Beyond Problem Solving: Philosophy and the Quest for Understanding feat. Agnes Callard

unSILOed Podcast with Greg LaBlanc

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What are 'untimely questions' and why do they become common blind spots in philosophy? Why is philosophy a team sport?? How does Moore's paradox highlight the differences between truth and belief?

Agnes Callard is a professor of philosophy at the University of Chicago and the author of the books Open Socrates: The Case for a Philosophical Life, Aspiration: The Agency of Becoming, The Case Against Travel, and On Anger.

Greg and Agnes discuss the essence of living a philosophical life through the Socratic method. Agnes emphasizes inquiry, human interaction, and rigorous thinking as processes that require effort and dialogue. Their discussion touches on the distinctions between problem-solving and questioning, the complexities of human preferences, and the societal tendency to convert deep philosophical questions into more manageable problems.

Callard also reflects on philosophical engagement within various contexts, including education, relationships, and ethical frameworks. The episode highlights the value of philosophical inquiry not just as an academic pursuit but as a fundamental part of living a meaningful life.

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Greg: Wellcome to Unsiloed, this is Greg LeBlanc and I'm here today with Agnes Callard, who is a professor of philosophy at University of Chicago. Also the author of a couple of books, this one most recently is called Open Socrates. The case for a philosophical life and then. Before that, I don't know what the timing was, but there was this one. I think about. Seven years ago.

Agnes: That was first.

Greg: So yeah, it's called aspiration. The agency of becoming and then this little book, which is you and a couple of commentators called on anger, Paul Bloom, to the Butler and some other folks. Welcome Magnus.

Agnes: Thank you.

Greg: Well, look this book. I have to say this book appealed to me a great deal and it felt a little bit like I was doing a bit of archaeology into the origins of my view of the world. A lot of it, you know, resonated.

Agnes: So awesome.

Greg: With me, I think it it would be, you know, perhaps some bit of self deception to think that, you know, I live something of a philosophical life. I mean, it seems like an aspiration, at least that that I've had. And I know a lot of people who will claim to have the same aspirations. But it's not clear exactly what what that means. Right. And you offer a particular view of it. And in fact, I think you probably argue that it's the only real way to live a philosophical life, which is the the Socratic way right to live. Like Socrates does in some way to live a life of of inquiry, of of the pursuit of knowledge. Perhaps. Yeah. Is that. Is that a good way to summer? I mean, you have the punch. Different summarization.

Agnes: Absolutely. I think that that's a good way to summarize it. I think maybe the central way in which it differs from what a lot of people mean when they say philosophical life is that they imagine somebody spending a lot of time in a room by. Themselves. And. The Socratic version of the philosophical life. Is centered around the thought that you don't already have knowledge and you don't already have it. Not for an accidental reason, but because you yourself are not sufficient to the process of acquiring it, which is to say, thinking which is the process of acquiring knowledge. It's not something you can do by yourself. And so a philosophical life as presented in my book and as presented in the Socratic dialogues, I would argue. Is a life of human interaction. It's a way of engaging with the people around you.

Greg: That's the life of conversation, yes, right. But I think you also said somewhere that it's not just that thinking is a group activity or at least that dyadic activity, but it's it's also work, right. I think you said some people view thinking as akin to breathing something that's kind of kind of automatic, but I think you know, we all know that.

Unknown Speaker: Hmm.

Greg: Thinking is is you know you, you can. You can be a lazy thinker and you can be someone who actually takes it seriously.

Agnes: Yeah. So it is. I think it's actually work in two ways. It is different from breathing. In two ways. One way in which is different from breathing is that yes, it requires a certain amount of effort, and I sort of think another way to put the point I just made earlier is like nobody's really willing to put that much effort in and just until someone else pushes them. And so the ways we push each other in our interactions. Are crucial to thinking so there's effort involved.

Unknown Speaker: Or.

Agnes: But there's another thing which is. That Aristotle draws this distinction between akinesis and an energeia and Energia is the actuality, or the completion, and and energeia is completed every moment in time. It's like seeing or something breathing, maybe not be a great example, but seeing or just like enjoying a work of art where at every moment you're. Fully enjoying it. And he distinguishes that from a process which is not complete at every moment, but is moving towards some kind of completion point, like building a house, building a house is not completed every moment when you only have. The basement? You haven't have the. Just yet thinking is more like a kinesis and less like an air gate, and I think a lot of people think of it as like an air. They think of it as an actuality, but so do you think it's a process? It's a process of acquiring gradually acquiring knowledge. And so it's work and you're working your way towards a goal.

