The fear of death and whether philosophy helps you with it

Agnes Callard

2021-12-13

Contents

Agnes Callard is one of the most influent philosophers of her generation and someone who can do what is rare: bridge the gap between philosophical rigour and the practical quests of living, while using an approachable and captivating language.

This talk is part of the three conferences Agnes Callard gave while in Lisbon in December 2021.

Recorded at Brotéria on December 13th 2021.

Agnes Callard é uma das filósofas mais influentes da sua geração e alguém que consegue fazer o que muitas vezes é difícil: juntar o rigor filosófico às questões práticas da vida, numa linguagem acessível e cativante.

Esta conversa faz parte das três conferências dadas por Agnes Callard em Lisboa, em dezembro de 2021.

Gravada na Brotéria no dia 13 de dezembro de 2021.

`https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NHi777d0jAc`

Introduction

Host: I want to welcome you all to Bruteria.

It's a delight to have Agnes here.

I was telling Agnes that I started greeting her a while ago because of who's not here, and then we had this opportunity because Agnes tweeted that she was going to be in Portugal in December and asked if any institutions wanted to host a talk by her, and so Joanna forwarded me the tweet and I said, yeah, well, absolutely, we know we want to have a talk by Agnes, and we're very grateful that Agnes was so easy-going with all of this since the beginning.

It's great to have alongside Bruteria here with Miguel Tamen and also with Professor Michael Baum, who's not here, also with associated with this project, and FLAD, the Ulus-American Development Foundation, who's the sponsor for this series of talks.

Agnes, I don't want to take any longer because I know Agnes sent me the text for me to print it, and I couldn't help to take a look at it, and it's worth it.

So with no further ado, we'll go straight to you.

We're very grateful that you're here.

Thank you.

Agnes: Thank you so much for coming.

It's a great honor for me to be here.

I wrote on the top of my sheet here, slow down.

But I only wrote it on the first page, not on every page.

So I would ask you, I have a tendency to speak too fast.

That's bad enough.

When I'm speaking to native speakers, it's worse when I'm not speaking to native speakers of English.

So if you just hear me going too fast, just raise your hand.

I will know that all you're saying is, Slow down.

I won't call on you.

So you'll be doing me a favor and everybody else a favor.

This is a long talk.

Lecture begins

Agnes: Early in the pandemic, I had a conversation with my friend Steve, online in public, about premature death.

Before I had the chance to talk to him again, he died prematurely.

This is going to sound absurd, but I felt guilty for feeling sad.

I felt sadder than I had a right to be.

I'm not his relative or even his colleague.

We didn't go way back.

with a connection from youth or grad school.

We weren't part of some tight-knit circle of friends.

We didn't share much about our personal or emotional lives.

The only thing we ever did together was talk philosophy.

I first met Steve at a conference, but most of our subsequent interactions were in coffee shops.

He taught on the north side of Chicago, in Evanston, and I teach on the south side, down in Hyde Park, so we'd get together in between, in downtown, a few times a year, we would swap papers, and discuss.

The first time, we spent all three hours on my paper.

After that, I'd insist that we start with Steve's paper and then move to mine.

I'd give him comments, he'd give me comments.

That was it.

That was our whole relationship.

That's what I'm referring to when I talk about him as my friend.

He was someone I exchanged comments with periodically.

So if I think about it in general terms, it's not hard to come up with reasons to be sad about Steve's death.

I'm sad about missing out on the philosophy that he's never gonna get to write and that I'll never get to read and the conversations I'll never have with him.

I'm sad on behalf of other people, his wife, his young daughter, his brothers and parents, his close friends, and everyone who lacked the good fortune of meeting him all together and who might have if he'd lived longer. And of course, there's reason to be sad for him that he'd miss out on all those experiences of family and friendship, of philosophizing and meeting new people.

Those are all good reasons, but when I consider all of them together, they don't add up, either in quantity or quality, to the pain I feel in my heart when I think about Steve's death.

So let me tell you a little about Steve.

Unlike me, Steve was not a flashy person.

He didn't dress weird.

He didn't use rhetorical flourishes.

He didn't call attention to himself or reflexively make himself the center of every conversation.

He was soft-spoken, gentle, and in my experience, always calm.

On casual inspection, there was not much that was unusual about him.

If you met him, you'd notice that he was tall and redheaded.

Maybe if you were especially observant, you'd notice that he gave off an air of being content, of being happy with his lot in life.

That's about it.

But when you started to talk to him about philosophy, there was this shock.

Imagine knocking on the door of an ordinary-looking house. And then an ordinary-looking person lets you in, but when you cross the threshold, instead of the standard interior you were expecting, you find yourself in a wild and beautiful garden, immense, with paths leading in every direction.

So if you imagine that you're close, but that image isn't quite right, it's even weirder than that.

The elements of that story, the knock at the door, the ordinary facade, the inner garden, that's good, but somehow it inverts the truth.

It leaves out something about Steve's generosity.

I gestured at it a minute ago when I mentioned that the first time we swapped papers, we spent the whole time on my paper.

That was what Steve was like.

He'd happily spend the whole time talking about your ideas.

Not in order to be nice, but because he genuinely found them fascinating.

Or rather, he made them fascinating.

So here's a better image.

You're sitting at home, looking at the same boring standard living room furniture you stared at a million times before, and there's a knock at the door.

It's an ordinary-looking person, no one special.

You let him in.

But the minute he steps into your house, it's transformed, and you realize that what had seemed for all those years like a dull living room was actually a beautiful garden, immense, with paths leading in every direction, calling out for the two of you to explore.

In a way that's hard to describe or explain, Steve took your ideas more seriously than you did.

You'd toss out a thought casually.

Here's a suggestion.

It's a point I'm in the habit of making sometimes.

No big deal.

It's probably wrong.

Whatever. And he would respond as if to say, No, wait.

This could be real.

This could actually be something.

So you don't get much sympathy for complaining about being a thinker.

It's a cushy life.

But in fact, we thinkers have it kind of hard.

Don't sing the praises of the life of the mind until you've sat for a decade in our armchairs.

Thinking is so floppy, ideas are so vaporous and protean, it's easy to get the impression that you're not really doing anything.

It's easy to become exasperated with yourself for turning over the same old stale concepts and pedanting distinctions over and over again.

As a thinker, you're always going around making points.

My point is, all I'm trying to say is, the point of this argument is, and the points are never pointy enough, their edges feel blunted almost as soon as you come up with them.

Who cares, really? The magic of Steve was that his questions, his observations, his calm, cheerful insistence on staying on a topic when you thought you'd exhausted it, the sort of insistence that from anyone else would come across as stubborn, but he was so affably persuasive, so gentle in his resoluteness, that you didn't feel dragged along.

You went along with it gladly.

His very presence had the effect of solidifying ideas and giving them substance.

He made the nothing and nowhere dream world of the life of the mind into what felt like a real place you could actually be in.

It's not that you suddenly had all the answers, or any of the answers really, but you felt you could find them.

He filled you with energy and courage and seriousness, with the spirit of, we are in a place designed to be explored.

Knowledge is ours for the taking.

When I think of Steve, I think of that place, and I think about what it was like.

Should I say was or is? On the one hand, it wasn't mine.

It was ours, and he's gone.

On the other hand, a whole world can't just poof out of existence like that, can it? Some things are not the sorts of things that can disappear.

Sorry, the number four is gone.

We don't have it anymore.

So I'm somehow thinking of it as being there and as not being there at the same time.

That is what I'm sad about.

How a mind, with all the space that only it could create, could be the thing we call dead.

In fact, the word sad doesn't really cut it.

The thought feels broken, and my heart breaks trying to think it.

That's what I feel every time I think of Steve.

I feel my heart breaking.

I've dealt with death before.

In fact, I've dealt with the deaths of people much closer to me emotionally than Steve.

But it somehow seems to me that because Steve was a philosopher, because my engagement with him was philosophical, that I'm having so much trouble dealing with his death.

That is the opposite of what the Greek philosopher Socrates predicted.

In the Phaedo, which is the platonic dialogue dramatizing Socrates' death and the conversations he had right before it, Socrates says that, quote, a man who has truly spent his life in philosophy is probably right to be of good cheer in the face of death.

He describes philosophy as a preparation for death, philosophers as experts in death and dying.

This is part 2 on the handout, by the way.

