethically, you know I'm friends with Sam Harris and he really doesn't believe much in lying now. He's not absolutely fanatical about it. He knows there's certain cases where he has to lie. But I would never want. Because I'm trying to be aware of truthfulness and fickleness and all of these sorts of things, you know, status. For example, I have a need for status. It's not a standard need for status. In some ways, in some ways it's boring, but I don't mind talking about it because I I can make. Contact with in it. I don't feel diminished by inheriting a human condition. The thing that really distorts me is that I feel like we're all handed this white suit that we don't want at birth. And then as we live our lives, all of the things that we do when we spill our soup. Or, you know, we spend time in the barn end up. Soiling this white suit and people look at us and say my God, you know, look at you. My question is, well, who ordered the white suit to begin with? Wouldn't I rather start with a base? Line that says. I bet I'm a fairly standard person, and if lying is a problem, and if hypocrisy is a problem if injustice and bigotry are a problem, wouldn't I want to give myself a budget in all of those areas? And the key question is trying to live within one's means.

Agnes: I think that's absolutely right. So when you said like I have all these flaws like that's why you want to teach ethics, because you want to understand them, I mean. The thing about the white suit, so I think that's a really pervasive myth in our society, and it's maybe a bad a lot of good legacies of Christianity. But it's a bad one. The kind of virtues of innocence, idea, the idea that we all start out ethically. Good, right. And that's related to the status game point about how we get something for free, right. But that and the idea is, well, maybe you can sell. Yeah, maybe you can sort of and then and then and then clean it up again and that that can be your ethical

agency. Right. But I don't think that children have some kind of innate virtue. I think virtue is something you have to acquire like and you have to. You have to come to an. Understanding of what matters.

Eric: But the point is, society foists the white suit upon right, so you can't. So you you have to say I reject this white suit. I will fashion my own. If you don't want to disappoint people right now, that the problem there is that I believe that your privacy like for example.

Agnes: That's that's the. Yeah.

Eric: We we see very few of our colleagues naked.

Agnes: Yeah.

Eric: There was a there was a there was a professor that would was probably the closest to being my official advisor. I didn't have a a PhD advisor, but the person who signed my thesis as if he was my PhD advisor, had a home in, in, in Martha's Vineyard. And we would, we would swim naked together.

Agnes: And puzzled by that, yeah.

****Unknown Speaker:**** Mm-hmm.

Eric: You know, because that was what one did. He was a sun worshipper. Mm-hmm. In a in a Hungarian Jew by. The way the. The fact that we don't see each other naked. Means that we're stunned whenever we do catch a glimpse of somebody out of context in which they are in their most natural state, and this has to do with the fact that we are handed these clothes and told to where wear them at all times. And then our our simple underlying reality is totally shocking. So it seems to me very sad. That you would have to give the lecture. I'm not saying that you you might want to give the lecture. You might enjoy the exhibition of it. You might enjoy the courage exercise of it. You might enjoy the intellectual puzzle of it. But the idea that there's a compulsion so as not to ruin your students has to do with the flaw of having accepted the white suit to begin with, and therefore losing your privacy.

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

Eric: Can I do a victory dance?

Agnes: I think, but I think and and I see what you mean and I think what you're helping me to see is that I've somewhat. Framed what I was doing slightly wrong like I it's the point. What? The thought isn't like, well, if people if I don't give this talk, then my students. Well, think I did something evil and then they won't respect me anymore. And now and and so instead I need to like I'm. I'm excuse myself, right. And I need to show that actually I'm as. White, as they thought I was. And that's definitely not like for instance, it's not at all what Socrates does at that moment in the apology. Actually, what he says is that he's like, you might think that, you know, some really bad thing has happened. But he goes on to say you might think some really bad thing has happened to me. You might think this is terrible. That they're putting to death, which is what everyone thinks about Socrates. Ohh look. This Plato showed that you can't have philosophy because look at this terrible result and the whole point of the apology is doctors like this isn't a bad thing. No, no bad thing happened to

me. Yes, they're putting me to death. But a good man can't be harmed neither in life nor in death. And I'm not, you know, like it's bad for them because they're doing something unjust. So it's bad for their souls. But it's not bad for me. Don't like, don't feel sorry for me. Don't feel bad for me. Right. OK. And I guess so. I guess as much as. And I like. I think you were right in picking up on the kind of self excusing nature of the way that I put it. But like, if you think about what I told you as the content of the talk, right, it was more like as much as any. Thing. It was an opportunity like to say something truthful about love that I had never I'd never had such an opportunity because I had never someone one of my, one of my colleagues, came to the talk and he's like. This was not a compliment. This was a criticism. He's like you talked as if you were Moses come down from the mountain like you like you like as though you had so much knowledge like as though you thought you were Socrates or something, you know. And I'm like, yeah, that's what I felt like. I felt like I had all this knowledge. And it was wonderful. And I had to share it with my students and I. So it was sort of, it was almost like there is a there's two points of correction, right. So one point of correction would be to get to the white suit. But the the, the actual content of the talk was to go the step further. Like, this was an educational opportunity. And and I think that I. I let myself not frame it that way in telling the. Story may be somewhat under the pressure of the idea of self purification, but it's not a truthful way of telling the. Story I realized.

Eric: Well but, but this is the question about whether to use the Avenue of Truth. You see, because at some level there's an aspect of of grace and meaning that is present here, which is the. You know whether you know it or not, and I don't know that you know this. At least in the male, arousal takes place on two different systems, both of them within the autonomic nervous system. 1 sympathetic 1 parasympathetic called psychogenic and reflexogenic arousal.

****Unknown Speaker:**** Hmm.

Eric: And it's not under the conscious control of the prefrontal cortex. It's a much more primitive system. Nature's not going to trust the reproductive system to the prefrontal cortex. And a friend of mine, Lisha Lee, just came out with a company I think, called Rosebud AI. That generates faces of people who never were. And you can find that you know she. I'm sure she will release a tool at some point in which she finds your phenotype and can hone to a fairly well and create a person that you cannot tell has never existed and put them in all sorts of situations so that you can fall hopelessly in love with that which is not. OK, now because that's taking place, effectively, your prefrontal cortex is like your parent. Trying to get control of a child who's been asked that the terrible question who wants ice cream and the child is now out of control, OK? You can't really talk about this because this is happening everywhere in a certain sense. I mean, we can talk about it in the general, but not in the specifics. So for example, you can say that self gratification is natural and normal and that the world engages in this almost without exception. You cannot say I'm sorry. I was late for the meeting. I spent the morning lost in. Onanism. Right. And as a result, that kind of layer of indirection

including in this situation using a language layer of indirection is a necessary part of the distortion of the truth that's needed for meaning. Fitness and grace. Different from pure truth, and I think that you you're caught in the bad breath problem in this story. Right. And the self purification. We come from a tradition where there's a ritual bath known as a mitzvah. And these purifying rituals. Are necessary to do. You know we don't have to. Unfortunately, it got tied to the issue of menstruation and whether or not women are intrinsically dirty through the process of renewing themselves. But simply the concept of a mitzvah as a ritual, and the fact that our brains have a place to allow us to be reborn.