Greg: Yeah. We also talked about the distinction between problem solving and and questioning. So I mean it seems like, yes, I think decision theorists and cognitive psychologists, they also know that there is. Kind of thinking, fast thinking, slow, you know, easy thinking and hard thinking. But I think most of the things that they would characterize as as thinking is is concerned with problem solving, right, which is not. Necessarily a philosophical activity, right?

Agnes: Right. So. A. A problem is something that you it's like an obstacle. It's where there's something in the way of doing something else that you want to get done, and you're removing the problem so that you can go on with the doing the thing you wanted to do in the first place. I say obstacle is just the Latin version. It's like a very direct translation of problem, which is a Greek word problema. And so like, if there was a big boulder in front of you or something you couldn't get and you'd have to, like, work around the boulder or make the boulder move or something like that. You don't care about the boulder. You're not interested in the boulder. As soon as the boulder is removed, you forget about the boulder forever. The the thing you do to problems is dissolve them or remove them. And what dictates sort of like your motivation and your behavior is the thing that you wanted to do independently of having this problem, like get somewhere, and I think philosophy concerns itself not with problems with questions where the thing that you actually want is the answer to the question and you're not trying to answer the questions so that you can get on with something else that you were doing anyway. That's what you were doing. You were on a quest. And when that it's still both problems, both problem solving and question answering are can I say scenario subtle sense, their emotions, their processes? OK, so they're similar in that way, but they're different in that with the question, there's a sense in which. The process leads to a sort of like self culmination where like the answer to the question, kind of is the culmination of the process of questioning and it's you can almost say you really fully understand the question when you have the answer so that there's an internal relationship to the question and the answer whereas. With problem solving, you know you can solve like anything that gets the problem out of the way. It's fine. You don't need a deep understanding of the problem. Like if you were trying to move the boulder and someone else is like look, you could just go around.

Greg: It then that'll be fine. So problem solving presumes that you. Your objective is given right or as we.

Agnes: Right. It's given that it's independent of the problem.

Greg: Yeah. And so we economists, we would say, you know your your yeah your preferences right you have the utility map and and and that's the thing that you start with. Yeah. Right. And the questions are primarily about how do you maximize it or optimize it or you know achieve the goal or or.

Agnes: Get. Yeah.

Greg: You know, get rid of whatever standing in the way of the goal. And and you said that people, when they're confronted with questions, real questions, deep questions, philosophical questions, they tend to convert them. Into problems. Why? Why is that? I mean is it is it for fear? Of. Asking the important questions for fear of.

Sort of. You know, digging deeper to figure out the the why or what the goal ought to be.

Agnes: So I think can be for a bunch of different reasons. Maybe let me go back for a second and say something about the economists and the preferences, because I think this is something where. In a way, I keep coming back to a certain difference that I have with, like the economic way of thinking. I think that maybe the fundamental difference is just whether you treat preferences as given or not. And so like from in aspiration and in this book, what I'm interested in is how do we get preferences? Because it seems like a lot of our preferences are actually the product of a fair amount of work that we do. On ourselves or the product of asking oneself the question what ought I to prefer? What is good and? And so like so that's just to sort of characterize my project broad. I think that. So if we if we take like let's say the Turing test right is an example of turning a question into a problem. So you know around the time when Turing was writing his the famous paper in which he presented the Turing test, this was like the era of the first computers. This was the time in which the word computer. Is transitioning from, meaning a human being who does calculations for you to a mechanical computing device. And people were asking themselves they could already see that these devices were going to get, well, much more complicated. And they're like, what would it be for one of these things to think? And that's a hard question. It's. It's hard to know, like it's hard to even know how to get your bearings on the question. What would it be for a machine to think? You start to realize? Wait a minute, I'm not actually even sure what it means for a human to think, right? You sort of feel at sea and then Turing comes along and he's like, look. I'm gonna propose a test. Take your mechanical computing device and put it in one room. Take a human being and put them in another room and then have a second human being. And if they can't tell which is which through a set of like signals being sent, then we're gonna count that computer as thinking and. The appeal of that was like we could sort of sidestep all of these difficult questions and now we have. A test and. And we can present the results of that test even to somebody who wasn't even interested in this question, to start with. Right. And so there are a lot of advantages to problem solving. Problem solving generally involves making use of established mechanisms. So we tend to like there tends to be an algorithm available for the solution of a problem, because we tend to construct problems with reference to available tools.

Greg: And so. So in other words, we grab definitions off the shelf, for instance, right. I mean you can. In most things where you can't get started until you have the definitions.

