Agnes Callard on Aspiration, Socrates and What does Philosophy Feel Like?

The Not Unreasonable Podcast

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Agnes Callard is associate professor of philosophy at the University of Chicago and her specialties are in ethics and ancient philosophy. Agnes recently wrote a book called Aspiration which tackles an intuitively clear concept, that we aspire to learn new things and to value them.

The thing with philosophy is that it seeks to apply order to our thoughts and this isn't always easy.

Philosophers spend their time sorting through intuitions to find the logical reality behind them. It's abstract stuff and in preparing for this interview I was reminded exactly how my mind recoiled at this in my undergraduate philosophy studies. We discuss this as well!

Agnes is breaking all kinds of new philosophical ground by reconciling this very deep urge in us all with the rest of mainstream philosophy. Agnes is also one of the more charismatic interviewees I've had the pleasure of sitting down with... you just get this feeling that she's struggling with the immensity of the material as much as we are, though of course she is brilliant and finds the answers!

So buckle up, folks, and come get philosophical with me!

David Wright: My guest today is Agnes Callard, Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Chicago. Agnes's specialties are in ancient philosophy and ethics, and she is the author of a recent book called Aspiration: The Agency of Becoming. We'll be covering all that today and more. Agnes, welcome to the show.

Agnes Callard: Thank you.

David Wright: So I want to start with how you've influenced yourself, kind of grounding philosophical thinking and actual experience. So what are the most philosophically formative life experiences you had, and that means the way that the real world Agnes has influenced the philosopher Agnes.

Agnes: Well, interestingly, I think that the further back you go in time, the less it's me influencing me, and the more it's other things in the outside world influencing me. Like, I think I can now make myself more philosophical, but when I was much younger, I think other things had to. So if I, there are a lot of things along the way that I could cite, but I guess, I don't know, something that's jumping out to me is when I was in high school, I read James Joyce's Dubliners, and then I read most of the rest of Joyce. But the thing about Dubliners that really resonated with me was that every story kind of had an epiphany in it. It had this sort of moment of realization in which somebody suddenly has a new understanding of their life, but not just a new understanding, an understanding, maybe for the first time, it's especially striking in the final story, The Dead. And I think you could get this thought out of so many movies, but I didn't, you know, out of It's a Wonderful Life or something like that. So I was just amazed by that, by the idea that you could suddenly have an understanding of your life, that it could like light up for you. And that seemed really desirable to me. And I think that

eventually, it took a while, but eventually philosophy just came to seem like being able to have one of those epiphanies continuously for your whole life.

David Wright: Because you're always learning about more about yourself or about the world or.

Agnes: Because you're always adopting the point of view that somebody has when they have that epiphany, where they're sort of thinking about their own life in a, not in a fully detached way. So not as an anthropologist of themselves or something.

David Wright: Right.

Agnes: But but in a way that isn't just going along with the flow of their everyday experience, right? So if you're a philosopher and say, I don't know, you're thinking about, say I'm teaching the Mino and there's a line in the Mino, Shape is that alone of all existing things that always follows color. It's a definition of shape, right? And so I have the students look around the room and look at the shaped things in the room and just notice the fact that we're Where you see a color boundary, you see a shape boundary. And that is the way the world presents itself to us. Now, that was always true. We always, you know, before they had that experience, color boundaries and shape boundaries would come together, right, in their visual field. But... That's a moment where you notice that it's like it shines a little bit of light into the way in which the visual space is organized for you. And philosophy is just kind of like doing that all the time with everything.

David Wright: Yeah. There's a feeling that I remember having when I studied a bit of philosophy as an undergraduate that I felt again, as I was studying some of your work and related works and stuff, which is this feeling of, fuzziness. And with that, I mean, and you make a mention in the closing remarks in your book where you say, I don't really see this as clearly as I need to to finish this process, right? And that really resonated with me because I was thinking like, that's the feeling I always have when I'm studying philosophy or thinking about philosophy. It just doesn't quite seem clear enough. And sometimes it'll snap into detail and you're good. But for the most part, you're sort of wandering around in this kind of haze. Is that what it feels like to be a philosopher?

Agnes: That's a great point because the epiphany analogy that I was using suggests, well, it suggests a sudden clarity that it would be hard to imagine how you could extend it in time, actually, right? Sure. It suggests something that occupies a moment rather than a period. Right. And I think you're completely right that the trick philosophers have discovered in order to extend it in time is to turn that like looking or something, into inquiry, right? Yeah. Into trying to understand. But in order to try to understand, there has to be something you're trying to understand and that requires that there be something you don't understand, some kind of puzzle, right? So often, any kind of philosophical inquiry will have somewhere at the back of it a kind of dilemma or a problem where sort of, there's no easy way for you to think about the situation because You're inclined to go one way and then that creates one problem. And if you move away from that, it creates another problem. And so you're caught between these

two problems and you have to find a way to think through whatever subject matter you're thinking about without falling into either of those two problems. And that, I think that creates, that's the kind of fuzziness of it. The fuzziness of it is that There's something you're trying to figure out or understand, and you don't, and you know that you don't, and so you can experience the fuzziness.

David Wright: There's a frustration there. I had a conversation interview with Kathy O'Neill, who's a mathematician and author, and she has this phrase, which I feel like... This feeling of mine maybe predates my conversation with her, but she definitely articulated it best, where she said, everybody thinks mathematicians are smart, right? Because this is difficult, well, it's a subject area, which every subject area has its own difficulties, right? But for whatever reason, mathematicians kind of wind up being elevated in some way intellectually, cognitively. And she said, the irony about being a mathematician, and she was a mathematician for a few years, is that you don't feel smart. You feel stupid all the time, because you're always working on these problems that are very hard, and you have to get used to that feeling. And I have the same characteristics as actuaries who are degree mathematicians and taking these exams you have to do for actually there's a lot of them and you spend the entire time just feeling inadequate because you're always trying to learn this material which is such a challenge and you fail the exams and so it's this exercise and feeling kind of pretty dumb. And yet from the outside we're always saying, oh wow, you guys are so smart. It's not what it's like on the inside. And what has interested me in the philosophy kind of comparison is that it's a different kind of feeling of frustration, intellectual frustration, between math and philosophy. For math, it feels more discreet, where it's like, you don't get it, you don't get it, you don't get it, bang, you get it. With philosophy, I feel like there's much more of a feeling of progression in between. It's a little more continuous, where I feel like you sort of can feel yourself coming towards the conclusion before you get there. And math, I feel like it just sort of snaps into place. Do you have any thought on it? You studied science for a little while, right, before philosophy.

Agnes: Yes, and I think in high school, probably my favorite subject was math. So I love math and I love that feature of it. The thing that's amazing about math is that when you get the right answer, you know it's the right answer. And that was one reason why Plato used it often as an example of, well, what we might now call something like a priori knowledge. The thought, he said math is It's like remembering, because when you, say you wanna remember someone's name, right? You're like, what was his name, what was his name? And then when you actually remember it, you know that that's right, right? It's like, oh yeah, it has that oh yeah with it, right? As opposed to just learning some new thing, like here's so-and-so and here's his name, right? And so every mathematical thing comes packaged with that thing that we also get in memory, which is like, oh yeah, that's the right one, and so Plato thought, well yeah, so we should, We should think of learning math as a kind of recollecting of what maybe we knew in a past life. So it has that click, right? That click of recognition. And

Plato thought philosophy could have that too. But it's a lot harder, I think, to get the click. I mean, maybe in some ways it's easier because– You can get close. Well, I think you can, but then, and I think maybe some people just do, maybe this really differs from person to person, but for me, I get it, but then it falls apart again. And so there is this progress, but the progress is–.

David Wright: Two steps forward, one step back.

Agnes: Yeah, it never, and I can always sort of tell, as you noted at the very end of my book, I'm like, yeah, and I haven't really solved any of these problems. And in fact, I've just kind of gotten started. And it always sort of feels like you've just gotten started. So I think that, you know, Plato was pretty optimistic, or at least Socrates was, think both of them actually were optimistic about the possibility of arriving at that clique. Though it's not clear that either of them thought you could do it within your lifetime.