****Unknown Speaker:**** Hmm.

Eric: Is an incredibly powerful facility that people focused on truth very often. They try to do things through the truth channel. It doesn't work as well as doing it through the. Ritual and meaning channels.

Agnes: It's interesting that mic fuzz are used for conversion too.

Eric: Yeah. Right and well and another thing, if you've ever read what prayers we say on Yom Kippur on the day of Atonement.

Agnes: Being born as a Jew.

Eric: UM. It's terrifying because you sort of start by atoning for your sins, and then you get into we are sorry for pretending to atone for our sins when actually we're not really sorry. At. All you know, just like holy cow that's written in.

Agnes: So I think that the idea that we can step away from. Being so concerned with truth and move over to, you know, ritual and meaning and something else, it's like it's as though you can step outside of thinking and do something else with your mind, then thinking like, and my view is there is only thinking, there isn't some other operation. There are other things that happen, like there, other things that happen to your brain. Right. But there's only kind of one thing you can do with your mind and there is no way to. Not care about truth. Even in your dreams, you kind of care about truth.

Eric: Ohh no no no. In no way. Look, look if you asked when, when Rabbi Wolpe sat in your chair, we got to the end and there was an issue about how does a final theory of everything affect our concepts of ourselves? Right. And I said to him, you know, at some point, the hard thing is to conceive of what we mean by a theory of everything because.

Agnes: Yes.

****Unknown Speaker:**** Yeah.

Eric: Is there's that which is left undone in the theory of everything, and it usually would. What I believe it means is that we are no longer searching for mathematical improvements at that point, but searching for something ineffable, some kind of gossamer that we can't touch without it disintegrating at our touch. Or you, you know this issue. Of what is the meaning of life and to the extent that I've been able to try to distill it into a sentence that doesn't crumble on me? I've said that the meaning of life to me is the struggle to impart meaning to meaning. And as soon the the reason

I constructed it that way is that if you just say that you're 100% clear, like even on what that means, then you're no longer struggling. And so as soon as the struggle disappears, the meaning disappears. On the other hand, if you say there is no meaning to life, you know the the Shakespeare quote about sound and fury signifying nothing. Then you've also lost the meaning of life because you've you've sort of crapped out of the game, and so it's only the active part of turning this thing over in your mind that keeps us animated.

Agnes: I think there have to be completion points, even if they're provisional. That is, I don't think it can just be struggle like because the short version of your answer is the meaning of life is struggle.

Eric: No without qualification.

Agnes: Cut off, yeah.

Eric: It is the. It is a particular.

Agnes: You said it's a struggle to impart meaning to.

Eric: Right. It's a particular aspect of struggle.

Agnes: OK. But my point is the genus is struggle, right, which is like something kinetic, right. It's emotion.

Eric: Correct. Not necessarily.

Agnes: And.

Eric: If it is, if I'm struggling to to pry a top off of a ketchup bottle, there can be a static moment where I'm simply putting pressure and there's not much kinetic.

Agnes: And.

Eric: Fair and metaphorically, I mean obviously it's not really about. Ketchup.

Agnes: Right. But like, like even if there isn't in order, imagine you just saw a frozen picture of you like this with the bottle, right? Even if your muscles were tensed, you wouldn't know whether you were trying to get the top on, take it off, or just keep it the way. That it was right. Struggle is in a way, Diaco. And we we we can see the struggle through.

Eric: A longer, by the way, every time you say diachronic the next time we meet we're we're going to drink.

Agnes: I don't usually say it this much. You're bringing this out.

Eric: What that? In me, this conversation is going incredibly well.

Agnes: So I think that. Look, there's this something else you said in your conversation with Rabbi Whoopi was that you hate when people say that happiness is the meaning of life. So I'm going to say that. I think happiness is the meaning of life. I think. I think it's true, but I think it's obvious there's no other answer. It's completely trivial. Truth. No one can disagree with this because so because of something I would call the value deferral problem. OK, so. And I think this is like the the number one ethical insight of the ancient world.

Eric: Spite me. Maybe spite is the meaning of life that. What?

Agnes: It's super simple. OK? Which is that like it's something like this, like the value of my life. My life can never be. Somehow something outside of me, something to

be found outside of me. So like, I mean suppose, like, OK, here's a thing that Aristotle considers a bunch of possibilities for, like what a really good life looks like. The most interesting thing about the possibilities that he considers is one that he leaves out. He so nowhere he has that the of the life of money making life of.

Eric: Yeah. Yeah.

Agnes: Honor the life of the intellectual life, the the political life, etcetera. It goes on and on. But when Vicky does not consider is like, what about altruism? OK, what are the altruistic life like? Suppose that I say the entire point of my life right is to make you happy. OK, I'm I'm an altruist.

Eric: Is that what is that? What it?

Agnes: Means let me give that as an instance. OK, let me give that.

****Unknown Speaker:**** Look.

Eric: Alright, alright, alright.

Agnes: As an instance. Suppose suppose you're an altruist too, though, right? So OK, so you go and you make someone else happy, right?

Eric: You just doubled the number of counterfactuals I'm entertaining.

Agnes: I'm going to keep going. OK, here's. Here's. Here's what. Why Aristotle didn't consider the possibility of that as a good life is that.

Eric: Right. OK.

Agnes: As an altruist. Instead of like deferring the problem of the meaning of my life onto you and I'm like, well, the point is like the point is that Eric be happy, right. And suppose you defer also right to somebody else. It's like we can't keep deferring somewhere along the lines. Someone's actually got to do the happening. Right. And I I think it's got to be me who does it for my life. It's not my children. It's not my students. No one can do the meaning of my life for me, and that's just what sort of ancient eudaimonism is. Is the realization that the that the value of someone's life has to come home to them and be available to them in the form of something like an experience? One thing you know not at pleasure, but no one. I mean no one. And many people. That was pleasure, but something that is in a way transparent to them and available to them as a meaning, as an experience. And that's what the word happiness is supposed to capture, at least insofar as it's, say, a translation of the Greek like *adamia*, right. So. So like and I think the idea of struggle is kind of another way to get into a worrisome deferral problem, right? Like you're always struggling. And the thing never happens then.

Eric: No, no, no. Wait, wait, no, come on.

Agnes: If, if the meaning is the struggle.

Eric: Yeah, but the no, no. Look. There is so much work to do and there's so many partial, you know, to to your point where you didn't say the word milestone. But I think what you you talked about is partial completions on on the road, right. So there are so many milestones and partial completions that are part of the struggle. I would never wish to suggest that it's just pure a Sisyphean.