Agnes: Right, right. We grab definitions and we grab like for instance, it was already clear to Turing that something that computers did and humans did is send signals, right? They both send signals. So what you could do is you could have them both be sending signals to a judge and then. You could set it up that way. And now you're not asking them a question about what's going on in the mind of the mechanical device or for that matter, what's going on in the mind of the human being. Right. You're just comparing 2. Sets of signals. And we have like mechanisms for doing that. And but I think the example you know, if you think about where we are today, I mean I wrote in my book large language models have clearly passed the Turing test. I think that's even more obviously true now than when I wrote it, right? Well, so when large language models started passing the Turing test. Nobody said Ohh they passed. I guess they think nobody said that, right? And so it was sort of this test that was only we were really only willing to take seriously as long as nothing passed it. And now we're like, yeah, but I mean, are they? Looking and so it seems like we converted the question into a problem, but there was the the main sort of residue was left over of the problem of actually not thinking.

Greg: Well, but I mean, decision theorists and economists have tried to acknowledge that preferences are endogenous, right. And maybe there are first order and 2nd order preferences. Why is that account insufficient? Right. So you could be an alcoholic and say I want a drink, but also, you know, don't want to be. And. Holic, I mean that seems to be very different from the project that you're working on, which is where you have a set of preferences and you you kind of want to have a different set of preferences or you you want to go down some route which will perhaps help you achieve or discover these new preferences. I mean, this seems like a big part of what we do as people, but. You don't really have a good account for this.

Agnes: I think the word preferences, if we could trust word preferences with the word values, maybe we get something into view which is. Like. Nobody just sees themselves as having preferences. I mean, maybe about food or something or like tasted movies. But like, we actually think that we want to do things because they're. Good. We think we pursue goals because those goals are actually objectively valuable and we think we could learn about some of our goals that they turn out not to be valuable. You wouldn't be like, well, that's my preference. I'm still gonna go ahead and do it. We'd be like, I guess I better get a reorient. And so I think that what the, the sort of basic framework of economics has trouble getting into view is the process of regulating our goals in the light. Of the truth.

Greg: So for instance, you use a couple of examples. The example of you know whether you should become a vampire or a parent. Those two are in the same right in the same ballpark, but you know, when you become a parent or a vampire, you become a different person in many ways, right. A different thing you have. Different values. Is it possible for us? To evaluate those values. If we don't have them, I mean, I remember when I was faced with the possibility of staying in academia or becoming an investment banker and and I thought it wasn't about that. I didn't want the money. It's just I thought, you know, like, I don't want to have the values of an investment banker. And I know I don't want to be the person that I'm probably going to become. I mean, can we kind of use empirics? To make some kind of prediction about, you know, what will happen if we go down some route and and evaluate from a current current position.

Agnes: I think that definitely yes. If what you think is that a set of values is mistaken, because I think that is something you can know without holding those values. And the way that you what you could be wrong, but the thought would be they're not real values, right? They're the illusion of some things appearing valuable to you when it actually isn't. So let's say, you know, some people pursue money as an end in itself. I'm not saying this is what I'm meant to, but let's just say this ourselves discusses this. He calls it the money. Maker OK sort of error. An ethical error that people make. And he thinks, you know, it's a pretty serious pathology because money essentially is instrumental value. And so it's useful in the pursuit of other ends. And so you have, there has to be something else that you care. It's like problem solving, right. Money is a way to solve problems, but you need to have the independent thing that orients you towards the good in the light of which you then want to remove the obstacles in the way of that. But if instead you treat the money itself as your goal, you're messed up. Your values are not. They're they're wrong, but as you value something that isn't valuable in the way in which you value it, you value it as intrinsically good when it's only instrumentally good. OK, I absolutely think you can know all of that without getting yourself into it. In fact, arguably you can't know it if you let yourself get into it, because once you let yourself get into it, you become captive to that illusion and money. Appears to you to be intrinsically good. I talked to a guy who used to work on Wall Street and he said. You know everybody that worked on Wall Street, at least when he worked there, had a number that was the number which when they or a bank account would reach that then they were going to quit. And every every he said, everyone he knew could tell you at any they had a spreadsheet open, they knew what their net worth was and they could tell you at any given time what it was and. And like how far it was from their number. But that what people tended to do was raise the number. Yeah, the number keeps moving up. Right? So, like, that's a description of, like, a pathological state of affairs where on the one hand, the having the number in the 1st place indicates a kind of awareness, right, that I don't need infinite amounts of money. I maybe need a certain amount to live. Whatever. Kind of life I wanna live. But then that you get sucked into a world and a mindset where no matter what, how much you get into that never quite seems like enough. Absolutely. You can see that, I think. I can see from the outside that doesn't. Look like a very good life. There's a different problem, though, when it you think it is good. That is when you think, look, maybe parenting would be a good way to live, or maybe vampiric city would be a good way to live. I take those examples partly from Lori Paul, right? So her she had this book called Transformative Experience in which those two examples figure as the two central examples. And so I'm sort of. Continuing that conversation with Laurie and. And I think you know, a lot of people might just be like, well, vampires are evil. I might be inclined to say that like they they, like, kill people. So I don't wanna do that. But maybe you're gonna. You could be you. There's option of like, you know, donated blood or whatever. So you're not gonna be evil, but that that'd be essential, right. I'm gonna be an evil vampire and then it's like, well, it's this other mode of living where you're immortal, but you only come out at night. And you look really cool and you have all these powers, but you're separate from human civilization. And like, that's like a different mode of living. And you're asking yourself, should I? Have that other mode of living, and so and Laurie, what she's trying to do is get you to see that a lot of their, like, transitions in life really are kind of that dramatic, that it's becoming apparent is a really big transition. You're kind of becoming a different person. Your fundamental core values are shifting in that you're coming to value. The being who didn't even exist before. And so she wants to sort of problematize or have you puzzled over how. Could you make such a decision?

