Agnes Callard on Philosophy, Progress, and Wisdom

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Philosopher and author Agnes Callard talks with EconTalk host Russ Roberts about the state of philosophy, the power of philosophy, and the search for wisdom and truth. This is a wide-ranging conversation related to the question of how we learn, how to behave ethically, and the role of religion and philosophy in encouraging good behavior.

Transcript

Russ Roberts: Today is March 11th, 2020 and my guest is philosopher and author Agnes Callard of the University of Chicago. She's the author of *Aspiration: The Agency of Becoming.* She's a regular columnist at the magazine *The Point*, and she is the winner along with recent EconTalk guest, L.A. Paul, of the 2020 Lebovitz Prize for Philosophical Achievement and Contribution. Agnes, welcome to EconTalk.

Agnes Callard: Thanks.

Russ Roberts: I mentioned before in recent episodes, we're recording this in the middle of the COVID-19 experience and pandemic, so we're not able to use some of our usual equipment. Audio quality may not be what you are used to. Please bear with us.

Russ Roberts: Let's get started. Agnes, the philosopher David Chalmers has a paper, "Why Isn't There More Progress in Philosophy?" The title implies that there isn't much progress. Do you agree?

Agnes Callard: I think that progress in philosophy just means something slightly different from progress in some other fields. And so, if we're judging it by those standards, it will *look* as though there isn't much. I read that paper a while ago. I can't quite remember it. I think maybe Chalmers's view is that there's something like kind of outsourcing a philosophy where in effect philosophy creates these ideas and then they go off into other fields to become progress.

And that's once again saying like the progress part is the extra-philosophical part, is the thing that happens when logic becomes a science of its own or moves over into math. But, I actually do think that there are some internal standards that we could use to think about progress in philosophy. They just might not be as useful for comparing each other fields.

Russ Roberts: I think what he was looking at in there and I think what people, whether foolishly or not, are looking for is establishing truths: having a better understanding of, say, the fundamental questions that humans grapple with. Do you think philosophy has made any progress on those things?

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Agnes Callard: I think the thing I was saying about how there are these sort of external standards for progress, they're still there in that phrase, 'establishing truth.' So, what we mean by that in science is consensus–that there comes to be a kind of agreement between experts in the field as to how things stand so that then you could speak to one of those experts if you were not yourself an expert and get, like, the lay of the land, like, what are people in physics saying these days?

There isn't that in philosophy. There isn't consensus building in philosophy. But, I think philosophers are engaged in the project of establishing truths. They give arguments for claims, right? And, so that's establishing the truth.

But, you may think, 'Well, it's not *established* if everyone doesn't agree,' right? So, that's where you're employing that consensus standard for what it means for something to be established.

Russ Roberts: Well, that's interesting. Yeah, I think that's probably true, although of course even in science most truths get discarded after a while. Some new truth comes along. It's the truth given the data that we have up to this point. It seems to me that's the wrong standard to apply to the human experience.

In particular, I think a philosophy–I feel really foolish saying this to a real philosopher, but bear with me–I think the point of philosophy is to help us not *answer* questions, but how to think about questions.

I think the truth standard or the science standard or the progress standard is really the wrong standard. It's like saying has human nature got–have we gotten more virtuous over the last 3,000 years? The human being, not me or you, but humanity. And I'd say we haven't changed so much. To me, philosophy is the way that we think about the challenge of living a meaningful life, being virtuous, coming to grips with suffering, coming to grips with the complexity of our consciousness and how it interacts with our actions and thoughts.

And I don't expect philosophy to answer those–I mean, I think it would be absurd for philosophy to try to answer those questions, other than to tell me that they can't be answered. And then, to me, philosophy should–and I don't think it does this particularly–but I would *like* philosophy to speak in the voice that I can understand as someone alive in 2020, so that I can do a better job *coping* with those questions. Not answering them, but coping with them. What do you think?

Agnes Callard: So, I think you're right that philosophy shouldn't answer those questions, but that's not because they don't have answers or because there's no truth there. It's because philosophy can't do that for you. You have to answer those questions. That's what philosophy has been trying to tell you. And, so I think one really deep difference between progress in philosophy and progress in science is that in some sense progress in science is all about having less science to do. It's like we're trying to finish science, right?

And, so the progress means we've tied those loose ends. It may turn out we didn't tie them as well as we thought; we've got to go back, right? But, progress in philosophy is not about making there be less philosophy that has to be done. It's about making it

the case that the people who are philosophizing in the future can do it better. In some way, there's more philosophy to be done, the more philosophical progress we make.

And, so I disagree with you about how human beings haven't gotten better over the past couple thousand years. I think they *have* gotten better, and they've gotten more virtuous, and it's because of philosophy.

So, I would give the number one human achievement of all human achievements, I think, is philosophical, and I think is the the idea of human rights. That did not exist in the period that I mostly work on, the ancient world. People didn't *have* the idea of human rights. You start to see glimmerings of it I think really in the Bible, but it's not really fully–I would say it's fully articulated in the enlightenment by someone like Kant, the idea of human dignity.

I think nowadays, most human beings in the world just operate with this idea as almost like just written into their basic ethical framework of their way of thinking about conceptualizing the world, dealing with people around them is that people have– everyone has a kind of dignity and a kind of innate worth and that they have to be treated with respect.

I think that's a genuine change in human beings. It's a conceptual change and an ethical improvement that is because of philosophy.

Russ Roberts: Let me try a different approach to that. It's a great argument; I love it. It might even be true. I might even agree with it. But, a different perspective would be that that glimmering in the Bible you mentioned, the obvious place to start is that human beings are created in the image of God, which is a statement about our equality, a statement about our rights. Famously, Abraham argues with God about his destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, saying, 'If there are 10 righteous people, surely they don't deserve to die.'

So, there are glimmerings of what we might–I'd say more than glimmerings. I'm going to be a little stronger. There are examples of what we might think of as justice, if you're so inclined. Social justice, not so inclined–but you could argue that. Then you ask, well, okay, that text was instrumental to the evolution of Western civilization in certain parts of the world; and yes, it may have flourished most fully in the Enlightenment. But you could argue that it was economics that drove that appreciation for those arguments.

I won't say the *field* of economics, so you could make that argument, too. I won't. But, you could argue that it was the end of subsistence for most people, the potential for economic growth that allowed people to indulge, finally, their taste or yearning–if I can make it a little more poetic–their yearning for being treated with dignity. And, without that, Kant is just a book on a shelf. What are your thoughts?

Agnes Callard: I think it's probably true. I think that philosophical ideas require all sorts of empirical conditions to take hold and get themselves fully appreciated. In Genesis, you *have* this idea in the very beginning that human beings are created in the image of God, but there's some way in which humans have to learn that. And they don't learn it right away, right? And, there's this amazing moment when Cain kills

Abel, and God says, 'Don't you hear the blood of your brother crying. He's crying to me from the ground.' And, God is like surprised that Cain does not hear it, right? It's almost like God has to learn that human beings do not just have this moral sensibility that's just like built-in even though they're made in the image of God. There's this learning that they have to do, right? And, Genesis tells some of the story of that learning.

So, I think that what you're pointing to is that there are sort of empirical conditions on this learning's taking place. And, I think that that's true.

Russ Roberts: And then the other part–I disagree potentially with your thumbnail of human progress–is just like in economics, there's a temptation to point to the good parts of economics. Like, I could point out that when Adam Smith talked about the virtues of commercial life that it encourages empathy, or that trade through specialization is great for improving our standard of living, and division of labor. It's easy to leave out the parts that maybe are not so cheerful.

So, what I would worry about in philosophy is utilitarianism, which is embedded, I think, like fish are embedded in water. I think it's really hard for modern human beings to avoid utilitarian calculus. You point out we sort of absorbed this idea of equal rights, human dignity; I think we've also absorbed this idea of a calculus of *societal* well-being. And, I don't think it's a very–obviously, people disagree, but I think that can be a very *destructive* impulse that philosophy has given us through Bentham, Mill, and I think through its application in economics with not enough care.

Agnes Callard: Yeah, I agree. I actually think that's true of many philosophical ideas that have a kind of reductive bent, right?

Russ Roberts: Yeah.

Agnes Callard: So, there's quite a lot of philosophical theorizing that is an attempt to unify everything under one principle. And there's a very good motivation for that. That is what knowledge *is*. Knowledge is holding the many together under one, right?

But, you have to do that in a way that doesn't do violence to the differentiation within the many. So, this is very abstract answer.

Now, about utilitarianism in particular. I think that there's a kind of road to utilitarianism, almost from first principles, which is: of course you want to do the best thing, whatever the best thing is, right?

Russ Roberts: Yeah.

Agnes Callard: There's a truism there. You should do the best thing, right?

And, the best thing is the thing that brings about the most good, right? And, everything that's good is going to be something that happens in the world, right? So, you want the most good happenings.

So, like, that kind of argument gets you to utilitarianism pretty quickly. And, I think we haven't yet figured out exactly how to arrest that argument, if you see what I mean?

Russ Roberts: Mm-hmm.

Agnes Callard: So, that's something I take it that we're still working on. And, when we're still working on an idea, the sign of that is that there are all kinds of bad applications of the idea. We're still thinking. We're still figuring that out.

Russ Roberts: Yeah. The most good–who could argue with that, right?

Agnes Callard: Exactly.