David Wright: Yeah. Well, let's talk about the beginnings of the book. So the book's called aspiration, maybe you can describe a bit about what it is. And I want to come back to the idea of of its origins in your own development, because let's put it this way. When do you think was the first time that you were consciously aspiring? Maybe a previous version of the theory and you're thinking, that's what this is, I'm doing it right now. Can you think of that example? So first describe it and then maybe talk about an early example in your own life.

Agnes: Yeah, okay. So aspiration is the rational process of value acquisition. So it's trying to come to value something that you don't already value. And so if you think about all the things you care about now, and that includes people you care about, it includes, you know, maybe political ideologies that are important to you, religious views, activities that you love, If you go back and think about yourself at age 10 or something, probably very few of those things were you into, right? So there's what we're all about in life, and as adults, those are not the same things that we're all about as children. So the book is just about that process of how do we get from there to here? And one story you could tell is it's just a series of accidents, and so that's why the phrase rational process is important, where I'm making an assertion about that process, namely that you have some role to play in where you end up. In terms of my own, well, so one thing about the book is that it came about, I suppose, this might be unusual 'cause I've never heard anybody else say this about how their book came about. It came about with me trying to say, write about a different topic. And I was giving talks on this different topic and they kept getting refuted by my audiences and I kept, And yet I kept feeling like I was, what I had to say was there's something really right and important.

David Wright: About it.

Agnes: Weakness of will. So this came out of my dissertation, right? And I was giving this theory of weakness of will and people kept pointing out that like there were lots of cases of weakness of will that didn't fit what I was talking about and that there seemed to be cases of what I was talking about that didn't fit that weren't weakness

of will. And people just kept giving me these counterexamples. They were good ones, I'm like, you're right. And then all of a sudden one time I realized that the problem wasn't that it was a bad theory, it was just that it was a theory of something else.

David Wright: Interesting.

Agnes: So it was almost like I kept the theory but shifted the topic. And so that's how it came about. So it didn't come about by me thinking about my own experiences of aspiration. I was thinking about a set of wrong examples. But clearly something in me wanted to think about this problem. I think part of the reason why I didn't think about it is it's not discussed in philosophy very much, the word is basically not used. So I didn't have anything to plug into and philosophy, on the other hand, weakness of will, is widely discussed. And so it was sort of the closest thing to the thing I wanted to talk about and it just took me a really long time to figure out that there was this other thing, it was super widespread, no one had really philosophized about it.

David Wright: Yeah.

Agnes: But as for my own life, yeah, I think it would've been full of examples if I had thought to use them early on. I didn't. I guess the best ones would probably actually have been, and were once I started to think in a more straightforward way, just my students, actually. That is, I'm just constantly interacting with aspirants, paradigmatic cases of aspirants.

David Wright: Yeah, of course.

Agnes: And they often come to me and say, I'm thinking about my life and where it should go and what role philosophy should play in it. And we have these conversations that are basically about aspiration. That would be maybe the best.

David Wright: So you're immersed in aspiration.

Agnes: Exactly.

David Wright: Yeah, it's everywhere all the time.

Agnes: It's everywhere and yet I didn't see it for years.

David Wright: And to a degree, yes we all are, but maybe it's supercharged in universities because it's explicitly aspirational activity going to school.

Agnes: Yes, and also there's something that's very special about universities, so after I read the book, but before it was published, I was able to put in a correction, I already realized a mistake, a big mistake that I made, so in the book I say that in order to aspire towards some end. You have to have some grasp of what end it is you're aspiring towards. So you can't just like have no idea what you're doing and yet still in some sense be aspiring. I made that claim in the book. But then I realized it was wrong. Because I think that's what universities are, is that they are... that the question of whether you can aspire without knowing what you're doing is actually more a question of institutional support than it is a question about individual psychology. And that in some way, that's what a university is. It's like an invention that... maybe not originally for this purpose, but that we have deployed for the purpose of making it possible to throw people into an environment where all they have is like, I wanna become someone, I wanna do something important, and that thought is productive in

a way that it often isn't when you sort of go find yourself. 'Cause when you go find yourself in Europe, there isn't an institutional structure that is in any sense guiding you so that you'll get somewhere, but I think in universities, You are being guided in a very gentle way, and there's so many ends you could pick that even if you don't know where you're going, you can be going somewhere.

David Wright: You know, one of the things that I find interesting about young employees that we hire is a common criticism, and I gave it myself when I first started working, is there's not enough guidance, right? So it's a bit more like a discover yourself in Europe than discover yourself at college kind of thing. And people really liked the guidance of college. And now it's much harder because there isn't an explicit pedagogy, I guess, saying here's all the stuff and how you learn it. And nobody thinks about that because in business you're not focused on education. It's an important component of any successful organization is training its younger staff and older staff, everybody for that matter. But the focus isn't that, the focus is on whatever the social function of the business is, on producing profit, of course, and selling things and helping the customer and all that. And so you kind of have this lack of guidance relative to what people have experienced before, and they really like the guidance. And so everybody wants to feel, and this kind of comes back to an idea in the book, which is, and some of your papers too, which is that we look outside of ourselves for the aspirational inspiration, right? I mean, where do you get the ideas from? It's from the people around you, they're saying you should go to this, and university gives them a lot of that, I guess.

Agnes: Yeah, so I think that guidance is really tricky because, and the older people get, the trickier it is to guide them, right? And so we have the same thing in universities, just you think about grad students, right? Who in some sense always feel like they don't get enough guidance. I remember feeling that as a grad student. I remember feeling like I had this advisor who all he ever did was refute everything I said. and he would just pick it apart. It was absolutely the best thing anyone could have done for me, but it didn't always feel that way. And I remember at one point I actually learned a special trick with him, which is that you could deploy him against himself by just saying something like, There's no possible way to produce an argument for this conclusion, and then he'd refute you and give you an argument. And then of course, next time it would show up in your work and he'd refute it, but you know. at least you made a little progress there. Yeah. So I think the problem is that there's, as with philosophy problems, with guidance, there's sort of two extremes, right? One is just leaving people to their own devices and I don't think they're going to really get anywhere. I mean, maybe there's some geniuses who would, but Very few of us are that sort of genius. Very few geniuses are that sort of genius even, I think. So there's just that, right? And then at the other extreme, there is making other people into yourself. And that's a real danger. People, when you influence someone and you make them and you bring it about that they do things in a similar way to how you do them, it makes you feel really good because it makes you feel like you're living your life with knowledge. Like, wow, look at what a good thing I'm doing if somebody else wants to do the same thing,

right? And so, When I was first learning how to cook, I used to always pretend that I was in a cooking show and giving people advice about cooking. This is when I was first learning how to cook, so I didn't know anything, so I'd be making stuff up. And I would be like, so this is how you do it. As though I knew, but the idea that I was guiding someone made me feel like I knew. So that's very dangerous because we're just motivated to make make ourselves feel like we know by imprinting ourselves on other people. And so that's the tension, right? Is that you want to guide someone, but you want to guide them in a way where they become themselves and not you. And that gets harder as the person gets older, I think.

David Wright: Yeah. there's a social feedback loop, then I guess, right. So saying, you know, you're right, because people around you agree that you're right. And, and that's one of the things that really interests me in back-to-back to the book, where I'll oppose this question, then we can get into it, which is that there's no such thing as negative aspiration. Right. So maybe talk a bit about that, about why that's the case or not the case.

Agnes: Yeah, good. So there's actually two things you might mean by negative aspiration. One is aspiring to cease valuing something. I think that is possible.

David Wright: Okay, right.