Greg: Yeah, I mean, I I remember had a conversation with a friend of mine and she said, you know, she didn't want to have children. And I said, well, why? And and she said, well, you know, it would get in the way of all things that I'm, you know, that I currently want to do. Well, you know, how do you know that you would want to do them once you have the child? Right. And, you know, we we don't know, but I mean. You can kind of do some empirical research. A little bit, right?

Agnes: Right. In fact, we can learn that we wouldn't. That is, I can know that if I have a kid, my preferences will shift. And like I right now, I love. I'm staying out late at night and partying. But if I had a kid, what I would love to do is take care of my kid. That is the answer for me. The question which set of preferences. Should I be trying to satisfy? In order to answer that question, I have to ask myself something. Well, which is better? That is, which set of objects that I'm valuing in? Both cases is. Actually more valuable.

Greg: You, you, you spend a lot of time in your, in your work talking about I guess more sentences. Kind of the idea I value this but I know it's not valuable right or it you know I I think this but but I know it's not true I mean so don't we have to start there in order to. Acquire knowledge or to. Acquire the the value. The right things. Don't we have to start with some admission of of imperfection? But but. But it's very difficult.

Agnes: Yeah. So I'm very excited. You're asking me more sentences. I've talked a lot about this book and very few people have want to talk about that. So I I don't talk a lot about them, but I deal with them in one chapter of the book, and it's an important chapter. So of. Open Socrates not of aspiration. So a more sentence has the form of something like P, but I don't believe it. Right or not, P but I do. We'll just focus on P, But I don't believe it. Those differences are not very important and so. Uhm. Let's say that some example of I use in my book is. Honey doesn't spoil, but let's say that I Agnes don't believe that. That is, I think honey spoils just like everything else. I'm just not aware of this fact. Right. So this is like, a fact about the world that honey doesn't spoil, but that Agnes is unaware of that doesn't. And normally you might think that for any fact about the world, any inhabitant of that world could believe it, at least conceivably right. And like you could believe this, that honey doesn't spoil. But Agnes doesn't believe that. That's something you could believe. But I can't. Look, I can't believe it. That is. I can't say this sentence. It doesn't spoil, but I don't believe that I just said it isn't spoil that first part of that sentence in expressing in a vowing and asserting the proposition. What I'm doing effectively is saying that. I do believe it, right? And this is a philosophical paradox, and philosophers are just like, deeply, deeply puzzled by this. Like like many, many philosophers spend much of their lives on this problem and the outside world, I think might just be like, why are you guys so obsessed with this? This these more sentences, I mean, beckenstein famously sort of thought like, this is like. Moore's great contribution to the world. And I think it's because there's something the more sentence is not a contradiction, right? If I were to say honey spoils and it doesn't spoil, we can see why. I can't believe that. I can't believe. Because it can't be true, because something and its. Opposite can't both be. The case. But the thing that I can't believe can be true. It might be true. It might be that honey doesn't spoil, but. I don't believe that but. I can't say that sentence. I can't believe it to be true. It's a blind spot for me, OK? And now it looks like it's a blind spot. I'm just about honey, but about anything I'm wrong about that is anything that I'm wrong about. I can't believe that I'm wrong about that. Why? Because in believing. And I believe that it's true. That's just part of what belief is, is that you believe that your beliefs are true. You wouldn't have that belief if you didn't think that was the case. And so you were saying? Ohh doesn't philosophy begin from like realizing that you're wrong? I think. Well, I mean, if it did, according to most philosophers, philosophy impossible because you can't be aware that you're wrong because being aware of that involves like thinking that The thing is right. OK, what I try to do in that chapter by book is say, actually you can. Leave this kind of sentence. You can believe it in the context of a conversation where you're driven. To assert it. And so I can't sitting in my room by myself. I can't say anything like honey doesn't swear, but I don't believe that. But in the context of a conversation where you're refuting me and you're getting me to see that I'm wrong about something. I can't actually say it, and I give examples of how this actually transpires in one of the Platonic dialogues. And so in a way, what I'm what I'm trying to do there is to say that there is this state from which philosophy begins, which is a kind of self-awareness of being wrong. But it's a fundamentally social condition. It's what happens in an interaction where you've pushed me on something. You've pushed me to contradict myself. And then I'm. Like, oh crap. Like I'm saying a thing, but I can see. How it's wrong? So it's there's a very special circumstance that makes possible that kind of sentence. And so the kind of humility from which philosophy springs is itself like a social achievement.