Agnes: Pointless struggle. Well, you defined it as a struggle, so you can change your definition and you can say that.

Eric: I did. No, sorry. Implicit within the struggle is progress movement, partial completions.

Agnes: OK. I mean I I guess I I wouldn't hear that. As implicit like that is to me. The arrival somewhere like it's like there's going somewhere, and then there's arriving, right?

Eric: I'm a huge fan of arriving.

Agnes: And.

Eric: This this idea that the journey is what's important never makes sense to.

Agnes: Me, right. But I think your definition. Suggest that that the definition that the meaning of life is the struggle to impart meaning, meaning is a version of the journey view.

Eric: In the long but the idea that life is 1 airline long airline flight with no landings or takeoffs doesn't really enter into that.

Agnes: Well, so I get that like you don't think that, but what I'm saying is you're saying that so so there's like there's like how you view life. And then there's the way that. You have an articulate.

Eric: It's like weird with like academic support footnotes. So there's a footnote on that.

Agnes: Yeah, OK. But I actually want you to bring the footnote up in the main text and modify your definition and say that you know the pursuit of meaning essentially involves these two components that are actually really hard to fit together. And this is one of those distinctions we're going to need to like back.

Eric: Oh wow.

Agnes: Up right to. To be able to cash that check. But it involves both the. You know, a kind of movement, a kind of struggle towards something like and you know and putting meaning and meaning or understanding or maybe there's more than one kind of endpoint and then and then there's something like being at the endpoint, right. And there has to be a what it is like to be at the endpoint and that has to be part. Of what the meaning of life is, what happens?

Eric: Let me give you a little completion story that actually made a huge difference in that.

****Unknown Speaker:**** OK.

Eric: You ever heard somebody say when you you complain that you keep having a problem and somebody says, well, what's the only common factor to the seven problematic relationships you just described? Then you're supposed to say it's me, isn't it?

****Unknown Speaker:**** Right. Right.

Eric: Right. OK. So I was going around and saying to a close friend of mine named Michael Grossberg, I keep having the following bizarre hierarchical relationship problems. It's clearly me. He said no. Not in the sense that. You. Mean it, I said. What

do you mean? He said. Look, I know you very well and you're imagining that you're doing something really wrong, he said. In fact, think about a different problem. You've got someone with a compromised immune system. They're the only person who's actually seeing the world of pathogens correctly because they're actually. Not defended against the pathogens, everyone with a non compromised immune system is oblivious to what's actually going on in their environment, he says. The problem that you have is that you're the only guy who isn't oblivious to the problems in these hierarchical relationships because for whatever reason, you do not have the immune system that the rest of us carry implicitly.

****Unknown Speaker:**** Mm-hmm.

Eric: So to that extent, if you wanna say that, that's what you're doing wrong. But that's a really bad example because the pathogens are real, they're not imagined. OK, that totally changed my life. It completely reframed something I thought I effectively had a de facto proof of one thing. And somebody's better insight came in and made my life much richer. And I stopped worrying about that particular problem. Now I could move on to. The next problem. That's an example of a milestone of completion I never had to go back. It's a very durable insight. OK. That is part of the struggle to impart meaning to meaning. To get to these higher forms where you're not trapped in the same problems that everyone else has, it gives you an ability to teach, to share, to give paradigms, and I don't think that they're tied to personality. So one of the things that's really important to me, for example. And I talk about it a lot on this show, I think or in other interviews is the fact that in mathematics we honor our Nazis, that there were Nazis who contributed major insights, and it doesn't mean that they're not **** ** *****, but they part of them that contribute mathematical and physical insight. Is not compromised by their *** **** evil Nazis and those.

****Unknown Speaker:**** Right.

Eric: *****. Right, OK, so. The ability to divorce to some extent the human. You don't have any choice in mathematics. If somebody finds something essential and that person happens to be a *** ** * *****, you don't have the right to edit that person out of history because it's inconvenient for you that that happened.

****Unknown Speaker:**** Right.

Eric: Right. So I think that. The moral failings. Of the people who do the teachings should be assumed by the students. Now the key question is, do those moral failings compromise? Let's say the the teachings themselves. In some cases they do particularly comes from a point of sanctimony. If the teacher has not struggled as much as the student, then in fact the relationship maybe would be more profitable if if reversed.

Agnes: But I think it matters a lot, so here the theoretical practical divide is really helping you out, because I think that mathematics is very squarely theoretical, and the more we move towards the theoretical, the easier it's going to be to make that kind of divorce. A lot of people would find it harder with music. My mom is very torn about Wagner. It look for me the very hardest case and it's one that I've personally struggled with is Aristotle. So I think that Aristotle's views on. Like women and natural slavery

are deeply embedded in his ethical theory, so I don't think that they're like some kind of little extra bit that you can just ignore. Those chapters of the.

Eric: Ohh the there are ways in which something is infected with the problem and and you have to refactor the teaching.

Agnes: Politics. It's it's and it's not just that, it's that it's like even what's even connected to what's good about the teaching. There were years when I didn't teach it for this exact reason, like maybe it's just morally corrupt and we shouldn't teach it. I came to think differently about it, but. The point is the question of like how should we deal with the kind of ethical infractions of people who have something to teach us? I think has to be combined with the question what kind of thing do they have to teach us? How theoretical is it? How practical is it?

Eric: Are they the reliable or the unreliable narrator? That's another question.

Agnes: Right. I mean. In philosophy, the question of reliability is almost given that you.

Eric: No, no. As a literary device, in other words, are they speaking to?

****Unknown Speaker:**** Oh I. See.

Eric: In a way in which we can rely upon their words or their words, in fact tell us that they in fact have a hidden truth.

Agnes: Right. And like and like in some sense like with Aristotle like we know he's not reliable like we know it and yet and yet there's stuff, there's insights.

Eric: Right. OK.

Agnes: From him that we I think we don't have another source. And so it's like so for me that was like a a deep, a deep tension. That's in a way harder than the the Nazi mathematician case, but I I don't think that there's a single answer here like that is I I think that the theoretical practical divide makes a big difference, and in a way, the Nazi mathematician case is too easy.

Eric: OK. Should we tear down the arch of Titus that celebrates the sacking of Jerusalem? Stood there for a.

Agnes: While so you asked, you asked Rabbi will be this question too? Yeah, I I. So I don't have a view about it, but I also. Like the question, that's a very different question, right, because that's not a question about there's some knowledge. And then there's the source of that knowledge. We have a different set of questions about cultural artifacts and their and their history and what they mean. And like I guess like one thing that to me is important in asking myself that question is like about this sort of question like that's why I raised the Aristotle case. It's a kind of faux deliberation that I would be engaging in because no one is ever going to come to me and be like, should we tear this? Down like what? Do what you say.

Eric: No, I'm, I'm. I'm willing to start this campaign because I'm really getting tired of people saying that you cannot teach.