Agnes: I give an example of it in the book. But the other is aspiring to value something that isn't in fact valuable, okay? So I think it's possible to value things that aren't valuable. Okay. I think people do that. That is, people make valuational mistakes, right? Yes. However, I don't think it's possible to aspire to have one of those false values. Or more specifically, more carefully, what I think is, if you see that somebody is on the road to acquiring some false value, okay, as we'll call it, valuing something that isn't in fact valuable, then you can't see that person as aspiring. They might see themselves as aspiring insofar as they falsely believe that that thing really is in fact valuable, right, but that aspiration, using the concept of aspiration and applying it to someone, where that someone could be yourself, is predicated on taking the thing that they're moving towards to be, as a matter of fact, valuable. And one way to, that might sound crazy, but one way to sort of see what family of thoughts that belongs to is just to see that, like, on the picture I'm presenting of aspiration, what you're doing when you're aspiring is you're learning, or you're learning the value of something. Yes. Like, say you're learning to become an actuary, and you're learning the value of how to manifest a certain kind of honesty and integrity in relation to certain sorts of predictive practices, right? Yep. So, And the word learning is factive. That is, you can only learn what is in fact there to be learned, just like the word knowledge is factive. So you can, the word say believe is not factive. You can come to believe something even if it isn't true, but you can't come to learn something if it isn't true.

David Wright: Santa Claus.

Agnes: Exactly, right? You can't learn that Santa Claus exists because he doesn't exist. You can come to believe, right?

David Wright: I won't be playing this for my six-year-old.

Agnes: You can't So you can come to value something that isn't valuable, but you can't come to learn that value. And so since I think that aspiration is a learning process, I think there isn't any false aspiration in that sense.

David Wright: And so I think one of the really important ideas there, which I really like, and this is one thing that I thought about a lot, which is your initial idea of what the value is, isn't... You know enough to know that this is worth pursuing, but you don't know what it's going to be like when you get there. You can have the false positive. That's what we're talking about. So I think this is there, but it's not there. But one of the things that surprises me a lot about this is that when you get to the end, you might realize it was never there. And how do you determine or who determines or how is it determined that that value is in fact true or not?

Agnes: There are a couple of different ways to hear that question, right? So one of them is, who determines quite generally which are the real values and which are the false ones? I don't think anyone determines it.

David Wright: And yet everyone does.

Agnes: I think that, well, I think there's a fact of the matter, right? So nobody makes it be the case, it just is the case. But I think, I suspect that isn't the question that you're really asking. I suspect the questions you're asking is sort of like, how can you know at an early stage, right? How can you be sure that this thing is gonna, that you are gonna come to the correct judgment, that it's valuable at the end of the day? How can you be sure, secure that you're in a good direction, moving in a good direction? The answer is you can't, I think. So aspiration is kind of a risky process, but that's exactly why we do rely on so many structures as we're aspiring, right? So we don't just, most of us, the vast majority of us aspire to a way of life and a way of valuing that is in some sense socially sanctioned. And this is part of why the social sanctioning of certain practices is actually so ethically significant. Because, you know, take something like, homosexuality, right? So it's like now a possibility for someone to, in a kind of relatively comfortable way, depending on where they live, right, but say they live around here, aspire to a certain kind of homosexual life, right? But that aspiration was available to very few radicals, and you know, as recently as 50 years ago or something, right? And so the kind of value possibilities that are available to a person are partly a function of their community. It's a sort of function of both their community and sort of like how risk averse they are, right? 'Cause you might be willing to take, more willing to take those chances. But that's why we're looking for a certain kind of feedback because we're worried that we could be wrong and we're correctly worried because we could be wrong.

David Wright: I want to actually, I'm going to come back to kind of the main theme of aspiration, but I want to make sure, one of the things that amazes me about your career so far is that, and this maybe makes sense given that you started out with a different question, but I've kind of been drawn towards this idea of aspiration, because a lot of your work winds up in the book. A lot of your papers, I was like, I saw that before, and it turns out, yep, there was a paper on that. So I want to ask you a few

questions that have touched on some papers, and maybe we can sort of talk through some of the ideas and we can come back to it.

Agnes: Absolutely.

David Wright: Okay, so What is Aristotelian deliberation? And how is it different from what we think it might be or should be?

Agnes: So Aristotelian deliberation is the process where you go from having an end, like say your end is to buy your mother a birthday present, okay? You go from that towards some particular action that you're going to perform that is going to lead to that end.

David Wright: You're working backwards.

Agnes: Exactly.

David Wright: Yeah.

Agnes: So you work backwards from the end to the immediate action. that you can take. And Aristotle thinks of this as analogous to analysis in geometry, so that if you have a problem in geometry, like construct such and such a shape, one thing you can do is start with the shape, assume that it's constructed, and then deconstruct it, and see when you get to the first step that you could have done from the beginning, and then go the other way. And that's what he thinks deliberation is like.

David Wright: You already know the goal.

Agnes: Right, you start with like, okay, my mother has the present.

David Wright: And then you work backwards, how?

Agnes: Do we make that happen? different from, I would say, the thing that it's really different from is how contemporary philosophers think of deliberation, which is that they think of deliberation as, I'm offered a set of options. I'm in a marketplace, say, right? And someone says, you can have this or this or this, and I've gotta choose which one. Yeah. Right? And I'm gonna choose whichever one is best, say, right? But there, nothing has been presupposed about what my goals are. It's almost like, well, look, there's just some abstract idea of the best or utility or pleasure or something that I can measure them in terms of. And I just gotta do the calculation, which of these is the best option for me? And so that theory, that account of deliberation also presupposes a whole bunch of things. It presupposes that I have options. There's more than one thing I can do. It's almost like we're imagining ourselves in a kind of supermarket. In Aristotle's day, there weren't any supermarkets and there were just a lot fewer choices, right? Such that from his point of view, being able to come up with one thing you could do that could achieve your end, that's like really impressive. And he's not too concerned with coming up with the best way. Coming up with any way is good. Actually, there is a line where he says, Hey, if you come up with more than one way, then choose the one that's more efficient or the one that's more noble. He doesn't care much, right? Every modern interpreter coming at that line is like, Wait a minute, wait a minute, how do we decide between the more efficient and the more noble? And Aristotle is just profoundly indifferent to that. He's like, This is an awesome situation.

Whichever way you like, you've got two, that's an embarrassment of riches. Whereas the modern point of view is it's all about comparing your options.

David Wright: You know, what's interesting about that coming to my head. And this is another idea that I was thinking about, which is Aristotle maybe picked up some of the lower hanging fruit philosophically, because he's probably thinking that we can get to a decision is so important. And that we can get to an end is very important. And these days, we kind of figured that part out. Right now we're moving on to maybe things that are harder to figure out, but also maybe a little bit less. impactful, perhaps. Sorting out which one is best is not as good as maybe you get the 80% solution right away. And I'm wondering, this comes back to an idea of what you've written on, which is quite a lot of what we do now is based on the prior work of the ancient philosophers and others. And they might have picked a lot of the lowest hanging fruit. And then we're just still working out higher and higher up in the tree, and it's a little bit less clear where the value is. What do you think about that?

Agnes: I find that to be a question that's very hard to think about. Maybe it's harder for someone to think about that question when they spend so much time directly kind of in the ancient world as I do, right? Yeah, sure. Where it's almost like it doesn't seem as low hanging because trying to figure out exactly what Aristotle thinks about these things is actually super hard, right? Whereas if I were looking at it from enough distance, Like if I think about Comte, say, a philosopher I know pretty well, but who I haven't spent any time trying to really interpret, right? I just kind of read him quickly and I'm like, yeah, I get what he's saying. The way that someone else made about Aristotle, right? Then I'm just like, oh, I see, here are the things that he realized or achieved. But I'm like looking at Aristotle so close. So I guess I think that one way that I have of thinking about this problem is it's not exactly so much a question of low-hanging fruit as it is that a lot of what earlier philosophers do is come up with a kind of conceptual repertoire that gets integrated not just into later philosophy, but into common ordinary thought. So like one example of that with Aristotle is, and this is not an original claim to me, there's a book that was written maybe 10 years ago by Wolfgang Mann called The Discovery of Things, where basically he makes the case that Aristotle discovered things in the sense of like continuing durable physical objects as a way of organizing the world. Whether or not you think, whether not you're gonna willing to attribute that much to Aristotle.