Greg: But I mean, is there a difference between the? The questions you call untimely and sort of ordinary questions, I mean yeah, because in the scientific world you can say, you know, I believe this, but I could very well be wrong, right? You you basically speak in probabilistically, right? You think you speak provisionally, you you you have provisional beliefs. You know, I believe that the. Earth goes around the sun, but hey, you know, if you show me XYZ, I'll. I'll dish it. Right? Why can't we do that with with untimely questions and say you know. I. I well my child, but. You show me you know. You show me that he's a bad, bad kid and I'll I'll stop loving him or something like that.

Agnes: So the first thing to do is just to say there are a lot of sentences that are similar to more sentences that are not paradoxical and a lot of what passes for humility in our world are versions of those sentences. So, for example, I might well be wrong about this, or I'm wrong. About lots of things. Or in the the preface to a book like probably there's something wrong in here or I was wrong in the past or even I will be wrong about this in the future. If you know you're forgetful or whatever, right. None of those are paradoxical. So you really have to be very sort of precise about I am wrong. About this claim right now, that's the only one that raises the paradox. Not I might be. I could be. I probably am. I will be. I was. All of those are non paradoxical and and so in fact you can sort of see that people gravitate towards those non paradoxical claims. It doesn't hurt to say those ones. People are very happy to be like, oh, I'm wrong about all sorts of things I might be wrong about this, like I'm just human, right? That's those are not hard things to say. And I think you're right that with respect to many of the claims that we would make. What we can do is engage in some amount of suspension of judgment about that claim, and that's what we're signaling when we say I could be wrong is that and to some degree suspending judge about this. I haven't finished my ingrained to this. I'm not, I'm not certain I don't. Know I don't know. About this. What what I think so, I think there's a special subset of questions that philosophy concerns itself with, and maybe it's worth introducing because we haven't done that for our audience here. Is I call these untimely questions and the reason why I call them untimely is that there's a certain order that questions are supposed to go in with respect to their answers. That is the question supposed to come first, just ask the question and then get the answer. Untimely questions go the other way. They go in the wrong order. That's whether untimely you have the answer and then you ask the question and the problem with a situation in which you ask and you have the answer and then you ask the questions, you can't really ask a question that you take yourself to have already answered. You can't pose it to yourself. If I think that 2 + 2 is 4, I can't say what's 2 + 2. And I can say it, I can say the words out loud. I can move my mouth in that way, but I'm not really asking because, like, I know it's for. So I'm not really not really wondering about it. And so that pushes the the the dialectic back onstage. OK, why are there these answers that we are that we start with? And so I think that like in order to live your life, it's a little bit like preferences in order to live your life, you kind of need to take as given a bunch of answers to the question, how should I live my life? Because you haven't had time to engage in inquiries like what preferences should I have? So there's just, like a bunch of answers. That we get for free. What I argue in the book is that they group into two kinds, some of them you get for free from your body. So we call these bodily preferences. So things like when I'm hungry, I think I should eat like I should eat is like the answer to a question what should I do that's just given to me. I never had to. Ask the question. It's just shows up. But also we have like a bunch of answers to what should I do that we base off of the people around us and how they behave and how members of our group are supposed to comport themselves. And I would say this is probably a bigger territory than our bodies, everything from. You know, do we believe in God? What holidays do we celebrate? How do we dress? What facial expressions do we use? What kind of emotions do we express in conversation? How far do you stand apart from your locking conversation? I mean, just a vast territory of social dynamics that are we just like picking up from the people around us. How I'm supposed to act? We get a bunch of answers. We just. We're docile and. We just follow all those things we just. Imitate people around us. OK, so these. Are answers. They are answers to questions like how should I treat the people around me? How far should I stand from people around me?

Greg: These are all ethical questions, including like, should I eat this sandwich right?