So the fact that Steve was a philosopher, and that I am, and that's the nature of our connection– we knew each other pretty much exclusively as philosophers– the thing that was supposed to make dealing with his death easier seems to have made it harder.

I feel ripped off.

Where is the calm and equanimity that Socrates promised me? It's worth noting that just after Socrates claims that philosophy is preparation for death, he quickly follows it up with the observation that this claim is liable to be misunderstood.

Quote, it's on your handout.

I'm afraid that other people do not realize that the one aim of those who practice philosophy in the proper manner is to practice for dying and death.

Now, if this is true, it would be strange indeed if they were eager for this all their lives and then resent it when what they have wanted and practiced for a long time comes upon.

Simmias, this is the person he's talking to, laughed and said, By Zeus, Socrates, you made me laugh, though I was in no laughing mood just now.

I think that the majority on hearing this will think that it describes philosophers very well. And our people in Thebes would thoroughly agree that philosophers are nearly dead, and that the majority of men is well aware that they deserve to be.

Socrates responds, And they would be telling the truth, Simmias, except for their being aware.

They are not aware of the way true philosophers are nearly dead, nor of the way they deserve to be, nor of the sort of death they deserve.

Okay, so Socrates goes on, in this part of the Phaedo, to remind his friends that our bodies are constantly issuing commands to us, commands ordering us to protect it, to indulge it, to seek wealth, to gratify it.

We become so occupied with obeying these commands that we don't inquire into how we should live, quote, The body keeps us busy in 1000 ways because of its need for nurture.

Moreover, if certain diseases befall it, they impede our search for the truth.

It fills us with wants, desires, fears, all sorts of illusions, and much nonsense, so that as it is said, in truth and in fact, no thought of any kind ever comes to us from the body.

Only the body and its desires cause war, civil discord, and battles, for all wars are due to the desire to acquire wealth, and it is the body and the care of it to which we are enslaved, which compel us to acquire wealth, and all this makes us too busy to practice philosophy.

Worst of all, if we do get some respite from it and turn to some investigation, everywhere in our investigations, the body is present and makes for confusion and fear, so that it prevents us from seeing the truth.

Body is our enemy.

So if death destroys the body, then death silences the automatic demands, which are precisely the ones philosophers have to struggle against their whole lives long.

Philosophers work to free ourselves up, to arrive at real answers to these questions.

What should I do? How should I live? What's worth pursuing? These questions are going to come back a bunch of times in this talk, so you may have flagged that in your mind.

These questions on which our bodies imperiously and thoughtlessly pronounce.

Death is what we've been training ourselves for.

All right, is that a good argument? It would be a very weak argument if the destruction of the body simultaneously ended everything else.

The investigation, the seeing of the truth, the living and striving and struggling quite generally.

So the feeder takes up in some detail the relation between the body and the soul.

Though it's worth noting that the Greek psuche, which we're translating soul, is, at least during this period, much less metaphysically freighted than the English word soul is for us.

So psuche was simply the name for that in virtue of which anything, be it a human, an animal, or even a plant, counts as being alive.

Thinking there are souls in that minimal sense is compatible with thinking that the soul is destroyed or incapacitated by death.

Socrates' claim that my body is nothing but a kind of outer husk or prison from which the real me could potentially be liberated requires a much more substantive thesis about the soul.

So do we have any reason for thinking the soul can outlast the body and flourish outside of it? In his final hours of life, Socrates is pressed by the assembled company of his closest friends to answer just this question.

He has time to offer four arguments for the immortality of the soul and to entertain some challenges to those arguments before he's forced to drink hemlock.

put to death by the state.

The point of the Phaedo, the point of Plato's writing of it, seems to be to try to show us how well philosophy prepared Socrates for death.

His friend Phaedo, who narrates the story, reports that, quote, In both manner and words, he died nobly and without fear.

Does philosophy have that effect on the rest of us? Eerily enough, I asked Steve this exact question during our very last conversation.

I asked him whether philosophy prepares you for death.

Even more eerily, he never got the chance to answer.

A question from the audience interrupted him.

I said we were to go back to it, that we had time, there was over an hour left, but I forgot, and he forgot, and we never did.

By the way, this talk is online.

You can just search it on, search my name on YouTube and you can watch the talk.

Okay, so what is the answer? Does philosophy trade you for death? We're now in part three.

So many have expressed incredulity at the thought that philosophy or anything else could prepare a person for death.

But perhaps no one has done so with so much wit and poetic grace as Philip Larkin in his poem, Obey.

When it comes to death, the only options Larkin sees are being deluded and being terrified.

So I'm going to read you the poem, which is like your handout.

I work all day and get half drunk at night.

Waking at 4 to soundless dark, I stare.

In time, the curtain edges will grow light.

Till then, I see what's really always there, unresting death, a whole day near now, making all thought impossible but how and where and when I shall myself die.

Arid interrogation.

Yet the dread of dying and being dead flashes afresh to hold and horrify.

The mind blanks at the glare.

Not in remorse, the good not done, the love not given, time torn off unused, nor wretchedly, because an only life can take so long to climb clear of its wrong beginnings and may never, but at the total emptiness forever, the sure extinction that we travel to and shall be lost in always, not to be here, not to be anywhere, and soon, nothing more terrible, nothing more true.

This is a special way of being afraid, no trick dispels.

Religion used to try, that bass, moth-eaten musical brocade created to pretend we never die, and specious stuff that says, no rational being can fear a thing it will not feel, not seeing that this is what we fear, no sight, no sound, no touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with, nothing to love or link with, the anesthetic from which none come round. And so it stays just on the edge of vision, A small, unfocused blur, a standing chill that slows each impulse down to indecision.

Most things may never happen.

This one will. And realization of it rages out in furnace fear when we are caught without people or drink.

Courage is no good.

It means not scaring others.

Being brave lets no one off the grave.

Death is no different, whined at, than withstood.

Slowly, light strengthens, and the room takes shape.

It stands plain as a wardrobe, what we know, have always known, know that we can't escape, yet can't accept.

One side, we'll have to go.

Meanwhile, telephones crouch, getting ready to ring in locked up offices, and all the uncaring, intricate, rented world begins to rouse.

The sky is white as clay with no sun.

Work has to be done.

Postmen, like doctors, go from house to house.

So Larkin casts scorn at the idea of the immortality of the soul as a religious fabrication, quote, created to pretend we never die.

He's equally dismissive of the philosophical argument.

It's a longstanding argument that says, I shouldn't fear what I cannot experience.

So here's philosopher Shelley Kagan making a pretty typical version of that argument, and also quoting its history.

If something is true, it seems as though there's got to be a time when it's true.

Yet if death is bad for me, when is it bad for me? Not now.

I'm not dead now.

What about when I'm dead? But then I won't exist.

As the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus wrote, so death, the most terrifying of hills, is nothing to us, since so long as we exist, death is not with us, but when death comes, then we do not exist.

It does not then concern either the living or the dead, since for the former it is not, and the latter are no more.

If death has no time at which it's bad for me, then maybe it's not bad for me.

If Larkin had read these words, he couldn't if he was long dead by the time they were written, he would have laughed in Kagan's face.

Once death rolls around, the subject is missing.

There's no loss because there's no one to undergo it.

This kind of pontificating will not strike Larkin as comforting.

The terror Larkin speaks of is mute and unreasoning.

Let me read again the wonderful description of what it's like to be gripped by the fear of death.

Making all thought impossible, but how and where and when I shall myself die.

arid interrogation, yet the dread of dying and being dead flashes afresh to hold and horrify.

The mind blanks at the glare.

So I think this idea of the mind blanking captures something of existential horror really well.

When our bodies terrify us most sharply with death, they do so by telling us that we are our bodies.

We don't care whether it's philosophically reasonable to represent the future that goes on without us as a gaping chasm of nothingness, that is simply what our mind presents to us.

We behold the total emptiness forever as a sure extinction that we will be lost in always.

Kagan says a person can't be nowhere, but Larkin says, accurately, that we do in fact envision ourselves, not here, not anywhere.

I think Larkin has accurately described the experience of a certain kind of fear, which is to say how the mind presents things to you when you're entertaining the thought of your own death.

I also think that Larkin is right that when you're in that kind of state, the force of argument and reasoning collapses.

If Larkin were only making these points, it would be hard to disagree with him.

But he wants to go further and claim that this terror-filled point of view gives us access to the truth.

Nothing more terrible, nothing more true, he says.