Russ Roberts: Except when it's applied by, say, Stalin or Hitler. There's an interesting tension between what's best for individuals and what's best for "society at large." And, I think we have that reductive impulse. I know we have it in economics. I used to have it and I've rebelled against it–this idea of saying, 'You know, it's just unfortunate that this policy, or this change, helps some people and hurts others. So, that's too complicated.' Like you said, I want to unify that. 'Let's just take the dollar value of the harm and the dollar value of the benefits and just add them up and see which is bigger. And, if it's positive, it's a good thing. That creates the most good. If it's negative, that's not good.'

And, I find that reductive, social welfare economics, it's implicit in the worst exercises of communism, fascism, Nazism. I'm not suggesting economists are fascists or Nazis, but I think that human impulse to simplify, to reduce a complex system to what amounts as a scaler, a single number–'Oh, it's positive. It's above zero. That's good,'–I think is to be resisted.

Agnes Callard: So, the thing is, that–the question is the alternative.

Russ Roberts: Fair enough.

Agnes Callard: Like if you want to resist it, what do you want to do instead?

Russ Roberts: Yeah, fair enough.

Agnes Callard: So, a lot of the time, we have to make some kind of a choice, right? And, people want to make those choices in ways that are in some sense principled.

And, I think that utilitarianism gives you one principle. It gives you a principle for making choices.

Now, I don't think it's the *only* principle. So, Kantianism is another principle. It's, like, you could have rules, right? You could make your choices in accordance with moral rules, such as, 'I'm never going to intentionally cause the loss of life,' or something like that, right? Where you then always have the option of doing nothing, though that may end up resulting in a lot more loss of life, but you didn't intentionally cause it, right?

So, there are other kinds of principles that you might choose *other than* utilitarianism. Or you might decide to be unprincipled, right? But, those are your options.

And, so that's sort of what I mean by saying we're still figuring this out: is that, I think that we *want* there to be some principle underlying these choices, but if we jump too quickly to a commitment to a particular principle, it's going to lead us to terrible consequences. The terrible consequences are simply the sign that we pick the wrong principle or an insufficiently complex principle.

Russ Roberts: I think you could argue that the alternative to having a *system* is to go case-by-case. And, 'I'm not going to have a set of rules; I'm not going to have an overarching reductive calculus like utilitarianism. I'm going to look at each case.' Of

course, the risk is that you do what is convenient, what is good for you. You wrap it up in other motives to make yourself feel good about it. I think part of what we're–

Agnes Callard: And, you can't justify it to others.

Russ Roberts: Say that again?

Agnes Callard: And, you might not be able to justify it to others and to get other people to agree with you to pursue that plan of action.

Russ Roberts: Yeah, I might not be able to; but I might be really good at figuring out ways to make them think it might be good for them, too, and not just good for me.

Agnes Callard: Sure.

Russ Roberts: Right? That's the challenge there.

Russ Roberts: I think in a way–and I've been thinking about this for a while now; I'm trying to write a book on it–the whole idea of the scientific enterprise, which has worked so well in certain areas, doesn't work so well in others.

So, then you're left with–well, now what? If I can't use analytical technique and data to figure out, say, what career I should go into, or whether I should marry, or who I should marry, or whether I should have children, or whether the minimum wage is a good thing? You name it, right? Because I think all of those are very different than how many transistors you put on an integrated circuit, which is an engineering problem. Those other problems are different, to me.

And, then the question is: if you reject the scientific enterprise as the way to "solve" those problems, if you start to grapple with the idea that they're "not solvable," even– they are different kinds of experiences that one has to endure, or grope, or cope with, or grapple with–the reasonable question is, 'Okay, now what? Do I just flip coin?' Right?

Agnes Callard: Right. And so, what I want to say is that it's important not to conflate the idea of a problem's being solvable with the idea that it can be solved by someone other than you. In some way the scientific approach–that's the thing I was saying earlier about saying that the sense of progress, there is a sense of completing a line of thought so that it no longer needs to be thought about. So, it's almost like we delegate the thinking. So, when scientists say 'we,' what they mean is 'other scientists.' Right?

And, so the idea is like you delegate a bunch of your thinking to other people and then you don't have to do that work. They've done it for you.

So you can look up–you know, like, the idea that social science could tell you who to marry: it can be like you'd somehow look it up, or there'd be an app, or whatever and [?] can just pop up. The problem would be solved *for* you by other people.

But, I don't think the problem who to marry is an unsolvable problem. I think I've solved that. In fact, I solved it twice.

Russ Roberts: Yeah, well done. As Mark Twain said, 'It's easy to stop smoking. I've done it a score of times.'

Agnes Callard: Yeah, right. Obviously, we all have to solve that problem. I don't know anyone who solves it by flipping a coin, right? We solve it through agonizing

decision-making, and trial and error; and we don't solve it alone. We tend to solve it with the person that we end up marrying, right? That's also I think an important feature of this, is that: there's a little bit of the illusion of a solved situation, which 'I'm sitting here figuring out who to marry all on my own,' right? I'm not doing that.

So, I think that there are a lot of problems that are solvable, but you actually yourself have to do the work of solving them.

Russ Roberts: And we don't just, of course, solve that with the other person we're thinking of marrying. We solve them through our friends. We watch our potential spouse interact with our friends or family and we gain intangible, non-scientific data, what I would call information or knowledge even though it's not quantifiable.

Russ Roberts: You know, what you say reminds me, when you talk about the expertise and delegating it to others: One way to think about the death of expertise–which is something I think about a lot these days as the media to my view falls apart, literally, falls apart as a source of of knowledge for so many people–part of what maybe is happening is, some of it is the decentralization of media and the atomization of knowledge through the internet, the ability of people to inform themselves not rely on experts.

But, I think part of the problem is that so many of the things we care about are difficult problems, not easily quantified. There *isn't* a consensus. But we want there to be.

So, people look for lodestars–people they can they can "trust." And, my view is, on most things you can't trust anyone. There *isn't* a consensus. So, just you're going to have to live with it.

Agnes Callard: That's true. But, there's the other pole there, which is: there are people who really, not only love uncertainty, but almost seem to drown, bathe in it, glory in it, to the point of sort of despair. I mean, there's a certain road to skepticism where it's like, 'Oh, nothing is really knowable. No point to even try.'

Russ Roberts: Yeah.

Agnes Callard: And, I don't know. I see that sometimes. Like when you were saying to me, 'Oh, there are no answers like in philosophy or whatever.' I really hope there are answers because I'm trying to find them. I don't want to give up uncertainty as a goal. I don't want the illusion, the false certainty in something that I shouldn't be certain about. But, in some way, people's clinging to certainty and even clinging to authority is a sign that they love knowledge. Right? That they're not satisfied just being at sea in the world around them. And, you shouldn't be satisfied being at sea in the world around you.

Russ Roberts: I really enjoy agnosticism as a stance. And, I think there's a little bit of nuance here. It's not agnosticism: 'Well, who knows?' It's: 'Well, we know some things.' The way I like to think about it is the drunk looks for the keys under the lamppost because that's where the light is the brightest. That's our human impulse. It's very hard to avoid that impulse, but the shadows are where a lot of things are

happening. We're uncomfortable remembering that, so we forget it. We tend to look we're the light is.

Agnes Callard: Right. But, even in the shadows, like, you've still got to be searching rather than–and, I guess I think finding is the logical target of searching, like, what you're doing isn't searching if you think there's no such thing that– like, if you think there are no keys.

Russ Roberts: Yeah, that's true.

Agnes Callard: Then there's nothing for you to do in the shadows.

Russ Roberts: I'm older than you. I'm 65. I feel wiser than I was 20 years ago. There might be an illusion, but I do feel I've made some progress. But, I have to confess: a lot of that progress is in appreciating what I don't know. So, that's not really that helpful, maybe.

Agnes Callard: So, here's another way to think about it. Suppose there *are* answers. This is what Socrates thought: There are answers. All of the questions that we ask ourselves have definitive answers, where if you knew them, you would know that you knew them. And he says, if you knew them, you would be a living person walking among the shadows and Hades[?] would be so different than other people. It would be *incredible* to know that.

But–okay, here's the but: It's not achievable in a human lifetime. Maybe not in many lifetimes. Maybe if you were reincarnated thousands of times. Maybe then, maybe.

Okay. So, suppose you had that view, right? So, the view is that there really are these answers that they would be incredibly valuable–that having them would really be the only thing that would make your life sort of fundamentally worth living; but you're not going to get them over the course of your life. Do you still try to get them? Do you still work to get them? You might think that just, it would be impossible. It would be impossible to motivate yourself under those situations.

So, maybe you tell yourself a different story, like a story about how it's all about the search and the searching, 'Live the search and that's actually valuable.' And, that–that story, that pretense–that you told yourself is how you get yourself to do this impossible thing, which is searching for something that you maybe can't get within your lifetime.

Russ Roberts: I find that incredibly poignant, tragic. It really captures to me a lot of what is the essence of the human experience, which is: We're in the darkness. We grope toward truth. Occasionally, we think we're close to it or maybe even think we found it. And sometimes we do get a taste of it. There's no doubt about that. There are many areas of human life that are like that. But it's clear to me that you do need a lifetime to be a great parent. Excuse me, multiple lifetimes; I'm sorry. Multiple lifetimes to be a great parent, because you make so many mistakes and they become clear in hindsight.

Some people have the opportunity to start over and get a second set of young children to practice on. But most of us just do the best we can that one set of times with it.