Agnes: Exactly. There are questions about at least broadly ethical. How should I live my life and how should I spend my time? What should I do so? Broadly speaking, ethics answers the question. What should I do? OK, so the difficulty about untimely questions, we're gonna get back to more sentences is that? Because you think you already have the answer and it's not just that, but you're using the answer in the living of your life, you can't suspend it for the same reason that you can't suspend your life. That is, you can't put your life on pause and not be living it for a while while you're inquiring into the question of, for instance, should I even be doing philosophy like? Well, wait a minute, I am doing it right now. I haven't put that on hold, right. So there's a sense in which. You have to do any philosophy to do anything you do. You're already doing it with an investment in your life and with a bunch of presuppositions about how you should be living and and so on. Those kinds of questions, you can't suspend judgment, and so you can't say something like who knows whether I should be a parent or not, whether I should care about my kids or. Not it's like you do care about your kids.

Greg: So it's not simply bias, right? I mean, we talk about bias and why you know, you oftentimes need someone else to highlight your your bias. I mean, this goes deeper. You, you can't actually. Observe how you observe. You can't actually see in a true transparent way how you go about living, right? I mean, why can't we? Why can't we just create some detached perspective to say, you know what? I'm going to look at myself as a, as a, as an independent observer. I mean sometimes. People ask me. You know, why are you? Doing. That, and my first instinct is to provide some. Kind. Of. Internal account of my intentionality, but then I stopped and I put my social science hat on and I say maybe it's because I, you know, was exposed to this ad this morning. Maybe it's because of what my parents told me. You know, why can't we we do that. All the way down.

Agnes: I think you can. You can do the social science thing I think. That that can, like the social scientists. I know like. They have a bunch of blind spots from being social scientists and being social scientists of the particular kind that they are. Well, they're very invested in certain modes of describing the situation that they haven't sufficiently like interrogated. And so the point is just that you, you still, you still haven't. You haven't peeled off your skin, you're doing it. Very characteristic thing that you feel comfortable doing.

Greg: You're like, why did you let yourself get influenced by that ad? Why did you, you know, listen to your.

Agnes: Right.

Greg: Parents. Right. Right.

Agnes: But. I I guess also like so. So that's that's one way to think about it. But but the other way is that a lot of times there's something a little bit there's like a little bit of bad faith in the social science analysis in the. The person, insofar as they're actually going to engage with the ad and make the choice and whatever they're they're not going to adopt that other point of view. And so they're sort of they're sort of stepping outside their own point of. View. For the purpose of saying something intellectually sophisticated about that situation. But. Their response to it is driven in the same old ordinary ways, and they're still going to make the same choices, etcetera. And so like it would only be and in some cases this I think can happen like if in some way this sort of social science point of view can inform. How? Like what you think is valuable in the at the decision moment about like what adds to pay attention to or whatever. But I I think we can do some of.

Unknown Speaker: This.

Agnes: I think that so. One thing is that I think what philosophical training is, is training and simulating an interlocutor who objects to you, right? That's what you do in philosophy grad schools.

Greg: So if you learn to become a philosopher, you have less need of. A Socrates in your life.

Agnes: So I think it's interesting because you might think so in that you certainly like there's. Uh. A sort of an amount of progress that you can make that an ordinary person might need an interlocutor for, but when you get to the frontier of your thinking, you once again need the interlocutor. So, like the way that that shows up for me is like I give a lot of talks, I go to. Like I go to places and I like present the ideas in my book. And. I am just. Really often asked questions I didn't think of. And it kind of amazes me like it's like the audience is doing a magic trick because I'm a professional philosopher and I was simulating that. I was modeling them in my head. I was trying to predict what kind of questions they would ask when I wrote this thing, and I spent a lot of time doing that. And they're just like in a. Second, coming up with. You know a thing I didn't think of. And so I do think that philosophers are better at this than ordinary people, but they're also doing more of. And so they actually need interlocutors they turn out to interlocutors, actually. Even more.

Greg: So you don't need, I mean I think one of the points in in the book was that maybe you should go and find one of these gadflies and spend some time with them. You talked about how when you were, I guess an undergraduate, you went to the art Institute, just accosting people at random and said, hey, can I can I refute? Whatever it is you're gonna say, maybe go out and find people like that. But, I mean, Socrates didn't have people like that. He had he was he had. Yeah. He had also bodies. And he had credo and all those folks. I mean did. Talking to them was that necessary? Was that a necessary part of him becoming?