Agnes: But you so you think it should be torn down?

Eric: I'm willing to entertain your the extension of your ideas until you start to recognize. First, here's what I'm having a problem. I'm an I'm an incredible hypocrite.

OK. And the reason I've chosen hypocrisy as a life strategy is, is that it offered the greatest benefits per unit of responsibility of all major philosophies. OK.

Agnes: Right. OK.

Eric: I'm always troubled when people tell me that hypocrisy is terrible. Now I struggle to minimize my hypocrisy.

Agnes: So you don't think it's OK? You wouldn't struggle to minimize those?

Eric: Well, the the, the the ID within me struggles to maximize it because like what a great deal, right. But the, the, the supervisory capacity within me is sort of. It's an embarrassment of riches by embracing hypocrisy that you know the world becomes your candy store so that that. Yeah.

Agnes: That distinction between the I'm sorry, interrupt between the IT and the like, that's one of those faux distinctions that I don't think you have a right to in the sense that I think you're. One person and you make decisions.

Eric: Oh, you dear, sweet child.

Agnes: So it's like you struggle with your own hypocrisy and you try to minimize it because you think there's nothing wrong with hypocrisy.

Eric: I don't love my hypocrisy in one region of my mind, in other regions of my mind, I certainly enjoy my hypocrisy. I love steak dinners, and if I actually think about. You know what? What? Veal is. It changes the enjoyment of veal because veal is pretty sick thing to to really take pleasure from. To be blunt. Right. And so there's this issue, you know, and I bring this up, as in Cambridge, MA, there's a store in North Cambridge. I think it says like fresh killed poultry. It's just there on it. It's advertising what it is, and if you're buying from that store, you're pretty much not going to have the the shock when you actually think about what it is that you're consuming cause you bought it with. That kind. Of thought in mind, right? So there's this. Issue. About, you know, obviously when I when I when I'm saying that I'm a hypocrite and that I've embraced as a philosophy. There's a there's a playful aspect to it, which is that I'm recognizing. That most people don't see their own hypocrisy. They they're structured to see it in others and not in themselves. That's a very easy teaching to just walk around watching for your own hypocrisy and then, you know, kind of make yourself sick before pointing the finger at. Other people. What is very odd to me is how few people are aware of how deep their own hypocrisy is. And then to lead a naive rallying cry of, you know, I can't believe this is this hypocrisy in in other people. It's shocking. To not have an idea of what baseline hypocrisy is based in yourself seems a bit rich.

Agnes: I think you're the true crusader against hypocrisy, yeah.

Eric: In some weird way, but it's tends to be institutional hypocrisy. In other words, the, the, the, the thing that really bothers me. If we had a two by two grid, there's individual versus individual conflicts. There's institution versus institution where I really detest is Insta is institutions against individuals, institutional hypocrisy, the Jack boot of the institution on the windpipe of the individual is the thing that is so offensive to me that I'm pretty consistent that that's what I fight. I always try.

Agnes: What if the institution is right and the individual is wrong?

Eric: Well, then I don't view that as being a.

Agnes: That's not one of the. Cases OK, fair enough.

Eric: Is not one of the cases. What really bothers me is the institution using institutional power to humiliate, to destroy the reputation of the challenging individual who's making an excellent point on behalf of other individuals, right. There's certain institutional versus individual games, Goliath against David's and when I'm. And I'm up against that case. I'm particularly animated, having turned down opportunities to behave within the institutional structure. I'm pretty sure I really care about this case.

Agnes: But can I just go back to so something that I so you.

Eric: Type critical institutions are different from hypocritical individuals.

Agnes: Yeah, but like, you know, you you brought up the arch case, right? And so. So the thing that I really don't like is like when a. Question is posed, but it's really masquerading as a point or something else, right? So it's like I'm actually totally willing to deliberate about whether or not we should take this arch down, but that wasn't really why you raised it, right? You. You did. I think you raised it as a potential point of inconsistency.

Eric: Why did I raise it, do you think?

Agnes: But I don't know when I think about the arch. I think it's an interesting question whether or not to to.

Eric: The fact that you find an interesting question means that you are not convinced that it. That the question is settled.

Agnes: Correct, but that was sort of my point about all the cases. I don't think there is one way to settle.

****Unknown Speaker:**** Right.

Eric: Well, but I understand I deal with a lot of people who find that these things are settled right the the the.

Agnes: Fair enough. But but then, but but see, that's my point. You wanted to know, maybe whether I find the question to be settled or not. Right. And so you asked me a question. Should we tear down the arch or not? And your desire and asking me that question was maybe to figure out whether I thought a certain question was settled. Right. But I think that's an actually a deliberative question. Like, should we tear down the arch or not? Right. And So what I mean is like and and and that's the distinction I do between practical and theoretical reason.

Eric: Sorry by, but by doing that you're going to move it closer to the like. When you say that something is a live question, it's not a neutral frame, which is I I think it's an interesting question. I'm not sure either way if I said to you, what do you think about the violent overthrow of the United States and you were to say, oh, I think it's an interesting question. That's a very strong statement.

Agnes: Yes.

Eric: To find it an interesting question.

****Unknown Speaker:**** Right.

Agnes: Right. I think though that you know this goes deep into something like conversational trust, but I could find almost anything to be an interesting question, but I would need it would be pretty important to me that the person posed it to me as a question rather than as a test, right? Because sometimes questions aren't questions.

Eric: There's something parasitic about this. You see, you can't have a society in which everybody finds whether. The. The violent overthrow of the United States is to be an interesting question. In general, the substrate that makes this country possible so that a few people can find that an entertaining question have to make sure that that question is in fact Ultra.

****Unknown Speaker:**** OK.

Agnes: I mean I with respect to that particular one, I I haven't yet seen the interest that is you. You sold me on the interest of the previous one on the grounds of the discussion right on the face of it, it doesn't. We we haven't yet established the the grounds that might make. It interesting but.

Eric: Well, the destruction of Monticello, like I I, I I if I found things that you know had been built with slave labor, you know that.

Agnes: Right.

Eric: I can start to create a great deal of destruction by opening up a lot of interesting questions, thereby moving the midpoint of the discussion quite a bit farther. These are not, in fact neutral. This is part of why I find philosophy troubling, because it doesn't recognize often that.

Agnes: Right.

Eric: The act of asking these questions is in fact. A non neutral action if you remember the Dukakis question where there was a question about Willie Horton.

Agnes: Yeah, very vaguely.

Eric: OK. Yeah, right. The memory hole. It's pretty amazing. So I think he was asked a question about what should happen if somebody raped his wife.

Agnes: Ohh yes, yes, yes, yes, that's right. Yes.

Eric: Or something like that. And in general, the correct answer is. I'm not going to answer that question and don't make me tell you a second time. My wife is sitting right here, right. Thank you very much. I will not be entertaining that. Don't make that mistake again, Sir. Right. Right. Because the point is, I don't wish to open this up now. The philosopher's impulses. Oh, that's an interesting question. Very.