Unfortunately, the children are all different. It seems like a cruel trick because what works with one doesn't work with the next. Each one is unique. Even then when they're grown with the same shared genetic makeup with your spouse, it doesn't get that much easier because they're all another draw from the urn.

But, I think that telling yourself that the search is part of the–you know, you do the best you can even though you're really Sisyphus. You're rolling the rock to the top of the hill and you never get there.

Agnes Callard: I mean, the thing about parenting is that you're kind of learning how to parent your kids as you parent them, but then they're changing at the same time. So, they're always a step ahead of you.

Russ Roberts: Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle in action there, sort of.

Agnes Callard: Right. What you've learned is always useful just at the moment at which it becomes useless. Like, you've figured out the kid, and then they slightly change, right?

Russ Roberts: Yeah.

Agnes Callard: So, it's like this process of being always one step behind.

And, I don't know. I don't think it would help if you started out with a second set of kids. I haven't noticed that people are sort of much better with their grandkids. [crosstalk 00:26:53]

Russ Roberts: That's a great point. Well, a different set of incentives there, but I guess the part of it's like the idea that we're going to master the business cycle as economic policymakers: 'We just need more data. Give us a few more recessions, a few more depressions, and we'll get the hang of it,' but in fact each one is a little bit different.

Russ Roberts: You suggested there is some progress in philosophy, and yet, you think we have a lot to learn from Socrates. I know you think we have something to learn[?] from Aristotle. You specialized in the ancient Greeks. Why should we do that? Why should we keep reading these people who lived long ago in a different time before we figured so many things out?

People say this about economics all the time: 'I don't need to read Adam Smith because anything that was true in Adam Smith, we've kept and everything else is false. So, I don't need to read Adam Smith.' I don't feel that way, but I suspect you don't feel that way about Aristotle either.

Agnes Callard: Yeah–

Russ Roberts: Or Plato.

Agnes Callard: Yeah. So, I think that the way philosophy–one way philosophy creates progress: it doesn't itself *make* progress but it sort of creates it–is that there's like a mush of how people think about the world and philosophers divide it up and articulate it and create like a structure. Right? And, then that structure sort of trickles down and just becomes how people think about things, unreflectively, right? So, you could think of it as like your conceptual architecture.

So, in the ancient world, people puzzled over, like, how there can be a thing, like a chair, but it can be yellow. So, really there are *two* things there, a chair and yellow. But, how can there be two things that are one thing?

Okay. Now, for us, we're like, we can't even see the problem because like, well, it's a chair but it has a property, a property of being yellow. And, so when we say, 'It is a chair,' and we say, 'It is yellow,' we're using the word 'is' in two different ways–the 'is' of predication and the 'is' of essence or something. Right?

Russ Roberts: Yeah.

Agnes Callard: But, all of that is Aristotle. Aristotle came up with that, right? We're just being Aristotelians but we don't notice it because Aristotle created the basic categories. In fact, we called them the 'categories' in which we think about things.

So, why should you study Aristotle? Well, maybe you don't care why you think about things the way you do. But one thing is you might worry, as you worry about utilitarianism, that *some* of the categories that we've absorbed from philosophers, that some of our basic conceptual architecture might not be quite right.

Or even if you think it *is* right, you want to take a kind of ownership of it, right? You want it to be your own thinking. And, I think what studying ancient philosophy allows you to do is to have your thinking be more your own thinking than it was before, because you can sort of see it coming into being in some sense.

And, then some of it *is* like questions. With Adam Smith, I just remember I was reading this summer and there's this passage where he talks about how human beings have this very basic desire to be believed–to persuade others. They're like–that's the primary function of language, in a sense, is to be a leader, to be a thought-leader. He thought of language as satisfying this desire to be a thought-leader of others. And so, it's this deep and interesting asymmetry that then structures communication for Smith, where what you get there is some of the story behind why there are these status tensions among human beings, and why there's this zero-sum game aspect to the human experience, which has to sit alongside of the kind of very positive picture in like *Wealth of Nations* where it's like, 'Oh, we just get together and work together and everyone's improved. Trade is a positive sum game,' right?

Russ Roberts: Yeah.

Agnes Callard: So, for me, I want to read Adam Smith to understand this deep tension between the zero sum and the positive sum elements of human interaction.

Russ Roberts: Well, I think the mistake people make when they make those kind of statements–it's the same mistake they make–to me–when they say in a book, say, talking about Nassim Nicholas Taleb's book, *Fooled by Randomness,* people say, 'Oh, I already knew all that.'

And, my view is, I knew a lot of it, but the way he wrote about it made me understand it more *fully.* The way he wrote about it helped me internalize it and absorb it and feel it in my bones.

And, things that are facts and equations or theorems or punch lines are not the same as knowledge, right? Having a set of definitions, even if they're accurate–which is

not always easy–i's not the same as understanding things. And, I think that's what's lost when we ignore great thinkers of the past.

Agnes Callard: Yeah. I thought that seems right to me, that there's a way in which the thing we understand least is our own ideas. And so we might *have* them. They might be ours in a sense. But, we're often just saying words without really knowing what we mean by those words.

And, I think when we talk about things having properties, like, unless you can really get a grip on that problem of the two ways to use the word 'is' there, it's not at all obvious that it's okay to use the word 'is' in there's two different ways. The word 'is' is not ambiguous. It's not like riverbanks and money bank, right? It has a deep problem.

If you just, like, 'Oh, well, it's a chair and it's yellow,' there, you *think* you have the thought in a way, but you haven't seen to the bottom of your own thought. And, so the thought that like, 'I won't get anything new,' it's like in a way that's true: you won't get anything new. What you'll get is something old that's in your head but that you haven't sort of come to grips with.

Russ Roberts: That's the other question: is how much of how we think about things, the framework we use, how much of it is culturally transmitted? And, then we use the words of philosophers and economists and others to explain those or whether the philosophers and economists are actually propagating those ideas.

I'm thinking about a recent book I read by Joshua Berman. He's talking about the Hammurabi code, which details the punishments for various infractions–theft, building a building that doesn't stand up. Speaking of Taleb, he loves to quote this: that, if you build a building that doesn't stand up and it kills somebody, *you're* killed as the builder, and that produces skin in the game.

Berman argues that that's not the way the Hammurabi code–I don't know if this is good scholarship or not–but he claims that Hammurabi code was not enforced that way. It actually *wasn't* a law code. It was common law. It was a set of the standing of certain–it was a summary of certain cases and punishments or consequences at the time, and that no one expected them to be enforced literally like we would with a code. It was, rather, a collection of past cases or cases at the time.

And that's just extraordinarily fascinating because it totally changes the way you think about it.

But more importantly, for me, it reminds you that you look at the past–and we all look to history, and even if it's a week ago–we look at the past through today's eyes and don't appreciate how much of our vision is affected by the glasses we wear. Those glasses come from this water we're in, this intellectual water that we don't remember is out there. We just assume we're thinking of this rationally, as out of the blue. But in fact we have absorbed either the philosophy that created the culture or the culture that adapted the philosophy to its needs. And, I think that's a really wonderful and important enterprise if you got the time. I understand it's not everybody's cup of tea.

Agnes Callard: In some way we want some way to hold on to the wisdom that we haven't fully gotten to the bottom of. And, so we might have, like, a lot more thoughts

than what we can fully articulate at a given time. And that's part of what a code is about. Or it's part of a lot of–a lot of our values exist because we have institutions that transmit them, right?

Russ Roberts: Yeah.

Agnes Callard: Even something like marriage or universities. And, human beings wouldn't be very good at having much in their lives if we didn't have those institutions. We wouldn't come up with a lot of value immediately on our own.

And, so there's the process of tradition. I agree with you. In some way, it outstrips the theorizing of it.

Russ Roberts: Yeah. Well, because it gets into the world. It gets out of the lab. It's like a Frankenstein. We hope it's a good one, right?

But, the point about institutions is a deep point. I think about Adam Ferguson, who talked about things that were the result of human action, but not human design. And, that's one way to think about institutions: the things that emerge out of human interactions that are not planned by anyone.

Universities are a great example. And, you and I are both molded by them in ways we probably don't fully appreciate. And they're changing dramatically right now, I think in what their purpose. It's not right now. It's the last 30, 40 years or so. They're not what they were 100 years ago, let's say it that way. They're doing something different; and for people who conceived of them as they were in the past, it's alarming and incredibly destabilizing intellectually and emotionally, but it's clear to me that it's just another phase and you have to react accordingly.

Agnes Callard: Yeah. I'm so curious. Actually, one of the reasons why I wish I could live another 200 years is I really want to see what universities will look like in 200 years. Because, there's just this way in which part of the justification of the university has always been that most people aren't into that stuff and can't access it, right?

Russ Roberts: It's elitist.

Agnes Callard: Right, it's elitist. And, there still may be some truth in that, but there's just a lot *less* truth in it. I mean, just literacy rates going up a lot, right? The fact that in the United States, I don't know, 30%, something like that, people go to college, higher than that, four-year colleges, compared to 50 years ago, right?

So, what that means is that there's a lot more intellectual interest in the general population than there used to be. So, the differential between inside and outside the university is just lower than it's ever been, right?

And, the Internet is a huge part of that, too. And, so this question of what does it mean for there to be an institution that is the safeguard of this thing that most people don't care about–that's less true.