David Wright: 'Cause they were already there.

Agnes: Well.

David Wright: Or maybe there's a popular conception of it?

Agnes: There's a way in which it's like, that's like our question about value, right? It's like, Who determines? And it's like, were they there? I mean, in some sense, Aristotle determined it, right? But of course, in another sense, they were there. But the world isn't already, the organization of the world doesn't come along with the world, right? So the lines dividing things from other things aren't themselves just in the world. We have to draw those lines. We have to carve the world up. And what

you saw in sort of the earliest ancient philosophy, the Ionians, people like Permenides, was a real skepticism about whether the world could be carved up in any way at all that made sense. And Parmenes thought, no. And then you have Plato who thinks, well, it can't, but then there's this other world that can, namely the forms, right? And then Aristotle comes along and is like, no, no, no, this world right here can be carved up and understood in a way that made intelligible and divided into things, right? So one way to sort of appreciate that discovery is that it wasn't obvious in the sense that it was challenged before Aristotle. And so now, think about where we are, right? Obviously there are things, they're all around us, we see them, right? We think we just see them, but we don't realize we're also thinking them. We're thinking them using Aristotle's concept of a substance. And so now, so it's not just low-hanging fruit, right? It's It's that they built a kind of, they had, because they came first, they had a kind of foundational place in our conceptual repertoire. So we're mostly thinking Aristotle's thoughts as we walk around in the world, especially if we're not philosophers.

David Wright: So I wanna, let's keep going through this and we'll come back to, we'll come back to that, I think. next paper, how is the Socratic desire thesis foundational to Socrates thinking? In what ways?

Agnes: So the desire thesis is the thesis that everyone desires the good, right. And I think in some way that is Aristotle's foundational, sorry, Socrates is foundational ethical thought. So Socrates had a set of idiosyncratic views that sort of– Kept coming up. Yeah, they kept coming up and they were sort of the, it was like, this is the sort of thing that you always hear when you talk to Socrates, say his interlocutories.

David Wright: Here he goes again.

Agnes: Here he goes again. So there's a lot of actually, there's a lot of the here he goes again line in a bunch of dialogues. Very strikingly in the lakes, right? So some of those, you know, Socratic principles are, there's no such thing as weakness of will, virtue as knowledge, The good man can't be harmed. Nobody does evil voluntarily. Punishment is education, et cetera, et cetera. So there are these views that when Socrates would save them, people would be like, That's insane, but then he would sort of argue you into them. And I would say that the big sort of lever, sort of fulcrum that he used to argue you into them was the idea that everyone desires the good, because that one is actually relatively palatable and easy, right? 'Cause the thought is, well, what is it that you would want from the bad? Why would you want bad things, right? No one wants bad things, everyone wants good things. And so of course everyone desires the good, and now let's move on. But that quick move that I just did hides a really crucial ambiguity, which is, when you say everyone desires the good, do you mean that everyone desires what they think is good, or what actually is good? And Socrates thought that the answer was both, in fact. That is, people desire what they take to be good and what actually is good, and it's the same thing. And getting his interlocutors to accept that version of the desire thesis, right, where they're committing themselves both to the objective goodness of the thing they desire and their own grasp of that

goodness, That is then more work, and that extra bit of work is then very important for getting you to accept some of the other crazier views.

David Wright: That just reminded me of something I meant to mention a minute ago, which is that how much detail you go into in your work of going to the original Greek, trying to translate it again, think that the way we typically translate this word is a little bit kind of off, and you're able to actually pull more meaning out a lot of the text than has been accepted up to that point, and there's still more to be found, and it's kind of amazing, isn't it? thousands of years later. So what about, so what is Akrasia and is it real? What does Socrates think? What do you think?

Agnes: Okay. Socrates and I don't agree on this particular point. Yeah. So Akrasia is weakness of will. Yeah. Which is to say, when you act against your better judgment. So you're like, I am not gonna eat another cookie. I am not gonna have another drink. but then you do anyway. Or like, I'm gonna go to the gym tomorrow, but then you don't, right? And you wake up in the morning and you're like, I know I should go. I realize that would be the best thing for me. That would be the thing that I should do, but I just don't feel like doing it. I'm not gonna do it. And when you give examples like this to people, everyone immediately recognizes them from their own lives as like, oh yeah, I do that, right? And so then it's really fun to tell them, well, philosophers, at least some philosophers think that's impossible, actually. So the thing you just think you described and experienced, you didn't experience it. In a way, that's actually a really good example of the sort of thing I was talking about a minute ago about Parmenides. It's sort of like... There's a way that the world appears to you or manifests itself to you, and you can describe that. But then there's a question about the coherence of your description. Like, have you said anything at all when you described it that way? And one thing philosophers can show you is that you didn't actually say anything when you said that. You thought you did, right? It sounded good to you. But when we put a kind of conceptual microscope on it, it turns out you said p and not p, you contradicted yourself, and so we're gonna need to find some new way to talk about the thing that you took to be what you just described. And I think that much, that is the idea that the way people ordinarily think about those episodes is conceptually confused and incoherent, there, I think that's correct. I'm with Socrates on that. Now, Socrates wants to go even further and just say, yeah, and really nothing like that can happen, namely, you always do what you believe to be good. You always act on your better judgment. And so, at that point, you can come up with a variety of sort of dismissive explanations as to why people mistakenly take themselves to act against their better judgment. For instance, self-deception would be one, another would be they quickly change their mind, right, at the last minute. Socrates has a much more, Socrates doesn't give either of those actually, he gives a much more complicated and interesting explanation of what's really going on there. Namely that people actually can't tell apart different kinds of mental states so that There's such a thing as believing that it would be good to get out of bed, and then there's such a thing as, say, fantasizing or imagining that it would be good to get out of bed. You can have a thought in a variety

of modes. You can have a thought in a belief mode or, say, a hypothetical mode or a fantasy mode. And Socrates thinks that you think you can, just using introspection, tell apart your thoughts which kind you're having, but you can't. And so you called it a belief, but it wasn't a belief, it was a kind of fantasy of like, the, you know, that I really think that I should get out of bed. That's not even a thought you have. Yeah. So that's the Socratic analysis. I have a different analysis. My analysis is that Akrazia is the product of an interrupted growth process. So, you know, over the course of our lives, we adopt new value frameworks. And we adopt them with different degrees of perfection in terms of how much To what degree have we completed the aspirational process and come to inhabit the new value? And one thing that sort of stands in the way in an almost universal sense of like coming to value anything is just our basic condition as animals, right? Where like what we want is immediate physical pleasure. That's the value system we're born with, right? Biological. Exactly, right? And so like, No matter what, you might value exercise, right? And it's gonna be an aspirational project to come to value it, right? And it's gonna take years of hating it and then sort of coming to see what forms of exercise give you a certain kind, it's not gonna be enough for almost anybody to be like, this is good for me in the abstract, right? You're gonna have to find something that gives you a certain kind of pleasure or delight. But even if you find that thing, the chances are you didn't ever come to inhabit it completely fully. And so there's this kind of vestigial value system that is in you. And when that comes out, that's awkward, my understanding.

David Wright: So is there a way in which it's kind of a value confusion? Is that a way of thinking about it? Where you think that something's more or less valuable than it should be.