Agnes: Socrates. Yes, I think it was. So I think that you know we we don't have much by way of young Socrates. And we have the Parmenides which is like. Older Plato, giving us a little bit of. Socrates being, you know, thrown around the ropes by for amenities, but basically what we see in the Platonic dialogues, especially in those dialogues that really that scholars think really represent the historical Socrates, are representations of Socrates. When he was in. Full swing as we were right and so we don't see him getting there, but we see his sort of description of like his process which is 1. Where he learns by refuting people and by refuting people he gets better refutational tools and those refutational tools just are the things that we, you know could name as like Socrates's principles like his views, his ideas. So. I think that you know it is a striking fact about the Socratic method that it is that there. Are two different roles. That is, there's the role. There's the Socrates role who's like the gadfly, and then there's the role of the interlocutor. Who's the person he's refuting. And those rules are quite asymmetrical, both in that they do different things. But even more significantly, they require very different amounts of prior training. So sometimes people ask me, like, you know, thing I don't discuss in this book, because Socrates don't just doesn't discuss it, but I think it's a pretty significant part of my life is like, how do you be a philosophical parent? That is, how do you engage philosophically with your kids and? There's a sort of thing that I hear said often, which is like, oh, children are natural philosophers because they're always asking questions. Now, that's doesn't correspond to my experience of my children, but there might be. There might be a wise stage when the kid is like 3 or whatever, but no, no. My kids don't walk around constantly asking questions. They're not obsessive questioners. What they are is answerers. That is, my kids are very happy to be interrogated on almost any topic and answer as though they knew. Just like Socrates interlocutors, they love people like answering. They're ready to answer. They're excited by the thought that you wanna hear their answer. And I think answering requires less training than asking. It requires less kind of experience in philosophical activity. And so Socrates.

Greg: Sounds like my MBA's.

Agnes: Had to kind of relegate himself to the Socrates role because he was dealing with a bunch of people who didn't know how to do philosophy yet cause he was just making it up. But he says, like in the gorgeous. I'd love it. I'd love to meet Socrates. I'd love it if somebody would refute me. I would prefer. That.

Greg: Well, I mean, a lot of people say that Socrates was a jerk, and even philosophers will say that he was a bit of a jerk and that all he did was ask questions. And unlike the other ethical theories, right? Stoicism, epicureanism. Or, you know, we talked about utilitarianism. Down to logical approaches now, and that's the stuff that we typically will teach in, say, an ethics class here in Business School. Why has no one? Offered up the Socratic view as a. Current ethical philosophy to compete with those others.

Agnes: Until now. So that's what I'm doing in my book now. I think you can. It's it's a fair question, but you know utilitarianism shows up in the 19th century because people like Mill and Bentham were rediscovering. The ancient Epicureans and kind of seeing ways in which they Food systematize and universalize some of their thinking and you can ask why wasn't just discovered before? It's like, well, great, that we did it at any time, right. And you know, in the previous century you had Conte doing the same thing. For the Stoics, that is kind of says I'm a modern day stoic. And he's taking this stoic idea of cosmopolitanism. Of having a kind of rationality. Take a legalistic form where what? Your fund, what fundamentally the rational thing to do is to like behave as an appropriate member of the group that you're in, where that group is then defined in terms of its power of self. Legislation, right. But that's to deeply stoical thought that. On to sort of adapting, universalizing. So that's you have kont in the 18th century. You have a mill in the 19th century and the 20th century you have people like Philip of Food and Roslyn, Hearst House. Those with Anscombe to doing that for Aristotle. So you get new Aristotelian virtue ethics. Which is really a way of trying to put a third menu item on the table when you've got utilitarianism and continuum, the thought is no, you don't need to maximize utility. And no, you don't need to be following these moral rules and respecting human. Rights. What you should be doing is exhibiting the virtues of justice, generosity, temperance, etc. Be like the front of Moss. Be well brought up and kind of be an exemplar. Pursue the noble right. That's Aristotelian ethics, and you could say, why did that show up so late? I don't know. But I'm kind of right on schedule here, right? I'm in 21st century and I'm saying we can take the thought of Socrates and create a systematic. Ethics out of. I think you're right to point to this thing that seemed to stand in the way. So the thing that seemed to people to stand in the way was, wasn't Socrates just asking questions. That is isn't. He kind of just like. That I put in the book is like pouring a sort of critical thinking sauce over everything else, just like just think about everything you were doing and think about, think about a little harder and you know, be open. Minded and be humble and whatever. And I want to say no, there's just a lot more to the way that, that, that Socrates was pursuing his inquiries to the point where there are actual ethical precepts that I can pull out of these texts, not hard to pull them out cuz they're literally stated in propositional form and over and over again. Fact, that is, Socrates, maybe more than any other thinker in history, hence sayings, right. And he'll like. List them. For instance, at the end of the gorgeous, he's like, let me list all of my views. Here they are. So it's not that even have views. It's not that they weren't ethical views. It's not that he didn't argue for them. He did. It's that the way he argued for the most by interrogating other people because he thought in some way that his views. Because everybody had to have and so he could show you that actually, you you're callicles, right? And and you're like, I want. All I want is hedonistically pursue pleasure and be immoderate suckers. Like. No, that's not what you want. Cuz