Due to the difficulty of confronting this truth, he says we mostly evade it, forcing it to stay just on the edge of vision, a small, unfocused blur, a standing chill.

What we call courage in the face of such fear is another kind of evasion, a pretense undertaken to protect others from seeing what one is undergoing.

As is the return to ordinary life, work has to be done.

It's another evasion.

The real truth comes to us only in those rare moments when the realization of it rages out with the full force of its panic and terror.

Okay, it's one thing to tell us what the fear of death is like.

It's another to insist that the fear of death contains insight into the truth, insight into death, right? So Lurkin is probably right to observe that when you're afraid of death, you think to yourself, Death is no different wind out than withstood.

It doesn't follow that you're correct to think this, that your thought is true.

Larkin slides between reacquainting us with a certain familiar voice, the voice we hear in the middle of the night when we're alone and vulnerable and terrified, and speaking in that voice, authoritatively, as though it were the voice of the truth.

Is that slide justified, or is Larkin taking poetic license? We're on part four now.

Suppose you knew you were going to die soon.

How would you prepare yourself? I'm not asking about how you would make the best use of your remaining time.

That's an easy question, and I imagine you'd say you want to spend your final days being close to loved ones, engaging in the activities you most enjoy, finishing important projects, eating favorite foods, visiting favorite places, right? But it's not clear that those same activities would serve as preparation.

There's a difference between finding the best way to pass the remaining hours before a portentous event, such as a final exam, a wedding, an interview, your own death, and preparing for the event.

So I'm not asking, how would you pass your final hours? I'm asking, how would you prepare? You might think, that question makes no sense, because there's no such thing as being prepared or unprepared for death.

You might think the only question is how to pass the time until it comes.

But I think that's wrong.

There is an experience of being unprepared for death, and it is described beautifully by Leo Tolstoy, actually in a number of places, which I'll go through, but first and foremost in his novella, The Death of Ivan Ilyich.

So the story, concerns the final months of the life of an ordinary upper-class bourgeois Russian, Ivan Ilyich.

Ivan was sort of the paragon of familial career and social success.

His home was basically a party hub for aristocrats until he started experiencing a pain in his side.

The pain gets worse.

Eventually, it becomes clear that Ivan is dying.

Everyone around Ivan, his wife, his friends, even his doctors, pretend that he's not dying, that he's going to get better soon.

They repeatedly insist that he's turning a corner.

He finds himself terribly isolated in his knowledge of what's happening.

Tolstoy describes this as a dreadful solitude.

Quote, lying face to the back of the sofa, that solitude in the midst of the populous town and his numerous acquaintances and family, a solitude than which there could be none more total anywhere, not at the bottom of the sea, not under the earth.

His solitude comes from the fact that he is alone in confronting his death while everyone around him is successfully avoiding it.

Ivan himself tries to avoid it.

He tries to resume his former habits and practices, but he finds they've been hollowed out.

Here's a quote.

He tried to go back to his former ways of thinking, which had screened him, screened him formerly, from the thought of death.

But, strange thing, all that had formerly screened, hidden, wiped out the consciousness of death now could no longer produce that effect.

Lately, Ivan Ilyich had spent most of his time in these attempts to restore the former ways of feeling that had screened him from death.

He would say to himself, I'll busy myself with work.

Well, I used to live by it. And he would go to court, driving away all doubts.

He would get into conversations with colleagues.

But suddenly, in the midst of it, the pain in his side would begin its own gnawing work.

He would return home with the sad awareness that his work in court could no longer, as before, conceal from him what he wanted concealed.

that by his work in court, he could not rid himself of it. And what was worst of all was that it drew him to itself, not so that he would do something, but only so that he should look it straight in the eye and, doing nothing, suffer inexpressibly.

Illness unwaits Ivan's life projects and causes him to wonder for the first time whether he ever had any reason to do any of the things he was doing with his life.

What were once closed questions, should I be married to this person? Should I socialize with these people? Should I pursue these career goals? Have become opened up. And even finds no way of defending his old reflexive answers.

Quote, it occurred to him that what had formerly appeared completely impossible to him, that he had not lived his life as he should have, might be true.

It occurred to him that those barely noticeable impulses he had felt to fight against what highly placed people considered good, barely noticeable impulses which he had immediately driven away, that they might have been the real thing, that all the rest might have been not right.

His work and his living conditions and his family, and these social and professional interests, all might have been not right.

He tried to defend it all to himself, and he suddenly felt all the weakness of what he was defending, and there was nothing to defend.

But if that's so, he said to himself, And I am quitting this life with the consciousness that I have ruined everything that was given me, and it is impossible to rectify it.

What then? He lay on his back and started going over his whole life in a totally new way.

In the morning, when he saw the footman, then his wife, then his daughter, then the doctor, their every movement, their every word confirmed the terrible truth revealed to him that night.

In them, he saw himself.

all that he had lived by and saw clearly that it was not all right, that it was all a terrible, vast deception concealing both life and death.

This consciousness increased his physical sufferings tenfold.

He moaned and thrashed and tore at his clothes.

It seemed to be choking and crushing him, and for that he hated them.

Ivan finds, upon examination, that his answers to questions about how to live have been dictated by convention.

He did what it took to fit in among the people that surrounded him. And yet, once he dismisses his life, this whole life, as a lie, he nonetheless goes on to cling in the face of death to, quote, the claim that his had been a good life.

This justification of his life clutched at him, would not let him move forward, and tormented him most of all.

Okay, so even's predicament is that death both necessitates A justification for life, and it also drives him to abandon the only justification he knows.

But the other equally significant aspect of Ivan's predicament is that he is alone.

Everyone around him is consumed by the need to evade death the only way they know how, by immersing themselves in those same conventional pursuits and by pretending that Ivan is not dying.

Tolstoy makes repeated reference to this lie and how it isolates Ivan.

This lie around them within him poisoned most of all the last days of Ivan Ilyich's life.

This is his final interaction with his wife, and it illustrates the poisoning effect.

She asks, Isn't it true you're feeling better? He said yes without looking at her.

Her clothes, her figure, the expression of her face, the sound of her voice, all told him one thing, not right.

All that you've lived by is a lie, a deception, concealing death from you.

The expression on his face when he said yes was terrible.

Having uttered this yes, he looked her straight in the face, turned over with a quickness unusual in his weak state and shouted, go away, go away and leave me alone.

Ivan hates his wife for forcing him to lie to her, so much so that he feels more isolated in her presence than when he's alone.

He experiences her as somehow waving before him and simultaneously withdrawing the possibility of comfort and human connection.

The life of Ivan Ilyich turned out to be no preparation for the death of Ivan Ilyich.

His life was such as to become unhinged by the prospect of his death.

So now I'm going to talk about the death of Socrates, part five.

But first, just a little bit more about Tolstoy.

So Ivan's crisis actually resembles Tolstoy's own, as described in the Confession, which was written many years earlier.

The two accounts share a desperate sinking sense that most of the practices on which we rest, the meaning of our lives collapse at the slightest intellectual provocation. And that once one's life's justification has been undermined in this way, no amount of thinking can restore it.

Both accounts are also characterized by loneliness and isolation.

In a confession, Tolstoy presents himself as posing questions primarily to himself, as disconnected from his wife, his kids.

The same is true of Ivan, right? And in fact, Tolstoy told this same story, he was pretty obsessed with this story, a third time earlier in the opening of part two of War and Peace.

Pierre, the Tolstoy character, right, experiences a similar crisis of meaning, and Tolstoy has a particularly vivid description of the fruitlessness of thought in the face of fundamental questions.

So this is from War and Peace.

This is Pierre.

Whenever he started thinking about it, he came back to the same questions which he couldn't resolve and he couldn't stop asking himself.

It was as if the main screw in his head, which had held his whole life together, had become stripped.

The screw would not go in, would not come out, but turned in the same groove without catching hold, and it was impossible to stop turning it.

The questions Pierre asks himself are the familiar set.

But instead of making progress on them, Pierre, like Ivan and Tolstoy himself, runs headlong into the fact of death.

So another quote from War and Peace.

What is bad? What is good? What should one love? What hate? Why live? And what am I? What is life? What is death? What power rules over everything? He asked himself. And there was no answer to any of these questions except one, which was not logical and was not at all an answer to these questions.

This answer was, you will die and everything will end.

You will die and learn everything or stop asking.

But to die was also frightening, and he again put pressure on the stripped screw, and the screw kept turning in one and the same place.