****Unknown Speaker:**** Right.

Agnes: Often not. If, like sometimes you can tell that the person. Asked it as a test. You mean not you mean?

Eric: No, no, I. If it wasn't asked, I'm just saying that very often the philosophical gambit is a pretend state in which we. Are. Quite comfortable. Entertaining anything you know. No. Yes, let's imagine that that Jane uses her steak knife to kill Billy across the table at the Philosopher's dinner. Right. And then you start talking about these. All of these sorts of things in general. This is, again, that there are no tough guys. We all should have personal boundaries and limits in places where we wish to say that. I

would prefer that that question not be asked because the question itself is a form of violence.

****Unknown Speaker:**** Right.

Agnes: But so you say, oh, the philosopher has this pretend interesting curiosity, but I would say the non philosopher has these pretend questions. That they put before us and then if we, if we say back to them look, there are circumstances under which that could be a real question if somebody were really asking me of it, it of me. And there is no question such that I could rule out in advance that anyone could honestly ask it of me in any conversation. That's not the same thing. Saying like I'm, I'm buying into your gambit and I'm going to answer your pretend question as though it were a real question. And if I were to do that, I. Would have to do it with pretend interest.

Eric: But let's talk about a situation in which a question that maybe should not have been asked too much. My opinion must now be asked because of the changing landscape. So, for example, the Tesla problem, which is that you might have thought trolley problems were bizarre and academic. Well, now that you have to commit it to code and you have to say, well, what, what should I do? How many baby carriages should I right? OK, that's an incredibly interesting situation where we can no longer afford to leave an expression.

****Unknown Speaker:**** Uh-huh.

Agnes: Unevaluated. Exactly right. So there there can't really be questions. We can't ask cause we might be in those situations, we might have to ask.

Eric: Well, my point is, is that there can't be a question that we can't ask under any circumstances. But that we may find that a question that was better off being unasked now must be like that. That Pandora's box could survive unopened for this many years. But circumstances have changed, right? Right. So.

Agnes: Right. And and a lot of I mean in that situation it might even be that. I think what what we'll probably end up doing is trying to find a lot of ways to avoid exactly answering it right, managing the situation in which the question has been asked rather than answering it. I mean, I guess, right, these kind of like I thought we'd have self driving cars away before now and I think we do right, but we don't have them. Because of these.

Eric: I thought we were going to get stuck here. That having to commit things to code forces us to promote to consciousness and to responsibility things that we would prefer. Like I I believe that one of the reasons that we tend to have more sex while drunk than than sober, at least the early stages of relationship, is because what we're actually interested in is an excuse.

Agnes: Mm-hmm.

Eric: And that we want to find an excuse, which is I I. Panicked, you know, that's a great thing to do behind the wheel. I panicked. Everybody understands a momentary split second decision to have a series of documented meetings in which we deliberated

over this and then it plays out in an actual intersection somewhere, you know, in North Dakota and suddenly.

****Unknown Speaker:**** But.

Eric: You know, two baby carriages are taken out so that a collection of school children are spared. That situation is like, well, who made this decision? And then it becomes a very thorny issue that we're not capable of it. And we may choose to exist in an ignorant state and forego the benefit of a technology because we can't bear to take responsibility.

Agnes: Right.

Eric: Deliberately, for what we what must commit to do?

Agnes: Right, right. And but there are this question is exists at a lot of different levels, right? And so it's like one question is you know, so you're right that we can hide behind the panic. But like suppose that I just had the time so many of these TV shows you know like 24 or whatever are about like cases where like yeah, there's time pressure, but the person has like a minute. To think about it, and they have to make a decision, right and.

Eric: Yeah.

Agnes: Like I might have to make a decision and I think you know it, it at least has to be possible for me, not necessarily to approve of the decision I make, even to be able to live with the decision I make, but to accept the fact that I made a decision. I think that has to be possible. And so it has to be possible for me to entertain the question. But the question of whether we can as a society deliberate together about that question and come up with sort of like an answer that we can then all live with and in some sense be governed by. That's like a whole other level. And there are many levels in between, right?

Eric: Yeah. Well, the question of should we derange what it is that we know about the world so that we can live with the noble truth. That may be foundational to our society. You know, if we came to understand cognitive.

Agnes: A noble truth or noble lie.

Eric: Sorry, noble lie, right? No noble truths are easy. You're correct. Thanks for Catherine.

****Unknown Speaker:**** Yeah.

Agnes: There's noble on top of being.

Eric: No, but like it's very disturbing to those of us who who believe in evolutionary theory that people who claim to believe in systems of selective pressures are unable to accept the basic premise, which is that they operate on systems with heredity, variation and differential success. And the differential success is the aspect by which. One group you know carries an evolutionary advantage over another. The idea that there should be evolutionary advantages and disadvantages relative to different environments is toxic to many of the lies that we've told ourselves to create. The foundation of our society, and so to to be able to say, well, I absolutely, I would never question Darwin's theory of of selection. However, I also believe in all of the lies that are necessary. And

that this is an unresolved conflict has to do with the partitioning of the mind. I don't see how you could do it otherwise. And the deep partitioned mind doesn't seem to be a healthy state. I know that my friend Sam Harris, you know, has this idea that he should have kind of a uniform, interoperable access to all aspects of his mind. But that seems like madness to me.

Agnes: I mean, it's one thing to think like I should at any given time have access to all of it. It's another thing to think that with respect to any particular bit where I don't have access. I can be sort of OK with that and be OK with the awareness of not having access. Like you can't just straight up deceive yourself, right? You have to sort of deceive yourself behind your back.

Eric: No, that's not true.

Agnes: I mean I can't say to myself like.

Eric: Do you go to synagogue?

Agnes: Sometimes.

Eric: OK, don't don't you find yourself straight up deceiving yourself?

Agnes: Let me give you an example of what I mean by stripping and you can see what I would say. No, not synagogue but but like, suppose that you were like, look, I'll pay you \$1,000,000 if you believe that I'm wearing like a red suit, right? I can't form that belief it would be so advantageous to me to believe it right.

Eric: All right.

Agnes: But like I I can't do it. I'm like self, believe it. No, it doesn't work. It doesn't work like that. Right. So that's what I mean by I can't deceive myself. There's a kind of there's a kind of fundamental will to truth that is just built into thinking and that I can't override manually. So I I could certainly come to believe that you're wearing a red suit through. Very funny. Panels. Right? I might even be able to take a pill if I knew a certain pill would induce me that belief. I could decide to take the pill and then take the pill. Right. And that would be kind of obscure way of coming to have the belief. So that's why I meant by you can't straightforwardly, right. You can indirectly, I think, and people do.

Eric: With very few layers of indirection.