Agnes: I, so there are, one place where confusion definitely shows up is in people's self-descriptions of being anocratic. 'Cause I don't think most people do see Akrazia as being what I just said, right? Nor do they see it as being what Socrates just said. And of course, you might ask, and I think you should ask at this point, well, why not just trust what people say, right? But the answer is that it sort of turns out that, And I didn't sort of spell this out a minute ago, but under philosophical analysis, the idea that, look, I fully knew that it was the wrong thing to do, but I intentionally decided not to do it, that's a contradiction. It's a contradiction because intentional action is action for a reason. And when you act for a reason, your reason has to be that the thing that you're doing is good. And if you think that something else is better and you're free to choose, Well, everyone desires the good. So there's no reason you wouldn't choose the better thing, right? And so to say, I intentionally and freely chose the worst thing, it's kind of like saying I desired the bad. It doesn't make sense. So that's the confusion, right? The confusion is in some sense, the ordinary person taking a kind of liberty with a concept like action or intention, that once you analyze it a bit into its components, you see the contradiction. But, so that's one level. That's just the level of the person theorizing about themselves, right? Now there's another level of confusion where, you know, you might say, if I'm right about ocracy and my analysis is correct, then it

entails at least this much confusion. The person who is ocratic hasn't fully inhabited a certain value system. And so they are, to that degree, confused about it. They don't have the knowledge that somebody would have. Had they fully inhabited it?

David Wright: Yes. Yeah.

Agnes: Yeah.

David Wright: So next question. Should I be angry forever? When why? Why would I wanna be angry forever? Why should I be? And then why might that be wrong?

Agnes: So suppose that somebody wronged you in some way. Like they stole money from you, let's say. Then you have a reason to be angry with that person, right? That is, Your anger is rational, right? And the reason is that they stole money from you. That's why you're angry at them. And so now let's think about what it would take for you to no longer have a reason to be angry at them. Well, let's say they gave you back the money. They gave you back money, but it's still true that they stole from you. And that's what you were angry about, that they stole from you. So when they give you the money back, they haven't changed it, they apologize, they haven't changed it. You might say, and I do think about this a little bit in at least some version of the paper I wrote on this, what if they went back in time? Could they solve it that way, at least theoretically, right? Now there's a question actually whether going back in time is theoretically possible. It's an active debate in the philosophy of physics. David Lewis, one great philosopher from whom I took a class on this very topic, thought yes, but most philosophers think no, but anyway, suppose we can go back in time. person goes back in time and decides, like, this one I'm not gonna steal from you, right? Well then I think it's true that you don't have a reason to be angry at them, but you never did have a reason then, right? In that weird world in which time travel happens, yeah. And so the question is, supposing, the real question is like, supposing you do have a real reason to be angry with someone, is there anything they can do to address that reason? And there's at least a prima facie argument that there isn't anything they can do. And it would follow that you would have a reason to be angry with them forever. Now, it doesn't follow from that that you should be angry with them forever because you might have other reasons, right? In fact, you most certainly will have other reasons, and those reasons can easily dwarf your reason to be angry with them. But the point is, and it might even be irrational for you to be angry with them 'cause you have so many reasons not to be angry at them, right? So in a sense, the philosophical puzzle that I'm looking at doesn't make an interestingly counterintuitive practical recommendation that everyone stay angry forever. But I think it's puzzling enough to think that whatever reason you have to be angry with someone, like even when you were a child, that you still in some sense have that reason. And it would still be rational for you to respond to it in some way. And I think that's an unacceptable conclusion. So what I try to do is find some way around it. I think one of the reasons why it's unacceptable is that it makes it impossible to give a really good account of apology and forgiveness because I think that what you are doing when you forgive

someone is to say, I no longer take myself to have any reason at all to be angry with you. And that matters. Exactly.

David Wright: Yeah.

Agnes: And so I think in a way, the puzzle about eternal anger is really a puzzle about how we can account for forgiveness.

David Wright: Yep, and.

Agnes: And you wanna know how? How? So I think that, I think that the sort of illusion that you have a reason to be angry forever is a product of the fact that anger severs you from the person that you're in a relationship with, right? So, and This is gonna be true even if the person is a stranger, but it's easier to explain if the person is close to you. So let's imagine that it's your spouse, right? You're angry at them. And so anger feels like When you're angry at someone, you think about them a lot, and you have these conversations with them in your head, and you're like, you show them how wrong they are.

David Wright: You become obsessed with it.

Agnes: Exactly. And yet you hate them and you don't want them to be in your head. Anger is like being trapped in a room with the last person in the world. You can't get them away from you. And I think what's going on there is you're trying to think about your relationship with this person. which is essentially a two-way street, but the thing they did has broken it. And so your angry thinking is your attempt to do something that requires two people, but only as one person. Just like your attempt to have a conversation that's a two-person thing, but you're just gonna have it on your own. And it never works. The fight you have with the person in your head, you sound so good, and they sound so bad. And then in real life, you have that fight, and they have much better arguments. And so I think that the sort of feeling like there's nothing they could say is the feeling like, well, there's nothing that the image of them that I have in my mind could say to make me forgive that image, right? And so in a sense, there's a kind of myopic or sort of Cartesian bubble quality to the rationality of anger. And that when like the actual interaction with the actual other human being makes a real difference in terms of creating a repair to the relationship that you then become able to think about this problem together with them. And I think once you can think together with them and not in the illusory where you've just imagined them, your sort of rational resources change. And it's, it's no longer the case that the fact that they did that thing is a reason for you to be angry.

David Wright: One framing that that I read about in the paper that I really liked, and this kind of comes back to the aspiration book is interpreting that in terms of valuational progression. Right. And so the the idea of being angry with somebody is that we have the shared value system, which you violated, and now bring me back, show me that we have this value system still in place.

Agnes: Exactly.

David Wright: Yeah.

Agnes: Yeah. Yeah, exactly. Right. So we You know, the way that I understand anger is sort of predicated on an idea that to be in a relationship with someone is to be engaged in like a kind of co-valuing. Two people valuing one thing together, where that's not the same as just two people who both value something, right? Sort of like the difference between walking with someone and just walking next to a stranger. And that What happens with anger is that there's a kind of injury to that covaluation, so that you're now trying to do something by yourself that you can only really do with another person. That's why you need them in your head. And so you've devolved into a kind of doing a two-person activity as a one-person, you've transformed it into a defective one-person version. And the processes of fighting with the person and talking it through with them. and apologizing and all of that is repairing the relationship so that you can do it as a two-person thing again. And then that sort of eliminates the need for anger because that's what anger is, trying to do a two-person thing as a one-person thing.

David Wright: So I wanna change gear just a little bit and we'll come back to that now, which is this comes to the conversation you had with Tyler Cowen. It was great. I mean, I couldn't recommend it highly enough, really enjoyed it. And he has a reading of your book, which you pushed back on. And I'm gonna try and mount to his defense here. So his reading is that actually, this is a piece of a theory of everything, which you have in your head, whether you know it or not. So what he calls a Straussian reading of the book, this covers a lot of ground here. And you think of just the papers you mentioned, where deliberation is an important idea here, the Aristotelian deliberation, which you examined, because that's about looking at a goal and thinking about how you get to that goal. It's a goal-oriented process. Even though you might not see it as clearly as you want to, the aspirational element, aspirational deliberation is Aristotelian, I think. The desire thesis, I think, is important there because you have this you're desiring the good. And that's another way of putting the value system, right. And so this goal oriented kind of process, again, where we're looking, there's a set of values that are out there, and they're all good. And that's what values are. And if they're not values, and they're not good, you know, kind of an equality there. So the angry forever, there's evaluational progress there, right? So you're either moving away from somebody becoming angry with them, moving towards them, and you're creating a deeper relationship. And so you push back, because you said, this is value of change, a theory of change. And this doesn't describe states. So where I would then say, where I think Tyler was onto something there is that I don't think there's such a thing as state. I think that we're always changing. We're always nudging little bits here and there towards goals. Every interaction we have with somebody else is either progressing a value system deeper or farther away. And every act we take in the world, I think, is actually moving towards something or away from something. And I think the human experience is necessarily one, at least in its, in its most fulfilling version, where you're working towards goals. So this is actually a

theory of everything, because that is everything, everything is a progression towards something. What do you think about that?

Agnes: Good. So I have sort of two kinds of responses to that. One is sort of meta and methodological, and the other is more first order. So maybe the meta methodological one is just to say, like, even if I were to grant all of that, The book is not even really a theory of aspiration. There's so much left to do. There's nothing in the book about love.

David Wright: It is self-aspirational.