Over and over again, Tolstoy tells the story of being uncontrollably driven to pursue a fruitless and futile inquiry into the meaning of one's own life.

It's a moving story, but it is not the only story there is.

If the death be an Ilyich, describes what it's like to be unprepared for death, the Phaedo, Plato's Phaedo that I quoted from earlier, shows us what it's like to be prepared.

Socrates' commitment to his life project, philosophizing, doesn't collapse in the face of his death.

Now, you might say, OK, but Socrates gets his equanimity and his calm cheaply, given that he believes his soul will be separated from his body and continue to live independently after his death. And it's true that Socrates seems to see the immortality of the soul as the answer to an important question about how to proceed in the face of death.

But Socrates' claims about the immortality of the soul show up in the Phaedo in quite a peculiar way.

Socrates neither dogmatically asserts them, nor insists that they remain untouched by criticism so that he can safely rely on them in facing death.

To the contrary, he accepts his friend's demand to produce arguments defending the soul's immortality, and he invites them to challenge those arguments.

That is how Socrates passes his final hours, and he repeatedly observes that that activity of inquiring into the immortality of the soul is a fitting one for him to be engaged in under the circumstances.

So recall how intractable Ivan finds the problems posed by death.

I won't even read the quote again.

But I mean, basically, he's torn between looking death in the eye and suffering alone inexpressibly, on the one hand, and looking away from death alongside his family and friends.

Socrates, by contrast, looks death straight in the eye and has a conversation with his friends about it.

It is, in fact, a remarkable feature of philosophical conversation that it matches the solemnity of death.

Ordinary conversations describing the enjoyment of a movie or a meal, grumbling discontentedly about one's boss, planning for an upcoming vacation, seem unfitting or inappropriate in the face of death.

Death trivializes those pursuits and concerns just as death trivialized Even's whole life.

That's why we've developed certain religious or quasi-religious or spiritual formulae that we use at funerals, at memorial services, a special kind of speech designed to insert a wall between life and death.

We don't talk in the same way in these different contexts. And so it's an astonishing fact about philosophy that it is suited also to this context of death.

It's not appropriate to complain or plan or enjoy sensual delights in the proximity of death, but it is appropriate to philosophize.

Okay, so my favorite moment in all of the Socratic dialogues, this is saying a lot, happens during the Phaedo, but it requires a really extensive narrative setup.

So I'm going to now spend a long time telling you what happens in the Phaedo, but I'll tell you when I get to the part that was the whole point of this long lead-up.

So after Socrates gives three arguments for the immortality of the soul, there is a murmur of unrest, and he's talking to a bunch of his friends, and there's a kind of sound if someone's not happy.

Two of them, Simmias and Thebes, have powerful objections to Socrates's arguments, but they're not sure whether to raise them.

Maybe this isn't the time? Socrates encourages them with the insistence that his proximity to death makes him even more eager to hear counterarguments.

He compares himself to swans, who, though they sing beautifully all the time, sing even more beautifully in the face of death.

Simmias and Thebes, taking Socrates at his word, go ahead and each offer up powerful arguments.

powerful and persuasive counter-arguments, right? And essentially, they're arguing against the immortality of the soul. And the narrator of the dialogue– OK, so this whole dialogue is being told by Phaedo after the death of Socrates to another guy, Hecrates.

So the narrator reports that the effect of these strong arguments was to induce despair in the whole group of people.

Quote, When we heard what they said, we were all depressed, as we told each other afterwards.

We'd been quite convinced by the previous argument. And they seem to confuse us again and to drive us into doubt not only what had already been said, but also what was going to be said, lest we be worthless as critics or the subject itself admitted of no certainty.

Okay, so Phaedo is narrating this story right during the period after Socrates' death. And at this point, the person he's telling the story to, the story of Socrates' death, breaks in.

This is one point in the whole narrative.

The guy's name is Hecrates.

Okay, so Hecrates says, By the gods, Phaedo, you have my sympathy, for as I listen to you now, I find myself saying to myself, what argument shall we trust, now that of Socrates, which was extremely convincing, has fallen into discredit? And now I am again quite in need, as if from the beginning of some other argument to convince me that the soul does not die along with the man.

Tell me then, by Zeus, how Socrates tackled the argument.

Was he obviously distressed, as you say people were, or was he not, but quietly came to the rescue of his argument? And did he do so satisfactorily or inadequately? Tell us everything, as precisely as you can.

Phaedo responds.

This is the last words he says to Hecrates.

I've certainly often admired Socrates, Hecrates, but never more than on this occasion.

That he had a reply was perhaps not strange.

What I wondered at most in him was the pleasant, kind, and admiring way he received the young man's argument and how sharply he was aware of the effect the discussion had on us. And then how well he healed our distress and, as it were, recalled us from our flight and defeat and turned us around to join him in the examination of their argument.

It's an astonishing thing for someone clinging to the immortality of the soul in the face of his imminent death to receive counter-arguments in a pleasant, kind, and admiring way.

I think Plato has a Hecrates break into the narrative here to underscore the moment, and he's right to do so, but we still haven't yet gone to the part, okay? But it's right that Socrates' response to Simmias and Cebes might constitute the greatest moment of courage in his entire life.

Now, here's how Socrates responds, OK? So he clearly has a feeling of the room.

So he begins by addressing Phaedo's unspoken– we know about the worry, but it was not spoken– that the subject itself admitted of no certainty, Socrates warns.

We should not become misologues as people become misanthropes.

There is no greater evil one can suffer than to hate reasonable discourse.

He explains that just as the experience of being let down by many people, especially our closest friends, can lead us to lose faith in humanity, so too the experience of being let down by arguments leads people to lose faith in argumentation.

Socrates thinks the mistake is similar in the case of people and arguments.

If you find everyone around you to be evil and untrustworthy, you should conclude that the problem might be you.

You're trying to, quote, have human relations without any skill in human affairs.

Likewise, though misologues, quote, believe themselves to have become very wise, and that they alone have understood that there is no soundness or reliability in any object or any argument, and that all that exists simply fluctuates up and down, Socrates thinks the fluctuation in question is really happening in their own soul.

He says, It would be pitiable, Phaedo, when there is a true and reliable argument and one that can be understood, that a man who has dealt with such arguments as appear at one time true and another time untrue should not blame himself or his own lack of skill, but because of his distress, in the end, gladly shift the blame away from himself to the arguments and spend the rest of his life hating and reviling reasonable discussion, and so be deprived of truth and knowledge of reality.

So when Pierre concludes, quote, There was no answer to any of these questions, Socrates would say he is mistaking a fact about himself for a fact about the world.

Quote, We should not allow into our minds the conviction that argumentation has nothing sound about it.

Much rather, we should believe that it is we who are not yet sound, and that we must take courage and be eager to attain soundness, you and the others for the sake of your whole life still to come, and I for the sake of death itself.

Socrates goes further than encouraging them to pursue the inquiry.

He actually warns them of his bias.

He admits that proximity of death will incline him to be too ready to believe in the immortality of the soul, and thus they should guard against him.

Okay, this is the part, this is my favorite part.

If you will take my advice, you will give but little thought to Socrates and much more to the truth.

If you think that what I say is true, agree with me.

If not, oppose it with every argument, and take care that in my eagerness I do not deceive myself and you, and like a bee, leave my sting in you when I go.

So Socrates sees that he is defending the whole foundation of his life, and he invites his friends to fight him on it.

That's the moment I was talking about.

Socrates shows great courage in being willing to risk the very foundation stone of his life, the crutch on which his ability to confront death rests, as he says, for the sake of death itself.

He also shows great love for his friends when he instructs them to give but little thought to Socrates and much more to the truth.

The link Socrates draws between mythology and misanthropy is as telling as the claims he makes about each consider on its own.

Recall how their existential crises lead Pierre, Ivan, and Tolstoy to all withdraw into themselves.

If Socrates is right and the kind of thinking they're trying to do is essentially social, then mythology and misanthropy amount to the same thing.

Love of argument requires that you love other people.

Those are the people you argue with.

Socrates goes on to offer one final magisterial argument for the immortality of the soul.

I won't go through the details of you.

I teach this argument almost every year.

At the end of it, Simmias still confesses, quote, that he has private misgivings about what we've said.

He still doesn't feel convinced.

Socrates concedes that his worry is well placed.