Plus, at the same time, the increase in attendance at universities has meant that universities now play this weird sort of gatekeeping role in terms of like your future status, and life prospects, and earnings, and all of that, that wasn't what they were intended to. It means they're much more integrated into the society than they ever used to be.

So, that's just super-interesting: that universities are stopping being sort of like a world apart. And, yeah, I agree with you. I wish I could see ahead to see what will happen with that.

Russ Roberts: I think the other part of it, of course, is that they're not just for education; and you could argue they're not even close to being mainly about education. They're a form–to pick a less elitist word–a form of finishing school. I can make that sound good by saying it's where people figure out who they are and explore their identity, so that's an intellectual enterprise in some sense or a philosophical enterprise.

But, if you think about them as a finishing school–and we're richer, so we can afford more people to get finished–although not as may graduate as start unfortunately; that's just the way it is–I think that changes the whole enterprise.

So, you think about your role as a professor in the humanities. I was a professor of economics. We saw ourselves as people who shared wisdom. Okay, sure. It's a pretentious-sounding thing. We saw that as our goal, that was our job. At least that's what I saw my job as being. And, I don't think that's really as important as an intellectual enterprise in the modern university as it was 40 or 50 years ago. It's just not.

Agnes Callard: What do you think–what is a finishing school? Can you just to say more about what does that accomplish?

Russ Roberts: So, if you think about a gap year. It's where you "find yourself," you explore something, you learn about what you care about, and that's kind of what college is, except it's four years. *Unbelievably* expensive. Not just the tuition, but the forgone earnings and opportunities to learn and explore things differently, in a different way.

And this COVID thing with Zoom classes is reminding people that–in a really dramatic way–'This isn't what I pay $75,000 for, is to get my kids to learn a bunch of stuff online. I mean, I can watch YouTube videos. Just for the certificate? Just for the signal, I'm paying $75,000?'

Of course, some people, Bryan Caplan, former EconTalk guest, believes that that's the case of–excuse me, past EconTalk guest. But, it forces you to realize that, yeah, that's not really a lot of the enterprise. A lot of the enterprise is something else and that something else is growing up, right?

Our age of marriage is pushed off in America now to a–the average keeps climbing. College is another form of–it used to be some people went to, finished high school. Most people didn't. And, then it was some people went to college, but most people didn't. We're increasingly going to where, 'You know, I really need 16 years, not so much of education but 16 years of not being responsible for myself.'

It's a really ugly way to put it, but that's another way to think of it as finishing school. It's not like you're going to learn your manners there or how to do–which silverware to use or which part of the meal. But rather, 'I'm not ready yet to grow up.' And, I don't mean that in a condescending way. 'I'm not ready to start my independent existence.'

And we have a society that create this weird bubble called college where a lot of people can go and try out a bunch of stuff. Some of it is intellectual. Some of it is career. Some of it is social. Some of it is identity. It's all complicated and mixed up. And that's what I think of it is.

Agnes Callard: Yes, so that makes sense to me. I mean, you could of course call it 'starting school.'

Russ Roberts: Better.

Agnes Callard: I recently asked someone, an economist who went to the University of Chicago who is one year ahead of me and we took some of the same classes, not together, but sequentially. And, I said, 'What have you really learned from having been a University of Chicago undergrad 20 years ago?' And, what he basically said was that he felt like it was his induction into intellectual culture. And, he was a child of academics, a child of university professors, and I was not, but I felt exactly the same. I didn't know that this world existed. I didn't know as a high school student, really. I read philosophy as a high school student; still–

Russ Roberts: Yeah, it doesn't matter–

Agnes Callard: I didn't know that you could be in this space in which you talk to other people about ideas.

And, I don't think that's the only thing college is about, but I think that if you start your life having discovered that, let's say, that's going to be a different life than the life in which you never discovered that. You'll start a different life.

So, I guess I would say ideally would be a starting school of that kind; and I agree with you that that's not primarily about transmitting knowledge or transmitting wisdom or transmitting information to students. It's about sort of showing them that a certain kind of community exists that will support their inquiry.

Russ Roberts: To trivialize it a little bit, I think it's really showing you how to read. And how to think. I think that's the ideal of a certain kind of college experience. The more pragmatic side of college, majoring and say–I won't pick on particular fields, but there's certain fields that I don't feel capture that, and that people in those fields are having a different experience. They're not exactly getting that beautiful thing that you described that isn't for everybody, anyway.

Agnes Callard: If you have a university where there is like a core curriculum that everyone has to take, that's–the very idea of the core curriculum is to make it not be a question of your major whether or not you're inducted into that kind of intellectual community, right? But, not every university *does*, right? So, yeah, I think it's certainly possible to not have that. And, for it to be the case that your university experience *isn't* really about learning how to read.

Though, I would say about learning how to read, I really do think I agree with you. I think you do learn how to read in college; but for me, what that means is you sort of learn how to socialize with dead people. That's sort of what reading is: It's to learn that reading is *that*–that reading is a form of interaction that you *can* interact with people who've been dead for a long time. It's just hard to do. And that's what the

reading experience is. The reading experience isn't passing your eyes over something and then writing a paper about it. That there's a form of socializing, which is a form of intellectual life that's possible in that context. And for me that was like a radical discovery.

Russ Roberts: So, I've never read much Aristotle. I guess the answer might be none. And I haven't read a lot of Plato. I've read a little bit of Plato. Shame on me. But, if I were a student in your class–well, let me say it first–if I picked up those works and I started to read them, I'd struggle. And I could socialize a little bit with that people but not so much. How do you see your role as a teacher in facilitating that conversation between students and those who are long gone?

Agnes Callard: Yeah. So, I think that really *is* my job as a–I agree with you, it's very hard to do on one's own. And, people often ask me, 'What should I start with in Plato or Aristotle? What should I read?'. And, I'm like, 'The first thing you should do is find a group of people to read it with'–that's Step One–and read whatever they want to read. Which is–that's not quite it. I then would have views about it. I think you should start with Plato rather than Aristotle. I think you should start with certain dialogues rather than others.

Aristotle is *very* hard because he's so boring to read, and there's no getting around that. And, that's really different from Plato, who is really not boring to read. And, so the nice thing about Plato is you can sort of get into it without really getting anywhere close to the bottom of it. You can sort of stay on the surface of it and get something. Is Socrates being a jerk here or does he have a point against Euthyphro? Is Euthyphro a conservative or a radical?

So, you have these conversations about these people–they are people–who are talking to each other, who are arguing with each other. And, I think what you have to do is get the students to be invested. You know, that thing, skin in the game. You sort of get them invested in this argument. Whose side are you on? Who do you agree with? What would you say if he said this to you? And, it's incredibly easy to do that with Platonic Dialogues. Students do it almost without trying. They actually read the dialogue and they just assume that their job is to figure out which side that they're on, right?

So, you don't have to persuade them to do it. And, then you just have to get them to see that they can just keep doing the thing, the thing that was in the dialogue is something they can do, too. And, that it becomes an extension–the classroom very easily becomes an extension of what's happening in the text.

That's much harder if you're reading Aristotle. It's harder if you're reading Descartes or Kant. It's *quite* hard if you're reading Nietzsche, right? But, you can do it. That's what you have to do with all of them. It's just easiest to do with Plato.

Russ Roberts: Can you do with Heidegger?

Agnes Callard: No, I can't.

Russ Roberts: I can't either. I don't even–

Agnes Callard: [?] much I agree.

Russ Roberts: So, that's a beautiful, beautiful idea. As a host of a podcast that interviews one other person almost once a week, I have this romantic ideal that conversation is the way we learn; and I'm curious those Platonic Dialogues–obviously, that's what Plato thought that was important. I'm curious what your experiences as a teacher in watching your students learn through the process of talking about people talking.

Agnes Callard: Yeah. So, one thing that was funny to me when you were saying like you saw your job as sort of transmitting wisdom is, like, I really *don't* see that as my job. I see it as *acquiring* wisdom.

Russ Roberts: Yeah, true. Fair enough. Better said.

Agnes Callard: And, I'm sort of sneakily using that–my students–to acquire wisdom. I just have all these questions. I come to class with a bunch of questions. I found that class works best if my list of questions is just a list of things that I genuinely want to know about the text or about the phenomena that the text is about? And, I do actually–this is just a point on which I substantively philosophically agree with Socrates though possibly not with Plato–actually Plato might have had a slightly different view than[?] Socrates–which is that, yes, philosophy in some sense essentially proceeds by way of conversation. And, that's because one mind by itself can't see around its own biases, prejudices, and assumptions. And, as much as we try to step back and reflect and be meta-rational, all of those procedures are governed by the same biases and assumptions. Right?

And, so you actually need someone else to ask you the very simple question that you just didn't ask yourself because it was in your blind spot. And that's what learning *is*.

And, so that's what I'm doing in class, is learning from my students by posing to them these questions. And then they give me answers, and I tell them why that answer isn't good enough, and why I still have a problem here. And, we go back and forth. And, that's what I think learning *is*.

Russ Roberts: You could argue that the reason you read dead people's works is to step outside that modern mindset you're unaware of, that water that you're swimming in; and it forces you to re-think where you're coming from, maybe. I don't know.

Agnes Callard: I think that there is that aspect of it. I think, though, that if I *were* going to do that, I would read more philosophical works that are outside of my own tradition than I do.

Russ Roberts: Yeah, fair enough. Good point.

Agnes Callard: So, I'm pretty narrow. And, I find it hard to get things out of such works and I find it hard to read them. And, I think it's mostly just that I don't have a community of people to do it with.