Agnes: Yeah, exactly. And so if you think about it, then, if you think about the book as being itself-aspirational and as having left out, that is, the methodology that I use in the book is to sort of break a whole bunch of stuff in philosophy, to say, here's a whole bunch of distinctions that are super useful that we've been using, internal external reasons, and then none of them work to describe this phenomenon, so let me just create a mess. And then I hope someone else is gonna clean it up and produce some new, 'cause it's not like we can live without them, right? And so I haven't done the cleanup work. And so then, there's a question, what point of view do you adopt towards somebody who's done what I did, right? And you could adopt a sort of optimistic perspective where you're like, yeah, but we can sort of project forward and see that, in a sense, it implies a view about everything. And I prefer, Like, as an aspirant myself, I guess, I prefer the more negative approach of like, what is this? It's nothing, because that's what's gonna get me to produce the next thing, right? It's like if you think it's already there, that induces a kind of complacency of like, ah, nothing more even really needs to be done, whereas my approach is like, so much more needs to be done. 'Cause that's what's gonna get me to do it. So it's almost like there's a kind of gestalt question where part of what goes into how you're gonna view that is the place that's gonna play in your future, you know, deliberations of what to write. So that's the sort of methodological question. But now the sort of first order substantive question of like, are there states, right? So there's an issue that I don't come down on in the book. It's probably the most important issue that I don't come down on. And I would say it's like the single greatest way in which ancient philosophy influences that book is making me realize that there's a debate that I don't know how to resolve. And so I have to steer clear of suggesting a solution one way or the other. But the debate is about whether aspiration is infinite or not, and it's a debate between Plato and Aristotle. And Plato thought, yes. So Plato thought, you should spend your whole life trying to improve yourself, in the sense of trying to more fully acquire the values that are in some sense ill-suited to your mortally embodied soul, and so never gonna have them in any kind of perfect way, you'll always be subject to something like akrazia, right, even if we don't call it that, and so you should just try to perfect yourself. That's the Platonic view. Aspiration is infinite. Aristotle's view and the ultimate underlying disagreement here is whether or not the soul is mortal, whether it dies. So in Plato's view, it doesn't die. So, you know, it'll be reincarnated, those in the afterlife, you just keep trying. Okay, maybe forever. Aristotle thinks the soul's mortal. So when you die,

you're dead, that's it. And so you've gotta achieve something in your life. And that achievement can't just be making yourself as good as possible. There's gotta be some amount of making yourself into something where at that point it's good enough. And now your job is not to have yourself as a project anymore, but to have outside projects where you do things like help other people become good and write constitutions for cities, for new cities. That's like ourselves, prime example of a great thing you can do for the world, it's like create a new city, write a really good constitution, write a really good set of laws. And when you're doing that, you're not aspiring. What you're doing is putting into action knowledge that you have. And I think it was really important to Aristotle to think that you can have knowledge. Knowledge isn't just something you're always trying to get. Knowledge is a state of your soul, an ordered state of your soul. And there'd be no point to spending your whole life trying to get it if you could never get it. And again, whether or not there seems like a point, actually, it really matters whether you think the soul's mortal or not. So I think that really is the fundamental disagreement. Now, what do I think? That is, what do I think about whether aspiration is finite or infinite, whether it is self-indulgent to spend your whole life perfecting yourself? I really go back and forth on this one, and I have a really hard time. I'm very much pulled by both sets of intuitions, I have to say, and so I try not to come down on that question. And, but, so now the question is, whether or not my book is really a theory of everything actually depends on how you answer this question. Because if you answer it, so maybe Tyler is a Platonist, right? And maybe that's like my Straussian reading, his Straussian reading of my book, is that he's just taking a Platonic framework for granted. And the Platonic framework is the one in which, in the human realm, all there ever is is change. Because in this world, there is nothing stable. Whatever is stable has to happen in another world. The Aristotelian framework is more humanist, and it says, no, there is something stable in this world to go for, and so there are states, and that's what his whole theory of ethics is about, how there are states of character, they can be acquired, and once you have them, you're not still trying to get them, and the period of education is a period up to age, maybe 30 or 40, and then you're done with education, and now it's time to do things.

David Wright: So let me give you maestrosian reading here.

Agnes: Okay.

David Wright: And, and that's that. And I'm sure you're not going to believe this, but but it's my reading of your book. So we'll see what you think. Everybody got Socrates wrong, starting with Plato. And so that there, it is not about the goal, actually. So the goal is there to get us to work to work, right. But it's the work that is actually the the goal in some kind of weird way, right? So you think about Socrates method, where he's, you know, I believe, I believe Socrates, which is to say that I think he's actually trying to figure it out in conversations, right? I don't think he, when you read the books, you sort of get this feeling that he hadn't the answer all along, right? You know, there's always kind of, Socrates is, it isn't always the case, but he's the hero who conquers the problem and he wins and carries the day, right? But I want to

believe anyway in a Socrates that was there really to try and figure it out with other people and say, let's all get together and work this problem out, right? And I think Plato's, Plato almost writes Socrates as a little bit too superpowered than maybe he really was, because Plato wants it to be a direction towards a correct answer at the end, and bang, just draw a line under that one, move on to the next book, write the next dialogue. But Socrates never actually wrote anything down, and I think the reason why he didn't write anything down is because he probably never felt like it was complete. And I think that he was probably okay with that as a result, because he could have rewritten history, Socrates, perhaps, and said, actually, I had all the answers all along. And Plato kind of did it that way, right? So he rewrote it, or he wrote it, he wrote it. And so he's the authority. We're kind of trying to see through Plato to Socrates. But I think he created more certainty than Socrates would have felt because Socrates has this underlying kind of feeling of a social construction of all these ideas. And Aristotle just took that and ran with it. And on we go, the philosophers of the day, we're trying to find the right answer. But actually, and this is where they asked, this is where I'm okay. Because I'm thinking, well, it's the process of cleaning it up and breaking it and cleaning it up. That's actually what we're doing. And we should be okay with that in some kind of weird way. What do you think?

Agnes: So there's a lot in what you say that I agree with. I very much tend to, one person once said to me something like, for you, Plato is like Socrates is ugly clothing. You gotta take off to get to the real Socrates. I think that's very much how I read the dialogues. I disagree that the way Plato presents Socrates is like that the dialogues end with some answer, because they don't. I mean, most of them, you know, most of the dialogues that are considered the most Socratic end in confusion and–.

David Wright: What about the ones that are most platonic?

Agnes: Well– Not the form of philosophical– They still end in weird ways. You know, the Theaetetus, the Republic, the Sophist, I mean, so, but, you know, in any case, We have the Socratic ones, and so we do have Plato presenting Socrates as being aporetic. That is, Plato didn't merely present Socrates as just having a bunch of views. But I mean, even in the Platonic ones, you might, arguably in the Platonic ones, a view emerges, but it isn't something where it's like always asserted by Socrates. So, the Parmenides, I mean, that would be a great example. Socrates is just totally lost. So, But on the other hand, I do think that Socrates is genuinely looking for answers to these questions, and that's what he's doing in the dialogues, and he often says it. He's like, actually, you think I'm trying to beat you or whatever, but actually I'm just trying to look for an answer to this question. In many of the conversations, this becomes an explicit topic in the Protagoras and the Gorgias. And it's a really interesting question why it is that, you know, doing that so much shows up for people as being something else, right? Socrates understood that he was going to be misinterpreted and he says that in the dialogues and he's like, You're gonna think I'm being ironic. He says that, he uses the word ironic in Greek, right? And so the problem of interpreting Socrates is already a problem even within the dialogues and Plato presents us that problem.