He says, you're not only right to say this, Simmias, But our first hypotheses require a clear examination, even if we find them convincing.

But Socrates pursues the argument no further, as it's time for him to die.

He suggests that Simmias do this in the future.

Quote, if you analyze them adequately, you will, I think, follow the argument as far as a man can, and if the conclusion is clear, you will look no further.

Socrates died in the middle of the argument.

He died as he lived, philosophizing.

Philosophy didn't consign him to loneliness and alienation in the face of death, nor did the prospect of death undermine his life project.

So philosophy is something which, if you do it, you can practice it, and in practicing it, preserve your connections to those around you, even when looking death squarely in the eye.

Tolstoy accurately perceives that many ways of spending your life cannot stand up to death, collapsing in the face of it.

Philosophy is an exception.

So philosophy prepared Socrates to face his own death.

It also prepared Socrates' friends to face Socrates' death.

Phaedo, telling a Hecrates what it felt like to be in the presence of the death of Socrates, describes, quote, an unaccustomed mixture of pleasure and pain.

Quote, Although I was witnessing the death of one who was my friend, I had no feeling of pity, for the man appeared happy in both manner and words as he died nobly and without fear, Hecrates.

So that it struck me that even in going down to the underworld, he was going with the god's blessing and that he would fare well when he got there if anyone ever does.

That is why I had no feeling of pity such as would seem natural in my sorrow, nor indeed of pleasure as we engaged in philosophical discussion as we were accustomed to do, for arguments were of that sort.

But I had a strange feeling, an unaccustomed mixture of pleasure and pain at the same time as I reflected that he was just about to die.

All of us present were affected in much the same way, sometimes laughing, then weeping.

In fact, I experienced something similar.

Because Steve died during the pandemic, his friends couldn't gather immediately.

But eight months later, there was a memorial service at the chapel of the university where he taught.

Three people who were especially close to him made beautiful speeches about him.

A priest read poems, there was music.

It was a poignant and moving ceremony, and it went roughly as I thought it would.

But before the ceremony, something happened that surprised me.

For the two days prior, one of Steve's colleagues had organized a philosophical conference on Steve's unfinished work.

About 30 philosophers flew in from around the world to sit around a conference table and discuss Steve's unfinished papers one by one.

I arrived at the conference on the verge of tears, and as soon as I saw a friend of mine, I collapsed into his arms, sobbing.

As the first session convened, I said to myself, this is going to be impossible.

I'm not going to be able to do philosophy.

I'm going to cry every time I open my mouth.

Looking around the room, I could see everyone else was in the exact same condition.

But an amazing thing happened to us.

After a few initial tears, we all threw ourselves into philosophy mode.

My first comment was a question.

There were a few sentences in the paper for that session that I felt were important, but I didn't understand.

I read them out loud and I asked for help.

My friend, the one who I'd been sobbing with just a few minutes earlier, came to my aid.

Calmly, patiently, he explained Steve's argument and the flaw he saw in it.

Together, the group summarized the main points of Steve's papers.

We explained them to one another.

We raised objections to his claims.

We thought about responses on his behalf or about ways of pressing the objections further to make them more devastating.

We're philosophers.

We considered ways to tie the papers together into our own work.

We joked over his funny choice of examples.

We argued with one another and with Steve.

We remarked more than once how much Steve's personality came through in his written words, how much we felt we were talking to him.

The conference didn't feel tragic.

It felt happy. And even more than that, it felt interesting.

There were things we wanted to know.

We were trying to find them out, and inquiring into those things felt like a totally appropriate activity in the face of our friend's death.

Philosophy, the fact that we were philosophers and that Steve was one too, made it possible to be mourning our friend and happily inquiring at the same time.

Actually, When I think about how cooperative and spirited and well-prepared and engaged everyone was in the discussion, and I compare it to other conferences I've attended, I think I can say something stronger.

The fact that we were dealing with our friend's death made us philosophize better, like the swans who sing more beautifully when faced with death.

This, I think, is what Socrates means when he says philosophy is a preparation for death, and that this fact about philosophy is something few people understand.

Philosophy is an activity that lives up to the challenge of death.

You can be philosophizing socially, philanthropically, happily, and be facing up to death at the same time.

But if philosophy has made me so great at dealing with death, why was I so sad? Why am I still so sad even now as I say these words? I'm still sad about Steve being dead.

Sad and not cheerful, not inquisitive, not energized, not philosophical.

I think the answer is just that I'm often thinking about Steve's death when I'm alone. And Socrates was right that philosophical activity and inquiry into these fundamental questions is not a bicycle built for one.

Maybe I can perform some kind of simulacrum of philosophical activity by imagining interlocutors for myself and responding to their imagined objections.

But the task of confronting the death of a dear friend requires all of my philosophical powers. And I don't have all of those powers sitting in a room by myself.

Sitting alone by myself, what I'm doing is not so much thinking as remembering.

I'm remembering the conference and the joy and attentiveness of those conversations.

I'm remembering the fido in my many classroom discussions of it.

It's probably the text I've taught most often.

Most of all, I'm remembering Steve and being reminded of what it was like when I had him to share my ignorance and my struggle.

It's human to be unable to think about the most important things on one's own. And it's human to shield oneself from this somewhat terrifying fact.

All of us, even professional philosophers, walk around with a conceit of knowledge separating ourselves from other people.

Our feeling of basic mental competence, of having the answers on which the living of our lives depends, keeps us from connecting with others in the ways that benefit us most.

Ignorance of ignorance prevents us from thinking together about what neither of us knows.

It's the wall between us.

Socrates had thinned out that wall as much as possible.

He was a great connector, a great coordinator with the minds of others.

Steve was like that.

That's why I miss him so much.

Recalling my conversations with Steve forces me to confront the gulf between what my mind can do on its own and what it's capable of when paired with a kindred spirit.

I know what I don't have, what I'm not doing, and that memory hurts.

If philosophizing prepares you for death, then memories of philosophizing make you aware of how unprepared you still are.

Socrates' friends describe their final hours with him not as straightforwardly pleasant, but a mixture of pleasure from philosophy with a certain feeling of pain.

Phaeda reports that throughout the conversation, he couldn't help remembering that Socrates, quote, was just about to die. And Simmias expresses fears for the future of philosophy.

Simmias says, quote, By this time tomorrow, there will be no one left who can do this adequately.

To be a philosopher is to feel with special acuteness one's need for others, especially those others who also feel the same need with the same acuteness.

You feel weak, vulnerable, incomplete.

I think there's evidence that even Socrates sometimes felt that way.

So although Plato represents Socrates as brave and stoical throughout the Phaedo, there is one striking detail that speaks to a chink in his armor.

In the opening moments of the conversation, Plato reveals a really strange tidbit.

While in prison, Socrates started writing poetry.

Socrates explains why he started.

He says, for a very long time, he's had versions of a dream in which he receives the instruction to practice and cultivate the arts through his whole life, right? And before his trial, his longstanding interpretation had held that the dream was encouraging him onward in pursuit of philosophy.

Philosophy is the art.

But during the days spent waiting to die, he started to second-guess this interpretation.

Maybe the dream had been all along that he's supposed to write poetry? So he started setting the stories of Aesop to verse, composing poems for the first time in his life.

Socrates relates these facts breezily without much fanfare, and his friends don't pursue the topic.

Commentators are likewise inclined to pass over these brief remarks so as to focus on the meat of the dialogue, the import of death and the immortality of the soul, which is right.

But it's worth just pausing for a moment to appreciate how strange this detail is.

Socrates, who famously refused to write his ideas down, who elegantly declared himself to be against all writing, started writing.

Socrates, who often inveys against the poets as dangerously ignorant of their ignorance of their subject matter, these anti-poets in a bunch of dialogue, he became a poet? In the final days of his life, Socrates entertained some sort of doubt as to whether philosophy was his true calling, apparently.

In the ensuing conversation with his friends, and in the earlier jail cell conversation reported in the Crito, Socrates betrays no such doubts about his life purpose, but on reflection, it is not so surprising to learn that there were moments when he was sitting alone in his cell, waiting to die, when he was less than fully sure of himself.

It's understandable that the fear of death might have hit him harder at those times, causing him to be at least somewhat inclined, like Ivan, to question aspects of how he had lived his life, as well as to turn to poetry, as Larkin did.

Recall Larkin, courage is no good.

It means not scaring others.

There's a temptation to think that the real man is what he's like when no one's looking.