I'm even talking from some authors *within* my tradition, like Plotinus. I try to read Plotinus. And, he's so important. He somehow thinks about the world in a way that's really different for me. I don't get anything out of him. It's just like whatever.

Russ Roberts: Spell it? Who?

Agnes Callard: P-L-O-T-I-N-U-S.

Russ Roberts: Plotinus.

Agnes Callard: Yes.

Russ Roberts: So, it's Plotinus, we think? Okay. That makes it sound–I don't know who Plotinus is either, so I shouldn't pretend that I do, but it was just pronounced funny for me. Who was Plotinus? Tell us. Plotinus, sorry.

Agnes Callard: So, he's sort of this important Hellenistic philosopher. I don't know that much about him because as I said–.

Russ Roberts: Yeah, why bother?

Agnes Callard: But, you know, he was living roughly like 200 AD, something like that. And, he was this Neo-Platonist who was sort of reviving Plato. Right? And, he wrote these this text called the *Enneads* in which essentially he's like trying to explain how everything is organized under the one. And, like, this kind of, in some sense, I might say I might say a very, very radically reductive philosophy. 'Reduction' is the wrong word because it's such a heavily metaphysical reduction that you wouldn't recognize it as such.

It's like heavy-duty metaphysics that is taking its inspiration from Plato but in ways that I find just very alien.

So, I kind of never know what question he's trying to answer. Anyway: you should probably talk to someone else about Plotinus other than me, someone who gets something out of him.

Russ Roberts: A Plotinusean. They're everywhere. A Plotinusist.

Russ Roberts: Let's close and talk about virtue. We talk about *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* here on the program quite a bit, and our natural tendency towards self-interest–not selfishness, but self-interest and how it can be overcome at various times and in various ways.

Thinking about your comment earlier–that "we're better than we were"–do you see religion and philosophy as being–I hate to say it, use this word, but competitors? And that I think some of philosophy is trying to get at: How can we be good without God? How can we motivate people to seek goodness and virtue without an external word, or say heaven and hell–without the–you can make it more positive than that. It's not so much about sticks and carrots, but more about aspiration toward greatness and transcendence. Do you see that there's–am I right or wrong in thinking about philosophy that way? And, can we make progress just through philosophy on that side of virtue? search for virtue?

Agnes Callard: So, one thing you're definitely right about is that most philosophers are not religious. And in fact recently someone on Twitter said, 'Is it bias if I respect a philosopher less if I learn that they believe in God?'

Russ Roberts: I saw that, yeah.

Agnes Callard: Like, *I'm* a philosopher who believes in God and *I* would view that as bias if you don't listen to my arguments for that reason. Like, you shouldn't. The first premise of my argument isn't: God exists.

So, I think sociologically that's right. I think that historically of course it hasn't been right. Most philosophers have been religious. I think that–so, I have some idiosyncratic religious views, but maybe, the first thing I would say is that I think religion involves thinking about God through images and myths and stories. And, you know, like the human image is the most fundamental one. We say man is made in the image of God; but we also represent God through the image of man, right?

Russ Roberts: Well, Michelangelo did, for sure.

Agnes Callard: Michelangelo did. Christians do in a variety of ways. But, I'm a Jew and I still, in some sense, when I think of God, it's very hard for me. Like, what am I going to do, think of a ball of light? Is that better than a human being? I don't think it's better. I don't think it's an improvement.

And, so there's this way in which what religion does is it tries to give us a grip on God that is imagistic, in mythical and, like, stories. And, I think philosophy is dealing with a lot of the same territory. And, what I meant by saying I'm an idiosyncratic is that I think in some sense everyone believes in God. So, that's an idiosyncratic view.

Russ Roberts: Yes, it is.

Agnes Callard: But, [?] you don't call it that.

So, like I think the scientist who is so certain that the universe has laws and that there's a law-like structure under it that is there to be known, who is certain of that, who goes into it with, like, what I would call faith, right?–

Russ Roberts: Yeah.

Agnes Callard: That is a *kind* of religious belief.

Not every view about God, sees God as, for instance, the creator. Aristotle's god wasn't a Creator God, right? So, the idea of God as creating, I view as part of the imagistic or mythic picture of God.

I think of that as being incredibly useful. It's a little bit like the thing you were saying about traditions, about Hammurabi code. Religion is some of the way that we hold on to, the thoughts about God that we haven't processed yet.

And, now: Where that would be going in terms of progress–will philosophy eventually sort of take up what was once imagistically presented and presented in a more articulate and rational way? Will it sort of complete that project? Probably not. But, who knows? Actually, I would say who knows? But I do think that that's some of what we're doing, like, in effect, the feeling of it's a competitor is sort of right because the scientist instead of thinking imagistically is thinking about the laws of the universe, right?

Russ Roberts: Yeah.

Agnes Callard: And, that's an instead -of relation. But, I don't think it's the kind of instead-of where, in effect, you can't believe in God and be doing science or philosophy. And in fact, I have the view that you *have* to believe in God. You just may not say that about yourself that you do; but that it's sort of like a revealed preference. You are voting with your feet by moving in this act of faith. And I think we just engage in acts of faith all the time. And science is one example.

Russ Roberts: So that's–boy, that was a lot to think about there. I was thinking a little narrower. I was thinking about Kant and the Categorical Imperative, say, that says–I'll butcher it, but I'll do my best–that says you should act as if when you make a choice and that if everyone made the same choice, would it be a good world or a bad world.

And, that's a great way to live. I think it's the right way–it's like saying, to put it in COVID terms, 'Wear a mask.' Or 'Get vaccinated.'

It's true that other people can protect themselves with their own masks if you don't wear one, but the world is a lot easier if everybody wears a mask. And it would be great if everyone felt that way.

I'm assuming that's true by the way, scientifically. It may not be, but I think it is true. And, I think it's the moral thing to do to wear a mask. It's the moral thing to not shoplift because if everybody shoplifted, there would be no enterprise. You can get away with it. It's the wrong thing to do, so don't do it.

Of course, that conflicts with our own individual self-interest, often. It's a classic free-rider problem. And, I think you could argue that progress occurs when norms evolve that make doing the right thing self-interested.

This comes back to a conversation we had on EconTalk with Dan Klein about honest income: that virtue is about becoming accustomed or habituated to certain things that aren't your narrow self-interest, but you come to feel that they make you better off, because they give you pleasure or they make you feel good about yourself. I don't think I'm doing justice to Dan's insight. It was much deeper than that, but that's the rough idea.

And that, if we could live in a world that was a little more kumbaya, it would be a better world, right? Where I said, 'I always do the right thing. When I find the wallet on the street when no one's looking, I don't keep it, I return it. I don't exploit people when there are opportunities to take advantage of them even though it's in my narrow self-interest. Even if it doesn't hurt my reputation, I still don't do it because it's just the wrong thing to do.'

And, you *could* argue that the enterprise of philosophy and the enterprise of what we might call secular humanism is to replace the divine idea of sin or things you're not supposed to do with this more social, cultural conscience. I don't know if that enterprise is real. I don't know if it's true whether it's just romance, dangerous. But it's interesting.

Agnes Callard: I see. So, one thing to think about what would Kant have to say about the categorical imperative and its relationship to God: In Kant's view was that you need God. He thought he needed God for exactly the reason that you've just articulated about the virtue versus selfishness. So, he thought that the idea of God was a practical postulate that people had to assume in order to be able to insist on a connection *between* virtue and happiness. And the idea being if you're virtuous, you'll be rewarded in the afterlife or something like that, right?

Russ Roberts: Yeah.

Agnes Callard: And, so he thought: you can't *prove* that God exists, but it's a kind of presupposition of your agency and of your commitment to being a moral person, etc., that you believe in God. Which is somewhat close to what I think, about everyone believes in God.

And, so that would be to say, like, in effect, the thing that would in some way underwrite a person's moral commitments for Kant would partly *be* this belief in a certain kind of order that God represents.

Now, you might say, 'Yeah, but what if we just forget about that? What if we just trained people in a certain way,' right?

Russ Roberts: Right.

Agnes Callard: We just train them to have these non-self-interested inclinations. And, I think that might work if those people weren't very philosophical. And, if they didn't think about why they have these instincts, right?

But, if they started to reflect upon it, they might want some answers as to why they should do things that are good for other people even if they have instincts that drive–these new instincts, these new social instincts–that drive them in this certain way.

And, I think that they are going to come upon these metaphysical questions, and they're going to want to come to answers to them just like we do. And, so even if we fully habituated and inculcated in these people this kind of social morality, their own inquisitive nature would force them to ask these same questions–to which God, at least according to Kant, is part of the answer.

Russ Roberts: I think also understanding consequences of actions, market forces, all those things that play into these kind of examples also would play a role. We talk on the program sometimes about tipping in a restaurant or tipping in hotels–the housekeeper, who not only will you never see again, you'll never see the person at all. But, I like leaving a tip. It makes me feel good. I think it's a good thing to do. I encourage people to do it. I encourage people to give at least a dollar to the person on the street, the homeless person and not just give them the dollar but to talk to them and interact with them, make them feel like a human being.

If people felt that was "the right thing," to do, if that norm was out there, I think–actually, I'm going to say it differently. I think in a more homogeneous society that works pretty well–I think it's harder in a heterogeneous society–I think the challenge is that it's one thing to say, 'We're all in this together,' but I think what a lot of people ask, even–it's probably unconsciously–'Who is we?' And, I think that's the challenge in larger heterogeneous democracies toward using social norms to provide behavior when legislation doesn't.