And, you know, as for like the process is the goal, see, I guess the thing, That's a not unpopular interpretation of Socrates, that's the correct dialogues. The thing that worries me about it is like how pleasing of a story that is to tell yourself. And how often Socrates seems to not be willing to allow himself that. I think he thinks that the thing that he's doing, which is looking for answers and not finding any, is the only possible worthwhile way to spend your life, okay? So does he think it's valuable? Yes. Does he think that it's enough? No, I think. That is, the idea, it's like, there's a real temptation to make a certain inference from it's valuable and it's the only kind of meaningful human life to it's enough because it's gotta be enough then, right? I mean, this has gotta be like pretty good, it's gotta be pretty awesome if it's the best possibility. And I think that Socrates, one of the ways in which Socrates challenges us is to say, this is all we can do and it's not very good, because what you actually want is knowledge. And you can't have it in this life, says Socrates, right? And of course, one sort of Straussian reading of that is like, no, really, you don't need to worry about the afterlife, this is the valuable thing, right? But just think about how that reading of it de-fangs the point and makes it easy and acceptable and kind of– Meaningless. Yeah, and not only meaningless, but it really allows you to flatter yourself in a certain way, right? In the sense that it allows you to be like, hey, I wrote this book, and there's a whole bunch of stuff I didn't explain, but it's fine. I'm doing the great thing, and this is awesome. But what's gonna move me forward? What's gonna move me forward is the thought that it's not awesome, and this is not good enough, and we need to answer these questions, and merely being engaged in the activity. I mean, it's kind of a paradox, right? Because the thing I was describing to you at the very beginning was like, well, I want this light to be shining in my life. It's kind of an epiphanic light. And you were saying, but it's kind of this, it's partly there's this confusion. And it's like the thing that allows you to extend it in time is the fact that there's this confusion and the fact that there's a direction and you're moving through it and you're inquiring. None of that would make any sense if there weren't something you were after. And I don't think the idea that you're after something is a lie you tell yourself. I think you have to really be after it.

David Wright: So let me push back again, because think of what aspirations... teaches me is that you don't necessarily need to know what the goal is. I mean, you kind of do, right? Think about the example of your own career, right? So this book came up, but I mean, you aren't looking for it. You're looking for something else, and then suddenly this thing discovered. And so it's almost like those epiphanic moments, those eureka moments, the accumulation of knowledge, that's kind of like a byproduct that keeps you going, that you love, and who knows where motivation comes from, right? I mean, why do we work so hard, all that kind of stuff. But for some reason, we love it. We also love the good parts of it too, right? But the process does seem to create a lot of value for the world. One of the things that in reading Tyler's book, Sovereign Attachments, I thought that was so neat, was he's integrating directly this idea of economic growth into philosophy. I don't know how familiar you are with the

intellectual side of the venture capital business in Silicon Valley and all that, but one of the amazing things about what their whole strategy is, is that we don't have a strong idea here for what's gonna work. So we're gonna place a lot of bets on all these little companies. Majority of them are going to fail, spectacularly. They're going to lose all the money. But once in a while, one of them is going to hit on something that's almost impossible to tell in advance. And that's what efficient markets teach us, is you don't know which one's going to work. So you have to let it just emerge. on its own. And there's a goal there, kind of implicit, there's like two ways to think about the goal. One is, the goal here is to make money, the goal is progress, the goal is knowledge, the goal is some good that nobody can dispute, but the pursuit of that goal is almost mindless, or it's almost like, I don't know what the right word is, maybe you can help me with that, but I don't know how it's gonna happen, I'm just kind of trusting that it's gonna happen, and I've seen it a few enough times that I believe it's gonna work, but that's not really why I'm doing this, I'm just kind of doing it, and I love it. And I love the good parts, and that keeps me going. But I feel like that that's a much more accurate description of how I lead my own life, and how I observe a lot of other people do it too. We like the idea of goals, we tell stories about goals, and they are important to a degree, but that's not what's really going on. What's really going on is something else, something a little bit messier, a little bit harder to see, but just as powerful in the generation of insight and knowledge and wealth in society.

Agnes: I mean, I guess one question about, say that process that you described of placing a bunch of bets, and then we don't know what's gonna happen, but we have, say, some reason to believe that one of them will work out. One question to ask is like, could that fit the paradigm that I've described about a learning process? Are you learning anything when you're doing that? Now, you can certainly discover things over the course of– Yes, discovery is a better word for it. You discover that this one was the good one, right? But When you're trying to say, come to appreciate, say, classical music, come to see what people see in it, like, what is that thing? I think there's something there, but I don't know what it is and I'm trying to get myself to see it. It's important that in that process, you're changing, right? The very idea of prediction is sort of, there's a kind of way in which you're holding yourself fixed and you're letting the world vary it up and your description of venture capitalism is a description of that sort of activity, which I think can have value, I have no objection to it. But it isn't aspirational. And not all ways of having new things come into being are aspirational. Sure. One way to have new things come into being is just doing a bunch of random stuff and some of it will work out, right? And you can do that in a more informed way where you have some reason to believe, some more reason to believe that one of them will work out. What's really interesting is to think about a kind of continuum between that kind of random activity on the one hand and something like a university on the other hand, right? Because I think of a university as kind of a structure that makes possible aspiration, that makes aspiration possible. Where in some sense, it fits what you just described at venture capital, right? Where you're like, we're gonna get

a bunch of people in here, we don't know what they're gonna do, but they're gonna do something great, right? Yes. But there, there is a kind of structure present that you have some reason to believe is gonna do some work in guiding them towards the things that are valuable. You have a history department and you have– The.

David Wright: Structure's pretty rigid, isn't it? In universities, you have departments, you have hierarchy, you have established status markers.

Agnes: I mean, I guess it depends what you're comparing it to, in some ways, I teach classes on whatever I want. Nobody ever tells me what to teach on. Next quarter, I'm teaching James Joyce and Elena Ferrante, and... in a class that I made-up and I'm a philosopher. So there's a lot of ways in which universities are not rigid that are maybe not as obvious, but there are some ways in which it is. Also, students mostly just take the classes that they want. They have to fulfill a major and they have some basic requirements. In some universities, they have those. They have a lot of choice as to what kinds of classes they take. And then they have a lot of choices to whether they wanna be in the drama club or whether they wanna do sports. There are all these sort of institutional things that are available to them, but they don't have to do, right? And so that's like, you could, you know, there is an institutional structure there, but it actually makes possible a certain kind of freedom, I think. So the question is, so I think that structure is a structure where you can sort of say that what you're doing is, in some sense, guiding people towards this kind of value where you hope that some or many of them are going to become great. I think that like betting on people is just a very different approach to that. And even in Silicon Valley, there's, you know, some amount of that university structure is starting to be incorporated in the form of guidance and even institutionalized guidance, right? And in a way, what you can see happening there is in some sense, Silicon Valley is just aspiring to become a kind of university, right, to incorporate the best aspects of it. And we'll see whether it works or not, right? The university is a very old institution that we've kind of been handing down to ourselves for a thousand years or so. I mean, arguably it dates back to Plato's Academy, okay? But certainly to the medieval German universities.

David Wright: Yeah, and I think that there is an element of knowledge acquisition in a lot of venture capital. And this is something that Tyler and I discussed a little bit, and something that I believe is the case. They're not just smart people. They're smart people who think very deeply and are using the experiences of what works to learn more about kind of the underlying reality of the world or whatever it is, the current state of the economic process, which itself is so complex, it's so hard to understand. And one theory of why a venture capital firm exists is is, well, this is kind of a new conception of it. It used to be just parceling out cash, right? But the way that particularly one firm, Andrusine Horowitz, manages it, and others do now too, is we're here to help these entrepreneurs in a much more explicit way and use the network. And we, not that firms didn't do this before, of course, but this seems so much more prominent now as a way of using this as knowledge distribution. So we've learned these lessons from these other places, and we are learning something about the way the world works, and

here's the knowledge and you can go work with it. and figure it out. So anyway, I want to move on to one other idea here, which is the idea of optimism. And I see aspiration, and this is another kind of theme where it linked me to venture capital. And so that's kind of jumping off point here is that it's fundamentally optimistic, right? I think, or it could be interpreted that way. So I wonder if you could talk to me a bit about how you think of it as optimistic and another another idea here is whether it is whether kind of whether philosophy itself generally is optimistic or not deep. What do you think?