But I think it would be a mistake to see Socrates's moments of weakness if that's what they were, as expressing the underlying truth about him.

Philosophy is social, and Socrates's philosophical nature best emerges in the social setting in which his thinking can receive its fullest expression.

But we do learn something important from Socrates's foray into poetry.

It suggests that what fortifies Socrates in the face of death is not his belief in the immortality of the soul, which presumably was present to him in his private moments as well, and indeed could only have rested on firmer footing when it wasn't being exposed to challenges and doubts, but rather his argumentative, inquisitive practice of philosophy in relation to that belief.

I think I can now diagnose the mistake I was making in blaming philosophy for not helping me deal with Steve's death.

Philosophy doesn't help you deal with death when you're not doing philosophy.

Or not as much in any way.

Philosophy doesn't fully abandon you even when you're alone.

It's true that philosophers are, just like Larkin, just like everyone else, beset by lonely, terrified thoughts in the middle of the night.

Our physical pain seems to speak just as Ivans does with the voice of the truth.

But when our bodies scream at us to save them, it's true.

We can't help but attend.

The body offers up its own answers to questions about how you're supposed to live your life.

Eat now.

We see this in the Phaedo as well.

We get a glimpse of Socrates' physical pain just before he explains the foray into poetry.

Because he's about to be killed, the guards remove the shackles that he's had to wear in prison.

Socrates, admitting that the shackles had hurt him, rubs his leg in relief and poetically reflects on how pleasure and pain are intertwined.

All those earlier times when he was composing poetry alone in his cell, the shackles must have been causing him pain, amplifying his fears and his doubts.

Our bodies tell us to be terrified of death.

Philosophers hear this savage command shouted in the language of pain just as much as anyone else does.

But philosophers do have an additional resource.

We can call up, in the narrow-mindedness of our solitude, an image of what it was like to think out in the open air with others.

That image is only a pale shadow of, not a replacement for the real thing, but it does serve as a reminder that one's current moment of pain and panic is temporary and illusory.

It's both joyful to remember happier times and painful to know that that is not how things are now.

That's the feeling of remembering Steve, an unaccustomed mixture of pleasure and pain.

We're almost at the interior.

So something Socrates' friends could not do was watch a three-hour video of their final conversation with Socrates.

After the first, it took me a while now to watch it the first time, but after the first time through, it's actually not as weird as it sounds.

So as I mentioned, Steve and I, our final conversation was about premature death.

We started with a paradox I'd happened to find on a blog that day.

The blogger had framed it in terms of actuarial tables.

So Steve died tragically young at 38, but even if he had died at 80, he could probabilistically have expected a few more years of life.

The same is true at age 90 or 95.

Even when you turn 119, which is as high as the actuarial tables go, you can expect six more months.

No matter when you die, someone who arrived at that age could reasonably have expected to live longer, because that's what happens to most people who arrive at that age.

So all death is premature death.

That's the paradox.

OK, so we talked about it for a while, and you can watch the discussion on YouTube.

Steve's solution to the paradox was that we should fix expectations at birth. And then it becomes true to say that dying at 40 is premature, whereas dying at 90 is not.

But Steve and I came to conclude that the deeper point of this paradox had nothing to do with actuarial tables or generalizations about how long other people live.

The deeper point concerns the drive by which any conscious mind, be it 10 or 40 or 90 years old, reaches forward and illuminates not only the present moment, but also some stretch of the upcoming time.

Suppose the oldest person who's ever lived– this is a silly sentence– is alive right now, of course.

Oh, I see.

They may not be alive right now, because it might be that the person who lived the longest died.

OK.

So let's suppose the oldest anyone's ever lived is 121.

Let's suppose that the 121-year-old is alive now.

So that person would have no basis for expecting that most people who arrive at my age live a bit longer, right? That's never happened before. And yet they still wouldn't be expecting to die at every moment.

Living at any age involves projecting yourself some ways into the future.

When we go through a day making decisions, making plans, organizing our agency, we stretch ourselves forward in time.

Indeed, this kind of stretching is required even just for the most basic form of thinking, in the sense of the temporally extended activity of being engaged in mental processing.

The projective quality of life mitigates not only against the experience of death, but against envisioning any possibility of experiencing.

What the premature death paradox brings out is, not only is there no experience of death, there is also no prospect of being about to experience death.

that any representation of yourself as experiencing or being about to experience death at any age is always illusory.

So does that mean that you just can't confront death? You can't face it? I think it does mean that we can't confront death with our imaginative faculty.

But no, interestingly, this is also true of dreamless sleep.

Socrates compares the two, death and dreamless sleep in the Apology.

They are both conditions in which it's not clear what it would be like to be in them.

There is no what it is like to be in the condition of dreamless sleep.

Recall Caden's observation that once you're dead, there's no one around to be the subject of the relevant experience.

If there's no experience of death, our encounter with death can't be empirical.

But we can still think about death, just as we can think about sleep. And we need to think about death because we're inclined, in moments of panic and terror, to fall under the illusion that we are confronting it.

The same does not happen to be true of sleep.

We don't regularly terrify ourselves by imagining the dark blankness, the total emptiness of dreamless sleep.

We are somehow inclined to try to dip our toe into death, to fall under the illusion that we are extending our consciousness into it.

Right? That's Larkin's mistake.

He's trying to feel his way into death. And yet, thinking about death also has its pitfalls.

So if somebody is wondering whether life has any meaning, she's often thinking about or facing death.

The prospect of our agency coming to an end unweights our practical projects, allowing us to countenance the possibility of not pursuing anything at all.

If we don't need to act, we don't need to presuppose all the goals that drove action.

In this way, death puts life to the test.

We can finally ask, What is the point of doing anything? And yet, as Pierre notices, In that condition, it is difficult to make progress on that question.

He again put pressure on the stripped screw, and the screw kept turning in one and the same place.

When one holds one's own life in abeyance, one doesn't get much traction on questions of meaning. And so Tolstoy's characters are inclined to lurch between thoughtlessly clinging to social norms and the fear, or realization, that life is meaningless.

Socrates held that it's possible to inquire seriously into the meaning of life.

The Socratic method of refutation, challenging, allows a person to entertain challenges to the answers to questions about life to which she's still committed and also pose those challenges to others.

So philosophy allows us to inquire into rather than panicking at the thought of the question of whether our lives stand up to the test of death.

If Socrates is right, it's possible to inquire seriously into the meaning of life, to ask the most fundamental questions without stripping the screw, but we can't do it alone, at least he doesn't think we can.

In what way is the study of philosophy training for death? So as I mentioned, I asked this question at the one hour, 40 minute mark of my final conversation with Steve, and as I mentioned, he never had the chance to articulate his answer.

But I think he did show me his answer.

In our final conversation, as in so many others, Steve and I were preparing ourselves and one another for death.

Audience questions

Host: Agnes, thank you so much.

Thank you so much for this.

I say we can probably take a minute or two to see if there are any questions before we start.

Now we start just bringing one question after another after this great talk.

So whenever you're ready, just raise your arm.

I will ask you to stand up and to speak loud and clear. And that's it.

Audiance member #1: My question would be– I don't know if I totally follow the argument, but I'm going to go for it.

Agnes: Great.

Audiance member #1: In a place like this, a Christian, Catholic place like this, what would be the answer you would propose according to what Socrates– how would you bridge up? this idea of being in a place where people do believe in life after death? And how would you bridge the environment?

Agnes: Yeah, so De Phaedo, it's probably the most well-known text in late antiquity and very influential in Christianity as well, because In fact, it's in some ways kind of a Christian-sounding text. And one, you know, one common ground is the belief in the immortality of the soul, right, which Socrates does Holden is arguing for.

So, I mean, in a way, all of this is actually, I think, quite suited to a Christian context.

It actually has a little bit of a more, struggles more in a secular context, I've found.

If you think the whole project is in some way predicated on at least entertaining the possibility of the immortality of the soul, and you think that, as many non-religious people do, think that that's absurd, then it can be a little bit hard to get that conversation going.

So, and I do try, I personally am also religious, not Christian, but, so for me, this resonates with me pretty, in a way that's pretty immediate. And I worry that that immediacy can actually make it hard for me to translate it into, sometimes into a secular, more secular context.

But I guess I would say, you know, sort of more generally that it seems to me that religions are institutions that grapple with the question of the meaning of life. And with the thought that there is something about life that is its most fundamental aspect, like there is something that is the most important thing.