Agnes Callard: Yeah, good. I mean, one way that I hear a lot of even religious leaders talk about religion is as a form of community. That the important thing about religion is that it gives you a kind of ethical community.

And, I think if that were true about religion, then a certain kind of social progress would replace the need for religion.

But, in my view that isn't all that religion is. I think that it involves, it essentially has metaphysical commitments that answer to the deep metaphysical needs that human beings have. So, my view is there would still be, even in that homogeneous, ethically-habituated society that maybe wouldn't have a need for a religious community, there still might be a need for religious ideas.

Russ Roberts: Let's close and talk about the humanities in general. We've talked a little bit about philosophy and a little bit the world of education. The humanities in my view are an endangered species in the modern university. People aren't as interested in majoring them. I have a son, foolishly majoring in philosophy. I don't really believe that. I think it's glorious that he's majoring in philosophy. But, people ask me, and I've joked about this before on the program: I say, 'What's *that* good for?' 'Thinking, writing. Other than that, nothing.'

But, a lot of people don't look at it that way. They think that majoring in the humanities is a 'waste'. It's a luxury that is not very practical. They'll also talk about how the humanities have gone off the deep end politically. What are your thoughts on that, and humanities in general, philosophy in particular?

Agnes Callard: Yeah. So, I believe in the humanities. I think that majoring in philosophy in some way, the description that we were giving of college as a finishing school or a starting school that inducts you into among other things intellectual culture, I think majoring in the humanities is sort of majoring in college in that way, right? It's like fully committing yourself to that. And, for that exact reason, it doesn't look that practical, because you're not already starting to do the next thing that you're going to do later. And, so people are like, 'Hey, why aren't you already doing the next thing?' It's like, 'Well, I'm doing this thing now.'

And, so I think there's something right about saying it isn't that practical in that sense.

But there's something–so, one thing to say is, 'Look, some things are ends in themselves.' There had better be some such things, right? And, part of what the humanities do is kind of allow you to develop the capacity to appreciate those things, the things they're unto[into?] themselves. And, if you can't, your life is just not going to have much value *in* it, because you won't be to appreciate all the valuable things. And, some of the most valuable things in the world *are* books, and music, and paintings, and ideas.

And, so, getting a chance to develop the capacity to appreciate those things is very useful even if it doesn't help you make more money immediately.

In terms of–there were many parts to your question. One of them was: the humanities have gone off the deep end politically. So, I think that there is this kind of a bit of a, like, there's been crisis in humanities for a long time and some of that crisis is the humanities somehow losing faith in itself. And, it's almost like there's this question, 'Well, do these ideas really matter?' And, one way they could matter is they could make a certain kind of immediate political difference that we could then see sort of mapped out in the world. And, so I see the inclination to sort of politicize the human-

ities as a son that like, there's some basic problems seeing the ideas as mattering on their own.

Russ Roberts: Good point.

Agnes Callard: And, I do think that that's something that we in humanities really have to work on. It should be, like, our first priority is to get in touch with the sort of intrinsic value that would not make us feel like we needed to do that in order for these ideas to matter. Because it *is* important. I think it's important also not to delve into the other extreme and to *just* think of the humanities as like fancy, expensive entertainment or something. These ideas matter. And so the person who's politicizing them is sort of in touch with the idea that they *should* matter. But, there should be a greater variety of ways in which they can matter; and there's some way in which we have to all convince ourselves really in the first instance that they do matter.

Russ Roberts: My guest today has been Agnes Callard. Agnes, thanks for being part of EconTalk.

Agnes Callard: It was my pleasure. Thank you.

Delve Deeper

EconTalk Extra, conversation starters for this podcast episode:

- Induction into Intellectual Culture by Alice Temnick. Jun 24 2020.

This week's guest:

- Agnes Callard's Home page

- Agnes Callard on twitter.

This week's focus:

- "Why Isn't There More Progress in Philosophy?," by David J. Chalmers. *Philosophy* 90:3–31, 2015. Preprint, 2014, at consc.net, David Chalmers's website. PDF file.

Additional ideas and people mentioned in this podcast episode:

- L.A. Paul on Vampires, Life Choices, and Transformation. EconTalk.

- Bryan Caplan on the Case Against Education. EconTalk.

- Dan Klein on Honest Income. EconTalk.

- *Ani Maamin: Biblical Criticism, Historical Truth, and the Thirteen Principles of Faith*, by Joshua Berman at Amazon.com.*

A few more readings and background resources:

- Jeremy Bentham. Biography. *Concise Encyclopedia of Economics.*

- John Stuart Mill. Biography. *Concise Encyclopedia of Economics.*

- Adam Smith. Biography. *Concise Encyclopedia of Economics.*

- *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, by Adam Smith. Library of Economics and Liberty.

- Code of Hammurabi. History.com.

- Flammarion engraving. Wikipedia.

- Aristotle. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

- Plato. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

- "Euthyphro," by Plato. Plato's *Dialogues.* Benjamin Jowett, tr. Classics.MIT.edu.

- Plotinus. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

- The Categorical Imperative. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

- Immanuel Kant. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

- The History of Utilitarianism. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

- Adam Smith's Moral and Political Philosophy. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

- "The Tradition of Spontaneous Order," by Norman Barry. Literature of Liberty. Vol. v, no. 2, pp. 7–58. Arlington, VA: Institute for Humane Studies. Available at the Library of Economics and Liberty. Contains some material on Adam Ferguson, among others.

- "Why Read the Classics in Economics?" by Peter J. Boettke. Library of Economics and Liberty, Feb. 24, 2000.

A few more EconTalk podcast episodes:

- Nassim Nicholas Taleb on Black Swans. EconTalk.

- Nassim Nicholas Taleb on Skin in the Game. EconTalk.

- Mary Hirschfeld on Economics, Culture, and Aquinas and the Market. EconTalk.

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Bryan Caplan on the Case Against Education

Bryan Caplan of George Mason University and the author of The Case Against Education talks about the book with EconTalk host Russ Roberts. Caplan argues that very little learning takes place in formal education and that very little of the return to college comes from skills or knowledge that is acquired in the classroom. Schooling, he concludes, as it is currently conducted is mostly a waste of time and money. Caplan bring a great deal of evidence to support his dramatic claim and much of the conversation focuses on the challenge of measuring and observing what students actually learn.

Comments

SaveyourSelf

Jun 22 2020 at 1:51pm

I never liked philosophy in school, but I loved this interview. There were so many fascinating ideas. And they were all so delicious. But if I had to pick just one to focus on, it would be this:

Agnes Callard said, "I would give the number one human achievement of all human achievements, I think, is philosophical...the idea of human rights... I think nowadays, most human beings in the world just operate with this idea as almost like just written into their basic ethical framework of their way of thinking about conceptualizing the world, dealing with people around them is that people have–everyone has a kind of dignity and a kind of innate worth and that they have to be treated with respect." '

"Rights" is a contractual descriptor. Rights are what the other party or parties to a contract owe you. "Duties" are what you owe the other party. Taken together they are the "terms" of the agreement. So when Agnes Callard brings up "human rights", that's not philosophical. It's contractual. This is easy to prove by moving to an extreme example. If there is only one person on an island, what are his basic human rights? Answer: He has none. No one owes him anything. There is no one else on the island. "Human rights" exist only in groups, and then only by agreement. The fact that a large group of human beings now believe in the concept of human rights means, by definition, that they believe they have a contract with other human beings. Thus the

really interesting question then becomes, with whom do I share this contract, how do identify who they are, and what do I owe them in return for these human rights? This is "social contract theory," and it's a *really* big deal. The social contract defines justice. And justice is the foundation of civilization. Without it, at least according to Adam Smith, civilization crumbles. So I think Agnes was correct on the importance of the matter of these rights but misunderstood their nature.

Greg G

Jun 22 2020 at 4:18pm

Human rights are social norms. The reason the concept of rights is meaningless for someone alone on an island is simply that norms are social conventions and social conventions can only exist when more than one person is present.

You might object that it trivializes human rights to call them social norms but that is only the case if you think they are unimportant social norms. In fact they are the most important of all our many social norms and we are a thoroughly social species.

You might object that social norms are too fragile a foundation for something as important as human rights. In fact, the observed fragility of the respect for human rights by humans throughout history is just more evidence that is what they are.

Like all social norms, there is both a lot of agreement, and a lot of disagreement, about the specifics especially as they apply to particular cases.

As Adam Smith would have pointed out, respect for human rights – to the extent they have it – comes from people's individual consciences. That, not some contract, real or imagined, is the source of the very crucial social norms that we are pleased to call human rights.

Those seeking a more "objective" foundation for human rights should consider that the fact that most humans are furnished with a conscience and that is an objective fact explained easily enough by the evolutionary advantages of co-operative behavior. And it is an "objective" fact that some social conventions come to dominate others even as they are slowly changing.

SaveyourSelf

Jun 23 2020 at 9:18am

Greg G wrote, "Human rights are social norms...social conventions...cooperative behavior...explained by evolutionary advantages."

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines norm as "a principle of right action binding upon the members of a group and serving to guide, control, or regulate proper and acceptable behavior."