Agnes: Um, I guess I think of optimism and pessimism more as features of people, rather than features of institutions, or concepts or activities. So I sort of agree that aspirations optimistic, but I guess my thought was that aspirants are.

David Wright: Yeah, okay. Yeah.

Agnes: And, um, and I think that, I I guess what I would say is it's a kind of tempered optimism, right? Because as an aspirant, you're constantly aware of the way in which you are defective. And that awareness is crucial to your development. So, but you know, that is the flip side of how good you could become, right? And the idea that, the idea of aspiration is the idea that how good you could become when weighed in the balance with how bad you are, it outweighs it. So you're gonna move in that direction, right? And that's optimistic. Is philosophy optimistic? I found that strangely, a lot of philosophers are really pessimistic. And I'm not sure why. I think that there could be a lot of different reasons. So one of them could be A lot of philosophers now, especially, you know, people who have tenure track jobs, people like me, just seen a lot of students, great students, not get jobs. That's not to make you pessimistic, right? Yeah. And then it's also like, you know, maybe you start out in philosophy thinking that you're really gonna get somewhere. And the more philosophy you do, like, I don't know, the more I feel like even in my intro courses, I'm just like, wow, you know, I thought I understood the Mino, I've taught it 50 times. And so there's this, I think that can be quite difficult as you get older to live with. So here's something, here's like a demographic fact that I found about people who work in ancient philosophy. So As you were noting a little while ago, part of what I do is interpret passages, and I'll read it in Greek and say, well, here's the translation, but actually, here's a slightly different translation that's maybe better, more accurate. And then there's not just translation issues, there's text issues. For a lot of these texts, especially, say, Aristol's De Anima, book three, our manuscript tradition is terrible. So it's like, we don't know what it says, and people argue about what the Greek says, not just how we translate it, okay. So here's something I've found that I find super interesting, which is that the older people get, the more dogmatic they become about those issues, about issues of, you know, what the text, textual criticism as it's called, what that text actually says, but then even more so, like how we interpret it. And when there are like multiple readings of a passage, right, I'll be like, oh, here's another reading. And like, if somebody is like, over the age of 60, the chances that they're like, no, there's only one reading, this is how you have to read it, it's super high. And I think it's partly that they're like, look, I'm approaching death, and at the very least, I have to know what Plato's

Republic says, you know what I mean? It's like, I can't keep going, I can't just die and admit as I'm dying that I don't know what these books– The very basics of what is the first line of the Republic mean or something, I went down to the parades. So I think that that could explain something like pessimism is this feeling that as you get older as a philosopher, the need to leave things open just becomes harder and harder. And Socrates actually encounters this in the Gorgias because Callicles says to him, this philosophy thing you do is really appealing in young people. It's kind of like a lisp, which is kind of attractive in a young person, but when you see an old person doing it, it's kind of pathetic and stupid, move on with your life, make some progress, right? And like, if you're a philosopher, you haven't done that you're still lisping at the age of 60, you know, and that can seem sort of pathetic to you, I guess.

David Wright: We're out of time. But I want to ask one more question, which is your your own journey really intrigues me in that when you refuted so, so convincingly, right on your initial version of the aspiration, I idea, you kept going. Not everybody would, right? Or you might say, okay, that didn't work, I'm gonna try something else. And so there's a persistence about your efforts there, which I think ultimately is and will mark the success, 'cause that's kind of one of the more interesting and important qualities in any person. Where does that come from? Do you recognize that as something that maybe you do well, and what do you think about it?

Agnes: I don't think it's a personality trait. I think it's that at that time I was working in contemporary philosophy, not ancient, you know, the basis of my book. But I was reading a lot of ancient and I've just been really persuaded that refuting someone is the best thing you can do to them. It's the greatest favor that one person can do to another. And I mean simpliciter, not just as philosophers. And so that gave me a kind of perspective on it, where I'm just like, wow, these people are really doing me this amazing favor, over and over again. This happens to me all the time. It happens to me with every talk that I give, but I'm looking for it. I'm listening for it. I'm hunting for the refuting point. I'm not trying to avoid it. I'm like, what's the best version of this point that this person just made that I can even turn it into? If I can respond to it, is there a version of it I can't respond to? I'm always looking for that. I want to help them refute me, because I want to help them do me this favor. And I think that I just have been persuaded by Socrates, Socrates says that in the Gorgias, okay? Refuting someone is the greatest favor, you can do them. And he's like, yeah, I'm always doing people these favors, and I wish someone would do them to me, but nobody's ever willing to, right? And so, I really appreciate that, that they're doing that. I sincerely appreciate it. And I think that, I don't know, I think maybe that's the best thing I've gotten out of Plato, is the ability to sincerely appreciate that, and so then it makes me kind of cheerful. And it doesn't make me feel bad about myself or feel like I need to give up because the feeling like you would need to give up is the feeling like you need to avoid having that happen to you again, right? Shift ground so it doesn't happen or say something else, but I'm not trying to avoid it 'cause I'm actually trying to make it happen.

David Wright: Do you think it's unusual? So when you refute other people, do you find that they have a similar response or not?

Agnes: No, usually not, though I'm hoping, I'm hoping to make it more usual.

David Wright: How?

Agnes: By teaching this to my students. And I think my students do respond in this way.

David Wright: Saying this is a good thing. Socrates is right.

Agnes: Yes. Because I often say it to them, my grad students, this thing that my teacher did to me, I mean, that's another big part of it. I had this teacher who just refuted me. And even when it didn't feel good, I could kind of see that it was good. So I do that. But not only do I do it, but I do something he didn't do, which is to be like, and right now I'm doing you a favor, let me explain why. And then they'll sort of try to avoid. And I'm like, no, no, no, don't do this thing where you're trying to avoid seeing my point. Actually just try to see it, make it worse. Try that approach or something. And I think it's kind of liberating when you try it, you realize that it's almost like you become empowered again somehow. So So I don't know, maybe if like, if I hope to have a legacy, that would be an awesome one. Yeah. And I do think that some people by temperament are such that being refuted doesn't bother them very much, actually.

David Wright: Yep.

Agnes: But that's not true of me. It's not, for me, it's not a fact about my temperament. It's more a fact about like a. commitment to a certain ideal in the light of which I'm trying to shape myself. And so I think that that's available to people, even who don't have the temperament.

David Wright: Is there an etiquette of reputation, is it sort of implicit there? Maybe that's something you need, the handbook you need to write.

Agnes: Oh my God, there's such a huge, this is a big issue in philosophy. Because for a long time, like say, in my early years in grad school, but much more so before that, There was a very bad culture of how refutation was.

David Wright: People get a bit nasty.

Agnes: Yeah, exactly. They get nasty, they pick on particular kinds of people. They try to refute them in a way that makes them look maximally stupid. Sure. And it's so easy to turn a refutation into an attack on a person, right? And so I think there really is an art of trying to refute people where like what you make, and part of the problem with with turning refutation into an attack on the person, I think the main problem is not that it hurts people's feelings, but that it's a bad way of refuting them because you're usually not going to be centering on their main point. You're just going to be finding the point where you make them look stupid. But you should be finding the point where they're most wrong.

David Wright: It's not about the point, it's about you.

Agnes: Yeah, or about them. But like, You gotta get to the heart of what they're saying and show that's wrong. You gotta bring down the whole edifice. You can't be

satisfied to be like, oh, you got this little fact about Socrates wrong or something. That might be more embarrassing. So yeah, I think that there's a lot of work to be done. There's a lot more consciousness in philosophy that we have to refute politely, but I think it's for the wrong reason. Namely, it's so that we can be... more civil to one another, which is a good goal. It's not that that's a bad goal, but like there are intra-refutational reasons why we shouldn't be that way.

David Wright: Yeah, makes reputation better.

Agnes: Exactly.

David Wright: My guest today is Agnes Callard. Agnes, thank you very much for joining me.

Agnes: Thank you so much. It was really fun.

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David's twitter: @davecwright. Agnes's twitter: @AgnesCallard