Agnes: I think that's right, but not with 0, right? That's all.

Eric: OK. No, I like this point a lot.

Agnes: And and so I think that that like that limit is like a certain kind of that's maybe where Sam Harris is like there's a certain kind or something that's right about his position there is that there's a certain kind of. Thing I couldn't accept a relation I couldn't accept to myself of opacity. And when I, you know, feel like the story that you told about the hierarchy case. Right and the way in which somebody sort of unraveled that for you, the romantic hierarchy, right, and brought it, brought to your own understanding what was happening. And gave you. It's like. It's like shadow. A light on yourself such that you now. Can can articulate it in a way that like make sense to you, right? When we're not, when we're not in that position with respect to

something, it bothers us and when we get into that position, that's a real and very significant. Kind of progress.

Eric: Interesting. Let me ask you a different question. It's been bugging me a lot. Yeah, I think that the Rawlsian veil of ignorance is there's something terribly wrong with it. And. I see it as having a. It's an example of a piece of philosophy that is got a lot of purchase outside of philosophy departments and I'm worried that it may be deranging us as a society that this idea, that identity should somehow be fungible. And we should say, OK, we don't know who we're going to come back as and in fact. It means something very bizarre to say that we would come back as as the other. Is there something wrong with walls in which if we predicate too much and we we lean on that pillar too heavily, we may do ourselves great damage. It's an intuition.

Agnes: Yeah. So I think, yes, actually I think I maybe a little bit, I'm I'm somewhat in agreement with you. Let me tell you how I would put this problem. To myself, the Rawlsian move is a species of a genus of stepping back moves, right. It's like, look, there are these facts about you. But you could imagine that they were not the case. Just abstract them away and now make your decision. But why assume you can do that? That is why assume you have that kind of metacognition available to you, right? And it's like, look, look at Rawls and look at all the people that Rawls influenced and the Rawlsian tradition.

Eric: OK.

Agnes: Like there was, it's like there's a very characteristic set of, say, political and social and economic views that go along with those people and like, did they really step? Did they abstract from those sufficiently in in, in producing the theory? Like maybe not right. And so I think that there is at the very least there's that assumption there that it is that it is possible and it may be possible, just maybe that you can't do it so easily, maybe that you can't do it merely by entertaining like a thought experiment or something like that. It may be possible to really learn to. Struct away certain parts of your identity through a lot of work right through a lot of cognitive work and through like experience and stuff that you do. But the idea that you could do it just by entertaining A counterfactual, I think is not right. I'm not sure exactly what the implications are of that. I mean that is, it seems to me that this problem is like it's an instance of something. More general that. I've criticized, but have you ever seen?

Eric: John Belushi and. Joe Cocker, singing, feeling all right on Saturday Night Live.

Agnes: No.

Eric: It's one of the great moments in television history. John Belushi becomes Joe Cocker, and Joe Cocker is so idiosyncratic that to have Joe Cocker watching himself acted by John Belushi that collaborate on the song is disturbing and funny and beautiful because Belushi is actually amazing.

Agnes: I will. I will listen to it later.

Eric: As Joe Cocker, as a singer. In that moment. I came to believe that John Belushi could run a version of Joe Cocker, at least to first, second and 3rd order in emulation.

Agnes: Right. But that was like talent that right?

Eric: To your point. Well, this is the thing which is I have people that I could come back as and I have people that I couldn't come back as to varying orders of approximation. And so that aspect of non fungible identity to me dooms the entire Rawlsian project in a way that I can't explain to people who are under its spell.

Agnes: I I guess the. So maybe what I'm willing to agree to is slightly more limited. That is, I'm willing to agree with you that the idea that one can subtract away the commitments and concerns of identity and in effect, right. What we're really arguing about. Is sort of Rawls's. The sort of the conceit that we can separate away comprehensive doctrines, right? Oh, imagine if I didn't believe in God or something. And like, you know, but that might be really important to me. That I believe in God. It is important to me, right? So. And so I'm like, so, so, so. So I I sort of agree that the sort of conceit. That identity is so thin and trivial that you can separate it away and then do your reasoning. That's a real problem, but the thing I don't agree with.

Eric: Right.

Agnes: Is that there is some particular barrier of identity, namely like say the set of people who you couldn't be born as, where you couldn't over time. Spend enough time with those people and talk to them to the point where at the end of that process, you're like I could be born as them. It's it's like now you can't imagine it. We we have the diachronic again for our drinking game but like, you know and so so the the, the, the the real for me the real objection like is.

Eric: Right. Yes.

Agnes: Is that there is a difference between what I can do merely through the OP, like through a mental operation that I engage in alone, and what I can do by learning from people. And I think, yeah.

Eric: Right. I I worked with somebody who I can't run very well in emulation. I do a really basic Peter Thiel impression, but I can only go for about 20 or 30 seconds. And then it becomes very clear that it's just mannerisms because the guy's operating system is wildly idiosyncratic. There's one guy who can do a better job of it, named Ajay Royan, who probably get this second order. And I'm I'm kind of just blown away by it because Peter is just too hard to model. I don't think that that's a convergent process in general, even when you spend a lot of time with somebody. Let me let me switch gears. Yeah, you can have the last word on that one if you want. I don't mean to cut you off there. The two topics I want to get to after the.

Agnes: Can I say of a quick about that? I I think that I I I want to distinguish the question of whether you could model them from whether you could get yourself into a position where you could imagine being born as them, I guess and so but yeah.

Eric: Please yeah. OK. So I mean that's OK good. That I want to get into one issue, which is that this doesn't really talk a lot about feeling and I guess I worry that

critical thinking is something we talk a lot about and critical feeling is something we neglect groupthink. Yes, group feel no overthinking. Yes, over feeling. No, these every place that you talk about something in terms of thinking.

Agnes: I agree.

Eric: If you substitute the word feeling and you realize that feeling is a kind of enhanced cognition, we somehow don't feel comfortable. So I want to talk about something that happened as we sat down in these chairs where. I'm very comfortable talking to you about thinking, and I'm not very comfortable talking to you about. Feeling.

Agnes: Hmm.

Eric: OK. So you were saying that you'd reviewed some episodes of the show, and I said, did you find them interesting? Hmm. And you quite truthfully said you did. And then I said something like, were they worth your while because you'd also expressed an idea that you prefer to read things rather than listen. Because the you value your time and the time is very expensive and long form pod. Testing.

Agnes: Sorry, can I correct one thing? It's not only that, it's that I process information much better when I'm reading. And so in terms of what I can remember and think about, etcetera, given that I heard it, it's.

Eric: Right.

Agnes: Like less of that.

Eric: That's true, but it's also the case that something is lost without seeing the inflections. The body language, hearing, the warmth or the coldness of the tone. So it's an interesting point as to whether or not the transcript is the interview.

Agnes: Right. What information I there. So of course, what information do I prefer to preserve? Yeah, which relates feeling actually, yeah.