One way to contrast it is to say that religions really contrast sharply with the economic point of view.

So the point of view of the economist, oh thanks, yeah, I should have taken that down.

The point of view of the economist is where it's like whatever good you need is whatever is most missing from you at the moment.

Food is of great value if you happen to be hungry. And then the next minute, something else is important.

Every minute, a different thing is important.

So the marginal value of different things is constantly shifting and changing as you go through your day. And I think the religious point of view is like, no, there are just things that are important.

Those are the most important things, and we often fail to attend to them.

And, you know, Tolstoy himself was driven in the direction of religion by these exact, that's where the confession ends, right? By these exact reflections.

So this is sort of actually why I thought this talk was suited to a religious context.

So I guess, I mean, I guess maybe if I try to think on the other side, in what way, in what way is it ill-suited? I would say, you know, there's a question, but I think it's a live question in, in every religion, how much doubt and inquiry is appropriate, and in what context is it appropriate? And my middle son just had his bar mitzvah, and he gave his bar mitzvah speech.

in which he was arguing that actually the Jewish religious traditions could be supported by rationality and reasoning, and the rabbi was like, this is going a little too far.

This is not what we believe, right? So, you know, he's like pushing in the direction of rationalism, right? And so I think that's really like a live question for religion is how much uncertainty, how much inquiry, how much criticism, how much revision is going to be permitted at a given time, in a given moment, in a given context. And I think that does differentiate religious activity, at least of some kinds, from philosophical activity, where there is a kind of no holds barred.

Like, you can doubt anything.

You can doubt the existence of the external world, and many philosophers do, right? So I think that the question of what kinds of conversations will show up around death, they may be slightly different between a philosophical and religious context because of this issue of the place of doubt and criticism.

Audiance member #2: Thank you.

Yeah, because it seems to me that what philosophy can help with dealing with fear of death, if I understood right, is that finally, whether the soul is immortal is beside the point in a way.

It's the grappling that you mentioned now.

Is that right? So there's this, when we're talking strictly about philosophy, it's that discussion that we have with other people about, well, the soul and meaning of life and so forth. And in a way, as I said, that it's kind of beside the point where there is immortality.

Agnes: Great.

So I definitely think that that's a very fair impression to get from this talk.

There was like one sentence that would have led you– this talk is probably going to be a chapter of a book, and I'm sort of presupposing stuff.

So I think it's important here that Socrates commits himself to a particular view on which his life actually rests, right? And he's entertaining challenges to it.

But in effect, you can only entertain challenges to something if you believe that thing, right? And so, you know, like an interesting thing about Socrates that I think doesn't always come to the fore is, He had lots of really strongly held views, right? So he has this impression of being like the doubter and skeptic and doesn't believe anything.

Like there's a dialogue, the Gorgias, that sort of ends close to the end with a list of claims that he thinks are tied down with arguments of iron and adamant. And he just starts listing them.

The immortality of the soul is not on that list, as I recall, but it does actually come up in the dialogue.

So the point is that, you know, You need some kind of account of the meaning of your life, of what your life is about.

Having some kind of account like that is actually what makes it possible for you to engage in conversation. And that has to do with how I think the Socratic conversation works.

Namely, one person is claiming something and another person is attacking that thing.

So there's got to be a guy who's claiming something. And all of the dialogues work like this.

There's somebody, you know, Lakes is a dialogue with two generals, and they have a theory of courage, different theories actually. And Socrates is like, here's why that seems wrong.

So this kind of conversation, like we were arguing with Steve, right? Steve had a bunch of views in his papers.

There was a picture that he was trying to defend and we were trying to attack it.

So I think you're right that in a way, it's almost like it doesn't matter what this stuff is, but it does matter that somebody actually believe it and that what they believe be in some way like a serious attempt to give the principles of their own life.

Audiance member #3: Thank you for the talk.

In one part of the conversation you said that death trivializes it all, right? But at the same time, knowing that our people existence, I think makes the things even more important, no? So I would like you to, yeah, to talk more about this contradiction.

Agnes: Yeah, great question.

So, I mean, you know, it's not my view that death trivializes everything.

There I was channeling Tolstoy, right? And I think Tolstoy specifically, it is the, a certain kind of adherence to convention, right? That Tolstoy feels death really, like, it becomes thin somehow.

It's like, oh, I'm just behaving in this way because everybody behaves in this way, but like, You know, what does it even matter? We're mindlessly adhering to these rules and then we're just gonna die.

I think that you're right that, like when I think about, you know, what would it be like to live forever or something, I sometimes think it would just make it hard for me to really value anything. And there's a wonderful paper by this philosopher named Bernard Williams.

It's called The Macropolis Affair, Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality. And it's about how, if you were immortal, life would just get really boring. And you would just, you would have, you know, it would be fun to watch your favorite movie the first time, the first thousand times, maybe, but eventually you hate that movie and every other movie and every book, right? And I mean, Borges also has number of stories like along these lines about that immortality would be a kind of torture, right? And that somehow part of our human predicament seems to be that we can really value and delight and cherish things, but maybe we don't have the ability to sort of infinitely delight or cherish in them, right? So that's like, that's the worry.

I think that I struggle with this, and I guess I think personally that I want to be the sort of person who, if I were made immortal, I would be able to make it not be a torture.

So that's my goal. And I don't think I'm going to be made immortal, but just in case, right? Because it would be really bad if you were immortal.

I mean, that'd be the worst possible thing, right? be immortal and then it's way worse than dying, right? It's being immortal and it's a torture forever, right? So you really got to prepare yourself, even though it's a tiny probability, it's really, really bad, right? It's a reverse Pascal's wager. And so I think you have to think, like, is there anything that, you know, like, Is there anything that even sort of like even God could take an infinite interest in like and just find infinitely enriching and fascinating and rewarding and you know, maybe God could do this with like everything actually, right? But I feel like I I do try to attune myself to some things where I think that thing is true, where I think philosophy is like that, that I think understanding the human condition is a thing where even if I fully understood it, then I would just contemplate it.

I would be happy, like Aristotle's God, just contemplating it for eternity.

So that's what I want.

I want to be the kind of being that could potentially be happy contemplating something for eternity.

But I agree with you that most of the things I care about, like pretty clothes, I would just super tired of after the first like 400 years.

Audiance member #3: Thank you for this image that wise people in solitary sort of beings. And now I feel like the people, yeah, I feel like what you said that philosophy or ideas is like a community effort and that the people I admire more sort of do think So I wanted to ask if you have an idea of where this idea of the solitary philosophy comes?

Agnes: From.

Yeah, great question.

So this is kind of what my whole book is about, actually.

So my book is really an argument that thinking is something that requires, thinking of the most important kind, let's say, requires more than one person.

So thinking is something, it's not something that happens in your head, it's something that you do with other people, it's a social activity. And I think that this would not have been seen as a very radical claim for like a lot of history, but when it starts to be radical, I mean, actually I don't have really a basis for historical claims, so let me just say, someone who just serves for me as an important node, right, so is Descartes in the Meditations.

So Descartes' Meditations has this, character, this almost two-sided character, like on the one hand, you know, he's alone in this stove-heated room.

He doesn't describe it as stove-heated in the Meditations, but he does describe it that way in the Discourse, so you can read it back into it.

He's alone in this room, right, and he's like, I am going to just figure out all my thoughts.

I'm going to deconstruct and reconstruct myself, right, through a series of arguments with myself. And he's, you know, there have definitely been other figures, earlier figures, you know, Boethius, Constellations of Philosophy.

He's not, Descartes is not the first, but he's hugely influential, right? And he's like, he has these arguments with himself, and so here's the thing that's really striking about the meditations.

So Descartes says, okay, I'm going to doubt all of my beliefs, that's step one, right? Because I might be wrong, so let me first just doubt everything, okay? And so he's like, okay, and then he's like, uh-oh, it didn't happen.

I didn't doubt it, I said I was going to do it, but it didn't work, I still just think.

that like what I think is just true, right? So it turned out, Descartes discovered, almost like empirically, that there's no doubt switch in your head that you can just flip, right? Because normally doubting is something you do because other people call what you're thinking into doubt, right? So it's not so easy.

So then he's like, okay, that didn't work.