"Norms" and their sister concept "mores" are a valid alternative explanation for some group behaviors, particularly those that persist over time in the absence of any obvious cause. But I find them wanting. Models using well defined contracts/agreements

are clearer, have better predictive power, are easier to understand, and have broader applications. For example, it is a simple matter to explain the nature and purpose of government using social contract theory. Predicting the presence, absence, and relative strength of markets in a civilization is trivial at a glance over the terms of a social contract. Furthermore rights, duties, and Citizenship are all explicitly defined in a social contract. That level of usefulness isn't possible, to my knowledge, using norms and mores to model society. Calling agreements between individuals "norms" is rather like hand waving—loose, nonspecific, ill defined, and hard to test. That's not to say that it is wrong to do so, only–in my experience–less practical.

Marilyne Tolle

Jun 28 2020 at 11:25am

My understanding of (real, not imagined) social contracts is that they're rooted in law and therefore legally binding i.e. one party can be punished for breaking the terms of the contract (e.g. not paying your taxes lands you a fine).

To me, the difference between social contracts and social norms that is pertinent to this discussion is that social contracts are formal (imposed by the state top-down), while norms are informal (emergent, bottom-up).

The question then is: which comes first? which one informs the other? This is an empirical question that is difficult to answer, but it seems to me that history suggests that legislation tends to ratify rather than prescribe social norms.

Perhaps it's easier to use Yuval Noah Harari's notion of "intersubjective belief" to refer to human rights.

SaveyourSelf

Jun 29 2020 at 2:15pm

Marilyne Tolle. Thanks for your post. It is thoughtful and interesting. I'm tempted to leave it as is, but this topic of social contracts is so important that I'm willing to take the time to attempt and get you to change your position.

"My understanding of (real, not imagined) social contracts is that they're rooted in law..."

Other way around. Law is a *second order* concept. Contracts must be present *before* the concept of law arises. In fact, the terms of all the legitimate contracts throughout society make up the body of the law. The contracts, therefore, are *first order*. Like cells make up your body, contracts make up the body of the law. It is probably, therefore, accurate to say that "law" is actually shorthand for "contract law." (A hopefully clarifying example follows a bit later.)

"To me, the difference between social contracts and social norms that is pertinent to this discussion is that social contracts are formal (imposed by the state top-down), while norms are informal (emergent, bottom-up)"

You are confounding a few things when you say social contracts are imposed by the state top-down. F.A. Hayek deliberately separated law from legislation. Considering Hayek's distinction is helpful for considering top down and bottom up explanations.

Legislation is coercive imposition of rules (someone deciding for someone else backed by coercion) and is top down, whereas *law* is the sum total of contract agreements over time (emergent, as you say), which would include norms because norms would be included in many contracts.

Legislation is a threat of violence by government employees unless certain actions are taken. Legislation requires no agreement at all from the target of that coercion. And although it is true that contracts can include coercive elements by agreement, the presence of coercion does not guarantee a valid contract is present legitimizing that coercion. Failure to recognize this distinction leads to the erroneous conclusion that all government passed edicts are contractually supported by the constitution. But that position would make genocide and slavery reasonable so long as the government said as much. One key to unraveling that seeming paradox of government endorsed slavery is that the terms of the underlying Social Contract supersede and restrict the coercive power for any Citizen agent, including those working in the government, to respect the terms of justice. You could write a constitution in which slavery and/or genocide is condoned, but that clause in invalidated by the terms of justice in the Citizenship agreement, which takes precedence.

S*ocial contracts* are simply multi-party contracts. And all agreements, be they two-party or multi-party, are voluntary else they are invalid. Agreements are not imposed. They are not top-down. A homeowners association, for example, is a social contract that would contribute to the "law of the land." The law for that specific land shared by the homeowners. In contrast, zoning rules passed down by governments are centrally imposed legislation, backed not necessarily by agreement but certainly by coercion. Social contracts, like all contractual agreements, are bottom up. That being said, in spite of my characterization of government edicts as coercive, the constitutional document that defines our government is a social contact. First the contract was drawn up that defined the government. Then people agreed to it. Then the government followed. Our government is *established* by contract.

Importantly, the supreme social contract is not the constitution. The ultimate social contract that (nearly) everyone in a society is party even before committing to a constitution is called the "Social Contract". It is capitalized to distinguish it from all the other multi-party contracts. The (capitalized) Social Contract is also called the Citizenship Contract or Citizenship Agreement. The Citizenship Agreement/Social Contract spells out (defines) what justice means for a consenting group of people and any other details deemed pertinent enough that everyone in their society can unanimously consent to them. And it is that Social Contract/Citizenship Agreement that forms the foundation upon which all other contracts are rooted, *including* the contract for government.

Abstracting on these definitions, the government is one or more people specializing in satisfying the terms of the Citizenship Agreement on behalf of themselves and other citizens who pay them for their service. Interestingly, violating the terms of any mutually agreed on contract qualifies as a violation of justice because it harms at least

one party. Harm is a violation of justice. For that reason, ultimate enforcement of *all* voluntary contracts falls under the purview of government responsibilities vis-a-vis the Citizenship Agreement.

"The question then is: which comes first? This is an empirical question that is difficult to answer..."

Imagine in the future a person migrates to mars. He is the first person to live there. So there are no laws, no legislation, no contracts, no rights, and no government. It's just him. But then he comes across a solo martian woman while exploring. What happens? Is one of the two sentient beings automatically the government and the other a citizen under that government? Is there any law or legislation present at that first meeting before either has taken any action or spoken any words? No and no. Before any of those things can happen those two beings must first agree not to destroy each other. That agreement not to harm each other is The Social Contract. The first. The foundation. The bare minimum of what it means to be "social"–the shared commitment to justice. If they can make that agreement regarding justice, then they are technically rudimentary citizens of a two person shared society. They might then make other agreements/contracts between them–the sum total of which is the law.

As an aside, there is no point forming a government between these two creatures until there are *at least* three sapient beings on the planet. Because government specializes in satisfying and enforcing the terms of the Social Contract in exchange for money or trade goods. Why would one of them pay the only other person over and above what they have already agreed on by contract simply to honor their word? That expectation of justice is already baked into their agreements. Without it, they would not have made any agreements! Creating a government to enforce their agreements would be equivalent to renegotiating all their previous contracts, but with worse terms for one of them and better terms for the other. That's not Pareto optimal. Both parties would not agree to that kind of change unless coerced. And coercion violates justice. And justice was their first agreement! Breech that, and ALL other agreements are void. So the government wouldn't happen at that stage, and without a government, there wouldn't be any government produced legislation either.

"It seems to me that history suggests that legislation tends to ratify rather than prescribe social norms."

Fair enough. This is what you would expect to occur when the members of the government producing the legislation are also subject to them (rule of law) and/or when the government employees producing that legislation are contractors. Because as contractors, if they don't perform as agreed in the contract, then they are in breech of the contract and they won't get paid.

"Perhaps it's easier to use Yuval Noah Harari's notion of 'intersubjective belief' to refer to human rights."

This cannot be true. "Rights" are terms of contractual agreements. If rights were "intersubjective beliefs", then they could be entirely within an individual. I might believe, for example, I have a right to your car. But that only works if you *agree* that I have

that right. Elsewise you will prevent my exercise of that belief when I come to claim it. And my cry of "you are violating my rights" would sound ridiculous. Because it is. A "belief" is not a right unless shared with other people. And if we agree on the terms of that trade, we have a contract. And if that contract is shared with many other people, it is a social contract.

We *all* have those rights, and *only* the rights, that we have agreed to grant one another.

Eric
Jun 22 2020 at 2:05pm
Agnes Callard: And, so I disagree with you about how human beings haven't gotten better over the past couple thousand years. I think they *have* gotten better, and they've gotten more virtuous, and it's because of philosophy.

To be even possibly true, that claim depends on there being an objectively true "virtue" that human behavior could become closer to ("better", "more virtuous") rather than not. If there were no objectively true standard, it would be inherently meaningless and empty to claim that people are in any sense closer to it. (cf. discussion in *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis).

Agnes Callard: So, I would give the number one human achievement of all human achievements, I think, is philosophical, and I think is the the idea of human rights. That did not exist in the period that I mostly work on, the ancient world. People didn't *have* the idea of human rights.
...
Russ Roberts: ... a different perspective would be that that glimmering in the Bible you mentioned, the obvious place to start is that human beings are created in the image of God, which is a statement about our equality, a statement about our rights.

There is no basis for innate human rights apart from the recognition, found in Jewish Scriptures and spread by Christianity, that all humans are created in the image of God. See The Most Important Thing This French Atheist Taught Me About Christianity. Later thinkers can piggy back off this as a "given" (without crediting the basis), but they are unable to derive it apart from it being an actual truth about human nature. If it were not true, humans wouldn't have inherent human rights, but only contingent "rights" that can be given or taken away as and to whom powers choose.

Agnes Callard: In Genesis, you *have* this idea in the very beginning that human beings are created in the image of God, but there's some way in which humans have to learn that. And they don't learn it right away, right? And, there's this amazing moment when Cain kills Abel, and God says, 'Don't you hear the blood of your brother crying. He's crying to me from the ground.' And, God is like surprised that Cain does not hear it, right? It's almost like God has to learn that human beings do not just have this moral sensibility...

Sorry, but that misrepresents the text. God says figuratively "The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me..." (not to Cain). God had warned Cain in advance

about temptation and choosing what was right. Cain later lies to try to hide what he had done, which exposes his own awareness that it was wrong. God asked "Where is Abel, your brother?" already knowing that Cain knew he had done wrong. Cain's deceptive answer and attempt at denial shows us he already knew (even before God's reply about the blood) that he had done wrong.