Agnes's Reaction to Episode 19

Eric: Exactly, exactly right. But then you sort of said that "no, that wasn't really a great exercise for you, or something like that".

Agnes: Yep.

Eric: That hurt me. What are your reactions to that? I think that the show is quite a bit better, particularly one or two of the episodes that you listened to, I think are extraordinary and it made me feel that you could not possibly have seen what it is that I saw in those one or two episodes, because it would have been worth 10 hours of your time because it was so rare. Now, I could be wrong so it's very interesting that, of course, I have a vested interest so I'm budgeting something for my own distortion. I'm also thinking about what the feedback I've had, how specific the feedback has made me question whether or not I viewed you as a reliable receiver of the content of the show. Had I over-invested in my image of you as the person capable of processing what we're doing here. And it made me wonder whether or not I'm doing something outside of the academy which the academy sort of realises is some cheap version of

intellectualism and story telling and narrative that would never survive in a rigorous academic context. So I went through a bunch of self doubt, accusation, negative feeling, question and uncertainty about you, myself and the project that we were going to sit down and create an episode together.

Agnes: That's a great question. So, I guess — let me report a bunch of different things. So, the first thing, when you said... you asked me, like, how does that feel. To me when you said "that hurt me". Immediately I felt hurt. Like I felt a reflexive, totally non-conscious empathetic response. Though I didn't at the time when I first said it. It didn't hurt me to say that to you. But it, often, I don't...

Eric: Well, I should say both of us are quite disagreeable as people and it's my perception that both of us feel comfortable contradicting something if we... it's an issue of the courage of your convictions and I think that you in general have a very high courage of your convictions and are willing to share.

Agnes: Oh, but also it's an issue of I had no perception at all that it hurt you when I said it and I'm often bad at picking up on those signals and it makes it easier to be (corrupted?)...

Eric: I was asking it because it was obviously a very vulnerable question and so the last thing I wanted to do was signal to you that I could be easily hurt

Agnes: Fair enough. But perhaps also I could also have, if I were somewhat otherwise, I would predict that, but I didn't at all actually

Eric: Cool, ok

Agnes: So, um, I guess that was just my instinctive response. and now, like, you know, yeah — I think that your subsequent ruminations, maybe the most interesting bit in them is the bit about academia. So, what's interesting to me is that, at the moment at which I have this response, it is attributed to me as an academic, right? Like...

Eric: Well, episode 19 of this show...

Agnes: Yeah

Eric: It is about the kinds of things that take place in universities all over the country that I'm alleging that has not filtered out to some extent to the general public.

Eric: Right

Eric: There is a tremendous amount of pressure to survive in academics causing people in my opinion — just as we say... well, let me say it differently. Concentration camp survivors from World War Two, death camp survivors, will often say something if they trust you, which is "don't celebrate us because the ones who survived weren't the good ones. We did what we had to do to survive. It's the ones who perished that you're really thinking about."

Eric: It's a very tough thing to say. In general when I meet someone who has succeeded in academics, they are always under a cloud. If they did it under this era, because the pressures simply too severe. Now, some people do better than that, y'know if you're good enough you can have a peacock's tale that you are in fact an ethical academician but in general people are going to have to take intellectual and moral half-

measures in order to survive in this competitive of an environment. So, I was trying to talk about that in episode 19, not actually attempting to single out an individual. The weirdness that simply talking about a problem in a particular case when people haven't understood that problem will tend to privilege an individual but by the hundredth case of it you start to realise that this is a general feature pervading the society.

Agnes: Good. So, maybe a couple of different responses. So, I found that the scientific content was all new to me. I didn't know anything about this way in which the, kind of, the propensity of a cell to become tumorous — if you want to cut down on that you have to make it bad at repair and that was so interesting to me

Eric: That is weirdly the central insight rather than the narrative and the drama of interpersonal warfare within the academy, just, what is death? Why is it baked in.

Agnes: Right. So, as I say there are a lot of different things and for me that was actually super interesting and I went and looked and read the abstract of a paper and...

Eric: You're awesome, thank you

Agnes: But I guess the thing is I did feel that the sort of thrust of the episode was supposed to be — this is how things can go wrong and I get that on an interpersonal level I get that it is that but the way I hear the story, there was this incredible scientific discovery that happened partly because of an academic context, and it happened and the truth got out. And like it's your brother, and so you love him and you're heartbroken about stuff that happened to him, but he's not my brother and from my point of view, look at what academia did, it got this truth out...

Eric: Are you fucking kidding, Agnes? Let's actually do this as emotional and cognitive.

Agnes: Good

Eric: Who gets to leave children? People who become professors. If you look at the professors who are left by a great professor, the idea that the thought is what got out there and by virtue of the fact that in some sense there was a conflict. This is what I call the horse and rider problem. Let's knock there order off of the horse and as long as we have the horse then that is what matters. This is a complete misreading of history because the key. thing that we find is a Michael Atiyah, for example, a great mathematician will leave multiple fields medalists as students. People who are at the very top of their game. This whole thing is about the train of transmission. When you actually effectively castrate or give a hysterectomy to a professor so that they cannot reproduce what you're doing is you're harming the ability to propagate the specialness that allows... the machine tools of those discoveries. You're confusing the important measure, with the tool and the machine tool. The machine tool is the tool that makes tools.

Agnes: U-huh

Eric: It's a... I think it's an incredible opportunity and, you know, you have also written on the topic of anger, right?

Agnes: Yeah

Eric: This is a question of functional anger. I find that outrageous, what you just said and I don't think I find it outrageous because I am flush with chemicals and I don't think it's because it's my brother. If you were to talk to me about Douglas Prasher was one of the people who gave us green fluorescent protein or GFP, he was driving a shuttle bus in Huntsville Alabama. Before I was championing my brother, I was championing Douglas Prasher because how could it be that the person who should have been on the Nobel Prize for GFP in full view of the academic community was driving not only a shuttle bus in Huntsville Alabama but after being featured in the New York Times with a full, top, above the fold picture of Doug, a year later he was still driving a shuttle bus in Huntsville Alabama. So, and I mean this with all academic rigour — “what the fuck is wrong with that thought process that that's what you think?”

Agnes: So, I think, like, I'm not sure you're clear in your own mind as to which bit of this you find offensive. It seems to me that from the way that you were just talking about Douglas Prasher that a lot of it for you is about credit and who gets credit

Eric: It's about reproduction

Agnes: So your problem is that Douglas Prasher didn't get to have students.

Eric: Douglas Prasher didn't get to have students. This is just like an amazing inability to understand what the game is

Agnes: Well, your brother did get to have students

Eric: No, he didn't

Agnes: Well, I mean

Eric: No, he didn't

Agnes: Well, he went on to teach, didn't he have students?

Eric: He taught at a weird undergraduate institution with no graduate program. You're really not getting it.