So what I'm going to do is I'm going to imagine there was an evil, you know, evil demon that has gotten hold of my mind and is making it seem to me like all these things are undoubtable when they actually are. And he's like, that's what I'm going to do. And then in the beginning of, early in the second meditation, he's like, oh, but look, here's some wax. And he's like, oh, wait, I wasn't supposed to think this is actually here.

Remember the evil demon and we're doubting. And so what's so interesting to me is that he has this sort of artifice of creating within himself in a first personal way, the whole philosophical critical enterprise, and it keeps collapsing, right? And so if you then look at, I don't know if I'll talk, so far there's no Descartes in my book, because I think my editor will be annoyed if I suddenly go off and talk about Descartes in a book on Socrates, and even more annoyed with the next part if I do bring this in.

But so, okay, much later, has this text called the Cartesian Meditations. And he is, you know, in effect saying, look, Descartes is the model for all of philosophy, so I'm going to do my own version of him. And it's this kind of, phenomenological text, which is in a bunch of meditations, just like Descartes' meditations.

He's like, okay, so now I'm going to doubt the existence of the external world, and I'm only going to do, like, only paying attention to my own phenomenology.

Except he doesn't do the thing that Descartes does where it doesn't work.

It just works for us. And the thing is, these were lectures given at the Sorbonne, And I just don't believe it.

I don't believe that Oserle actually doubted that there were students sitting in front of him. And let me imagine someone standing here, I doubt that there's anyone in front of me.

It's like, you could say that, Oserle, but I don't think you actually did. And so what's so interesting there to me is that we lost the ability to confront the actual experience of how it doesn't work.

It's almost like Descartes lured people into thinking there was this thing you could do.

Sit by yourself and contemplate and criticize your own thoughts. And even he couldn't do it.

But somehow, inspired by him, we got this image of like, that's a thing you can do. And I want to sort of leave open the possibility that some people are just really, really, really extraordinary. And they come closer to being able to do that than others. And I'm like at the other extreme.

I'm very much someone who needs other people. And so I'm alert to the thought that I may have this bias of, like, not seeing that it occasionally is possible.

But I have to say that, you know, even if I'm at the other extreme, I look around me, and I've never met any of these special people, right, who can do it on their own. And so it's striking to me, even Descartes was not really such a person, though the myth of Descartes presents him as being such a person.

Audiance member #1: Should I stand?

Agnes: Yes, please stand because I can't see you.

Audiance member #1: Thank you.

Thanks.

That was very interesting.

Agnes: Thank you.

Audiance member #1: So I was thinking how significant is it to you that the thing that Socrates found in the face of death was Basically, I think that he .

Well enough, that was philosophy.

Of course, it was philosophy.

Because I was struck by the fact that you, before, I think you kind of excluded that from your university possibilities of things that people might consider doing when they were told that they might be .

Mm-mm, right, so good, I mean.

Agnes: I think that when I considered, the list of possibilities that I considered was just a list of how you might fill your time. And then I said, and you're right that I didn't consider this on that list.

That's right, right? And it might well be that some of how you fill your time is philosophizing, right? But I think that there's still a difference if then we're asking, okay, you want to prepare yourself for death, it might be like a different kind of philosophizing that you would feel you needed to do, right? Which isn't to say that that would have to be, that the philosophizing you do in the face of death would have to be ethical, that it would have to be about what the right way to live is.

It would have to be that for many of us, for those of us for whom that's the fundamental face of philosophy, but I know very intimately because I'm married to such

a person that there are those for whom the fundamental face of philosophy is much more theoretical.

It's just wanting to understand how the world holds together at the most fundamental level.

What is there? What are the beings? What are the principles organizing the changes and movements in the things that are, right? And I could well see that for someone for whom those are the fundamental questions, that would be what the philosophical inquiry would be like.

So You know, I mean, you're right that I left it off the list mostly because I wasn't thinking that it would come to mind as a way of passing the time.

But even if it was a way of passing the time, that wouldn't guarantee that that very form of kind of philosophizing would also serve as a way of preparing.

But maybe you want to ask a follow-up.

Go ahead.

Audiance member #1: Yeah, I was asking about philosophizing as one of the things that you might be doing.

Just carry on doing whatever–.

Agnes: Oh, I see, I see, yes, yes.

Good.

So I think the question is whether, and this is sort of why I brought in Tolstoy, the question is whether that activity is one that allows you to carry it on, right? So does the activity collapse in the face of death? I think you're absolutely right that if it doesn't collapse, that my argument is in a way not specific to philosophy.

What I'm saying is philosophy is an example of something that doesn't collapse, and I try to explain how it doesn't collapse.

But I think there might well be other things that don't collapse in the face of death.

I think especially projects that are geared towards the greater and long-term benefit of humankind, I can imagine that they wouldn't collapse in the face of death.

So yeah, it's a great point.

Host: One final question.

Audiance member #3: I think what I understood was that you can use love, not a romanticized one, but a more relative with compassion to do philosophy in a neutral way and in a critical way, using its own methods.

So doing that, we can relieve relief, fear of death, and relating between Socrates also.

I don't know if I'm not thinking, but him and some more Greek, great thinkers, the travelers, studying Egypt, and they have a very big, how do I say, the soul has a very big place in it.

So is it not possible that Socrates, in that moment, was making his own rites of passage? Or like Kostinos of the time, the meaning that death and life has is totally different from the 31st century.

Now everything is so fast.

So wasn't he like making his own right of passage with his own kind?

Agnes: Yeah, great question.

So first on love, you know, in Greek, the word for love, philia, has a lot of different meanings.

Like you can use it to talk about, you know, you can use it to talk about romantic love, though there is another word, eros, for that.

But you can use it to talk about your family members, your city, your, it's very, it's much broader than the English love.

your sort of like coworkers, whatever, that would also be philia, friendship.

It covers love and friendship. And so it's definitely right that Socrates is articulating a new kind of philia and a kind of what you might call philanthropy, philanthropia, right? Love of humankind. And you know, that when the part where he's considering mythology and misanthropy, that would be the opposite, right? And the idea is like he loves his friends like as fellow philosophers, right? Like not as people he's related to, not even as people that he has spent time with in the past, but as people who will inquire with him and who will challenge him.

So I agree, that's a distinct and almost new kind of love that's shown up.

I think that there is a lot of really interesting ritualistic stuff in the Phaedo.

More there than any other text, there is a kind of definitely references to sort of Protagorean, like mysticism and lots of stuff that we don't even know that much about, but that Phaedo is like a source for.

I think that, I do think that what he is trying to do is in some way sum up the fact that his life has been about something different than the lives of other people around him, that it's had a different kind of purpose, right? And so, yes, I think it's a rite of passage, and there is almost a kind of confidence in the Phaedo, in Socrates putting forward his own view that you don't see in so many other places.

But I do think it's meant to be like, not a new thing in a way, right? But like a, this is what I've been doing all along. And now you can see that all along, the thing I was always doing was a thing where I really meant it.

Like this really, it wasn't just a game or something.

Like it wasn't just a way to pass the time.

It was actually the sort of thing that could prepare me for something like this.

So it's like, there's another dialogue, I think, I mean, equally important to the Phaedo in a way to think about Socrates, this is the Crito where Socrates is offered a chance to escape from jail. And he believes that he was unjustly put to death.

He offered a chance to escape. And he thinks it would be wrong. And he refuses.

And, you know, he's like, well, look, I just can't come up with a good argument to escape. And Crito is like, his friend, he's like, come on, they're going to put you, let's just go.

We'll worry about the argument later. And Socrates is like, no, no, no, this whole argument thing, that wasn't like a game.

That's actually– I actually believe in this.

This is actually the point of my entire life.

There's nothing else I can retreat to, right? And so I think you're right that what's being exposed here is that he's charted like a different course with his life, and that he is in some way sincere about that different course.

Host: Thank you so much.

This was a spectacular 90 minutes.

Agnes: Thank you.

Host: I'm very grateful that you're here.

Just to remind people in case they want to attend the other talks, you'll be giving tomorrow at 4 P.M. And on Thursday at 5 P.M.

You're all very welcome to attend the other two talks.

It's good to see a packed room like this for a philosophy talk. It's unusual, a bit surprising. And so kudos to you. This is because the, well, there were high hopes and they were fulfilled.

So thank you so much, Agnes, for coming. It's a delight to have you here. Thank you.

Agnes Callard
The fear of death and whether philosophy helps you with it
2021-12-13

Brotéria. <www.youtube.com/watch?v=NHi777d0jAc> &
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