Russ Roberts: I think in a way ... the whole idea of the scientific enterprise, which has worked so well in certain areas, doesn't work so well in others.

...

And, then the question is: if you reject the scientific enterprise as the way to "solve" those problems, ...

Science is great for solving questions about the nature of what *is* the case regarding physical reality. The reason it must always completely fail to address all "should" or "ought" questions is because all questions about about should/ought/right/wrong require comparing and contrasting what *is* with what ***ought*** to be. Science can only touch the former. It is incapable of addressing the latter, which is a question about what we are meant to be like, rather than whatever our behavior currently happens to be.

Agnes Callard: Suppose there *are* answers. This is what Socrates thought: There are answers. All of the questions that we ask ourselves have definitive answers, where if you knew them, you would know that you knew them. And he says, if you knew them, you would be a living person walking among the shadows in Hades, you would be so different than other people.

Suppose such a living person were to walk among us shadows. Even if the wise and the learned were to try to stump him, test him, and catch him with "gotcha" questions, he would be able answer them all and turn the tables on them until none of his opponents "dared to ask him any more questions". He would be a singular figure in history.

Suppose, as **Agnes Callard** suggested, we could not acquire this understanding on our own even in more than a lifetime. Yet what if this unique living person offered to give life to shadows like us and to accept them as disciples? "Learn from me ... and you will find rest for your souls." This would bring that life within reach.

Hoosier

Jun 22 2020 at 2:40pm

"There is no basis for innate human rights apart from the recognition, found in Jewish Scriptures and spread by Christianity, that all humans are created in the image of God. "

Were there really no human rights in Japan or China before the missionaries arrived? Was life for the average peasant in these countries any worse than it was in Spain or Germany?

I'm Christian and understand the importance of Jesus's teaching to what we value as a society in the west. No doubt about it. But I also lived in Japan, a country with very little Judeo-Christian influence, and they've turned out pretty well as a country.

In many ways it's as pleasant a place to live as you'll find in the world (it has it's problems too, but so does the USA, and Israel, and Italy, or any other place). How did it get this way?

Eric

Jun 22 2020 at 6:33pm

Any country can decide what contingent rights they will grant and to who. Rome had rights for citizens, but as Callard said, they did not recognize human rights (i.e. rights humans have innately as humans). Human rights imply a moral authority beyond the reach of government decisions.

While people might *learn about* human rights via missionaries (a matter of epistemology, i.e. how do you know), neither missionaries nor governments can make human rights really exist (i.e. a matter of ontology). My claim is that philosophers would be "unable to derive it apart from it being an actual truth about human nature. If it were not true, humans wouldn't have inherent human rights..." If there is no true way that people are meant to behave toward each other, then the idea that there are human rights would be unavoidably false and the idea of moral "progress" would be necessarily empty.

About all of this, I recommend *The Abolition of Man* by Lewis.

Robert Bienenfeld

Jun 22 2020 at 10:20pm

Russ, Agnes:

What a lovely, meandering, meaningful discussion. I studied philosophy in college some 40+ years ago and I am now coaching my granddaughter on how to think about college. Your conversation will help me enormously. Thank you!

Alice Temnick

Jun 23 2020 at 12:04pm

"Reading is a way of socializing with dead people" is a marvelous way of describing how learning to read in college **can** be a transforming experience with a space to talk about ideas and to become inducted into intellectual culture. That this campus experience happens for some, perhaps many, and certainly for Agnes Callard's lucky students is a testament to the continued value of University education, flawed as many believe it to be.

Brian Donohue

Jun 23 2020 at 7:06pm

Russ and Agnes,

Very good conversation. A handful of gems from each of you. Thoroughly enjoyable. Thanks. God bless UChicago.

Mick Marrs

Jun 23 2020 at 8:52pm

Another wonderful and interesting podcast. The discussion on whether a college education was useful or not made me remember John Henry Newman's "Discourses on the Scope and Nature of University Education". In it he asked the question what is a

liberal education. If I can do it justice by paraphrasing. The word liberal comes from the Latin for "free", but free from what? His answer was free from utility or usefulness in that the liberal education stands on its own, it is pursued for no other purpose than itself, for enjoyment, truth, comptemplation. As Agnes said it is independent of sequel, the thing after and expects no compliment.

Cicero wrote about true education, that it belongs to human nature to desire the truth, rejoice in it's possession, and to be disgraced in its absence

It's attributed to Aristotle a saying that those that tend towards a practical education do it because it usually bears fruit, but those that tend towards a liberal education do it for enjoyment.

When I was young I tended towards utilitarianism and studied computer science and economics in university. But now 25 years later I regret not spending a portion of my time learning philosophy and other ways of living. It would have been a better investment in high sight.

Kent Lyon
Jun 23 2020 at 9:51pm
"The great enemy of the Enlightenment was religion, which was viewed as the poison of society and the main barrier to an increase in knowledge and humanity. The antidote to religion was philosophy." Donald Henderson, in "Hume on the Natural History of Philosophical Consciousness" in **The Science of Man in the Scottish Enlightenment: Hume, Reid & Their Contemporaries,** ed. Peter Jones, Edinburgh University Press, 1989.

"For the normative self-understanding of modernity, Christianity has functioned as more than just a precursor or catalyst. Universalistic egalitarianism, from which spring the ideals of freedom and a collective life in solidarity, the autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, the individual morality of conscience, human rights and democracy, is the direct legacy of the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love. This legacy, substantially unchanged, has been the object of a continual critical reappropriation and reinterpretation. Up to this very day there is no alternative to it. And in light of the current challenges of a post-national constellation, we must draw sustenance now, as in the past, from this substance. Everything else is idle postmodern talk."

"Does the free, secularized state exist on the basis of normative assumptions that it itself cannot guarantee?" Ernst-Wolfgang Bockenforde.

"1. Traditions are neither good nor bad, they simply are. 'Objectively speaking,' i.e., independently of participation in a tradition there is not much to choose between humanitarianism and anti-Semitism." Feyerabend in **Science in a Free Society: Chapter** 2.

"Kill all the Christians." Nietschze in **Anti-Christ.**

Things that grew directly out of the Enlightenment were:

The French Revolution, including the Terror. Marxism. Communism. Socialism. The Russian Revolution. Fascism. Nazism. The Gulag in the Soviet Union. The Chinese

Revolution, the Chinese State, Buck v. Bell, Roe v. Wade. 60 million aborted fetuses and counting.

The most influential philosopher of the 20th Century, indeed the most influential person of the 20th Century, according to Alan Bloom, was Martin Heidegger, avid Nazi who never recanted his Nazism. He simply ignored Habermas' challenge to him to recant. Richard Rorty wrote an essay in his collection "Philosophy and Social Hope" that amounted to an exculpation of Heidegger's Nazism, essentially arguing, "What's a little Holocaust among philosophers?"

The idea that philosophy was the origin of the notion of human rights in the Enlightenment is vertigo and whiplash inducing when one looks at the current attempts to destroy the entire structure of what remains of Western Civilization that is raging in the streets of American cities, and around the world

One begins to feel like Candide climbing over the rubble of post earthquake Lisbon being lectured by Professor Pangloss that this is the best of all possible worlds.

Gregg Tavares

Jun 28 2020 at 5:13am

Some of things said in this episode, basically the idea that we need god to exist, suggests that person is living in the bubble of western society and don't realize it. I've lived in Japan for 14yrs. Japan is effectively not religious. At least modern Japan is in many ways a nicer place than many western cultures that are arguably based on religion. Japanese are generally nicer to each other, more honest (less percent of people who will keep the found wallet for example). I'm not trying to say Japan is perfect or Japanese people are perfect I'm just trying to make the generalization that if you live here for a few years you'll likely get the reverse culture shock going back home and seeing people be so "me first, screw everyone else". And, all of this "be nice to others" has absolutely nothing to do with religion.

So, when I hear a western philosopher say things that relate to the influence of belief in God and religion I can't help but feel they're missing a ton because they've never lived in a place where religion isn't such a big shadow on the culture. It's like the psychology experiments where conclusions are drawn based only on, usually white, college students.

Marilyne Tolle

Jun 28 2020 at 12:14pm

The discussion of moral philosophy revolved around Kantian deontology and utilitarianism/consequentialism.

Virtue ethics anyone?! Agnes Callard specialises in Ancient Greek philosophy and Aristotle. Come on!

Charlie

Jun 30 2020 at 4:03pm

One of the things Chalmers speculates on in that paper (if I remember correctly) is that perhaps there isn't progress, because there is no mechanism in science where you

convince everyone with evidence. People will defend positions with ad-hoc alterations to theories, and that perhaps this is the issue.

He doesn't really talk about ideas going off into other fields, although this is an argument I have heard philosophers make before. For Chalmers progress actually does mean progress, in the sense of why do we still argue about the same things for long periods of time, why are proponents sticking to out-dates views, why can we not soundly put to rest views, etc.

Gary B Skolnick

Jul 15 2020 at 6:01pm

What a beautiful thinker and articulate speaker. Kudos to Russ as well for shaping the conversation with thoughtful, informed questions (Plotinus notwithstanding). A real pleasure. Many thanks.

The Ted K Archive

Agnes Callard on Philosophy, Progress, and Wisdom
Jun 22 2020

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