Agnes: But, didn't he choose to teach there? And didn't he see that teaching... his description of that teaching there was that it was extremely valuable to him...

Eric: Yes, it's a very sweet story and, right now for example, I have a discord group and I'm teaching people with no formal background how to see gauge theory. The key point is that you don't understand what a university is. It's a very special place and who gets to reproduce and who doesn't is the story of our future. I mean this is about... so we belong to this Jewish tradition and I always use the same phrase, L'dor va'dor — from generation to generation. What has gone wrong in the academy that it sees things in terms of credit, status and all these things? It's about the resources and the ability to reproduce students in an incredibly intensive relationship where there's a transmission. You see, in my field, in Mathematics, the top mathematicians they have not externalised what they know into their papers — it's a fraction of what they know. You still can't get at these relationships from reading work, you actually have to go and you actually have to sit with the people who produced the papers, it's the machine tools.

Agnes: U-huh, I mean, it's weird to me that in some way we agree more than I thought we would on that point in that, look, I think teaching is the fundamental activity of a university

Eric: I don't think so.

Agnes: But you... so there's some other magic way that this reproduces?

Eric: Research is the fundamental activity of the research university. The problem with the University is that it's a confusion. If you think about the biathlon, which I always use as an example. The first time I heard about the biathlon, I laughed. Cross-country skiing and riflery. What the hell are these two activities doing in one sport? Well, if you live in Finland you know exactly why you would want to combine those two activities because you've got Russians on your eastern border, so in general there's an activity that's important in Norway and Sweden and Finland and Russia and places like that, because you shoot the enemy while on skis. OK. The teaching university is an incredibly confusing object to many people. Because of the Vanevar Bush pact called the Endless Frontier, we agreed that we were going to have the federal governments investment in blue-sky research only done through the Universities effectively and that meant that we took an incredibly important facility and we confused it with teaching. Now, there's an extent to which those are symbiotic, that they boost each other, that teaching and research are sort of happy complements to each other and there's a way in which they conflict.

Agnes: But I don't understand how you think this reproduction, how you think, so... suppose you're going to reproduce yourself in me. How do you do that without teaching me?

Eric: Well, the kind of teaching that we usually talk about when we talk about teaching, it tends to be very focussed on the undergraduates, so when you said 'didn't my brother get to leave students?' you're talking about relationship... to undergraduate students, because there's no graduate students there

Agnes: I find that for me that line is not as heavy

Eric: How many members of your department, on the faculty don't have PhDs?

Agnes: Don't have PhDs?

Eric: Like Freeman Dyson doesn't have a PhD

Agnes: Right, I believe all of them have PhDs but that's new in Philosophy. The older generation there were a number that didn't.

Eric: I understand but now you have a situation in which you have a requirement to be able to reproduce where you have done research. This kind of close teaching, this apprenticeship

Agnes: Good. And so, like, I think that you can say. So, this helps to clarify the situation. So, you can say that your brother was deprived of an opportunity to do a certain kind of teaching.

Eric: Let's talk about Douglas Prasher

Agnes: Douglas Prasher was fully deprived of an opportunity to do any kind of teaching...

Eric: Furthermore, he wasn't able to do any more of that kind of research. He couldn't get resources. He in fact gave over his work because his grant ran out.

Agnes: Right

Eric: I'm thinking.. I'm not as interested in the person who's good at administrative games who got to stay in the game, I'm interested in the Douglas Prasher and getting the predators the hell out of the way so that these guys can continue to work. In other words, they need a yiddish for strong muscle. So you need muscle to make sure that the sweet people who can actually do great work aren't prayed upon. You have sharp minds and sharp elbows and the key point is that somebody's got to break the sharp elbows. That's very important to me.

Agnes: I mean... but look, there's a question about... and maybe you've seen many hundreds or thousands of these cases.

Eric: I wouldn't say thousands. I would say tens.

Agnes: Right, and in listening to that podcast. That was listening, to me, to one case. And then I also have to go with my own experience...

Eric: So, you haven't seen much of this. I mean you're in a Philosophy department. I know nothing about how you guys do. What I will say is that in situations... like let's take a situation where there's no skullduggery within academics, but a career stops. So, Évariste Galois couldn't be a more important mathematician. More or less created group theory and Galois theory the day before he died...

Agnes: In a duel.

Eric: In a duel, right. Does it matter that he died? Yes. Hugely. Why? We have Galois theory, we have Group Theory. Thank you very much

Agnes: Right. We could have more.

Eric: We could have much more. And so the issue of just sort of the casual indifference to saying that the system works. That the story and the work could proceed, is a stunning fact to me. Like, to me, you know *Res ipsa loquitur* and the idea that that is a normal piece of academics is effectively the proof to me that there's something wildly wrong

Agnes: Yeah, I mean I guess I just think that there's a question. So, like part of that story was a lot of venality and pressures that come from people wanting credit for things and people wanting y'know... caring about name and reputation etc. and there's a question there about suppose we got rid of that. Suppose we changed people's psyches so that they didn't care about that

Eric: Suppose we had the ability to leave students and gain resources without needing to care. Let's proceed from there because I think this is going to be almost the last thing. So, it comes back to status where we began. So it comes back to status where we began.

Agnes: Yeah.

Eric: So my claim is that status is a proximate and the ultimate is the ability to transmit and create knowledge and the key issue is that, lacking a PhD and lacking

the ability to compete for grants handily, which are status-mediated, means that your line becomes self-extinguishing. That's the real issue.

Agnes: Yeah. I do think that this actually, where it gets back to is happiness. That my life can't be about whether my line is extinguished or not. My life has to be something the meaning of which comes home to me and it's not that that's not integrated into an activity where I try to put something forward, but the point of the pursuit of knowledge can't be to always be handing down the tools to hand down the tools some more.

Eric: What a beautiful place for our next disagreement. You were taking the point of view of soma, I of germ, you of the self and I of lineage, so I think we have a great opportunity to begin our next conversation. Agnes, I just want to say. I find you utterly charming. A huge work out mentally. It's a great pleasure, you're welcome to come back any time and thank you so much for dropping by.

Agnes: Thank you.

Eric: Alright, you've been through the portal with doctor Agnes Collard from the University of Chicago's philosophy. Comment please subscribe to us on Apple, Stitcher, Spotify, wherever you listen to podcasts, and if we could ask you to go over to YouTube and not only subscribe, but click the Bell icon to be notified whenever we drop our next video episode. We'll try to tighten up the time between the audio and the video releases. Be well, everybody, and hope to see you soon.

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Agnes Callard & Eric Weinstein
Courage, Meta-cognitive detachment and their limits
24 February 2020

www.youtube.com/watch?v=hJtA-_pBg8g

This is mostly an unedited robot transcript. Only the last part on Agnes's reaction to episode 19 has been error corrected. Feel free to carry on error correcting it.

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