I'm gonna show you. You want my thing. You wanna you. Want to make sure that you don't do injustice and you're more interested in that than in the question of whether anyone does injustice to you? I'm gonna. I'm gonna make those words come out of your mouth. Calculates it's still clear. This is what talking he thinks he thinks doing injustice is worse than suffering. But he's not just gonna say that what he's gonna do is extract that from the mouth of Callicles. And so. You know, you could have imagined a similar problem arising for and I believe it did arise for the sort of originators of neurosis Italian virtue ethics, where the contents and the utilitarians come to them. And they're like, well, how do you solve the trolley problem? You know, do you do you, do you make the trolley turn it so that it only kills one person, but then you're using that person as a means, or do you let it go and not interfere? And then you haven't wronged anyone, but you've violated the utilitarian principle not to have it kill 10 people. I mean, retellings are like guys. That's ethics is not about solving trolley problems like you guys are just wrong in how you're framing the basic idea of. Ethics and the content you just heard, like, well, this idea of like, be just or be generous. Don't you have to cash it out as either maximize utility or follow the moral law? And insofar as we're gonna grant to the aristotelians and that the content regions may not willing to grant this, no, there's a third thing that is there is a. A way of speaking the language of virtue that doesn't reduce to either of these other two. That's what it. Is to recognize. A distinct menu item and so. You might say, well, I mean, you know, isn't this inquiry isn't gonna boil down to and. And the thought is well, no. And I'm gonna try and show you how it doesn't boil down to those things. But like, that's the case.

Greg: I have to make. Yeah, but I mean, can you be a philosopher and other things that's the same time. I mean, in this sort of. Also, by this question you know if I'm a philosopher, then how am I supposed to go and? Conquer all these lands and you know, get rich and do all that stuff. If I'm in the form all day, you know, asking questions.

Agnes: You can ask that like to can you be a utilitarian and like conquer all these lands? The answer might be no, cause it might be immoral to do that. Can you be a content and continue to conquer those lands? Nope. Once again, cuz you might be using a bunch of people as a means. Yeah, like your philosophical, ethical system is gonna constrain how you live your life. That's kind of the whole point of an ethical system. But I do think that the Socratic approach is 1. Can be inflected as a way of doing. You know, like a lot of what you were doing in your life, the Socratic approach says do all that same stuff inquisitively. Now, there may be some things you can't do inquisitively. Don't do those things, but. Or maybe there are some things that you can't do inquisitively, but you simply have to do them to survive or something, as long as they're not on just. That's fine, but. But the thought is like well, but can you? Let's take romance or something. Let's say politics. Let's take death. Right. So those are the three areas that talk about can you be a philosopher and be doing those things. And Socrates, I think goes out of his way to try. To say yes. That is, it's not just that those things can be done philosophically, but they're done best philosophically.

Greg: Yeah. And so it seems like most people would. Most people would think you need to kind of wipe the slate clean in order to free up some bandwidth for true beliefs, right? Or truth or knowledge. And and you talked a bit about Tolstoy, right once he started asking all these questions, he he entered into a state of despair. And he basically claimed that the examined life is is not worth living. And so, I mean, and a lot. Of. People will become fideists or something else after they start asking all these questions. So what? What was the problem there? What's the what was the mistakes that Tolstoy made? And what are the mistakes that people who? Generally fall into despair are making when they start asking a lot of deep questions.

Agnes: Yeah, so I get this question a lot and in fact, I've gotten it in. The form I had. A friend who got super into velocity and like you know, was asking themselves these questions and drove themselves into despair and didn't cheer up. Until they got out of it. A number of people have brought up they they this this happened to them was happened to a friend of theirs. And I always ask them. Tell me a little more about this friend of yours and how philosophy drove them to just spare. Here's two different scenarios of them really getting into philosophy that I can imagine one. The. Read a bunch of philosophy books and spent a bunch of time sitting by themselves pondering those books or writing notes to themselves about the books. That's scenario number one, scenario number 2. They found a way to engage philosophically with all the people in their lives, and so they were constantly having philosophy conversations with all the people around them. No one has ever yet said that it was #2. That is, no one has ever yet given me an anecdote of a friend who was driven into despair because he was able to engage the people around him philosophically. To such a degree. So, and that's also not what happened to Tolstoy, right? What happened to Tolstoy is that he drove himself to despair because he tried to do something by himself that you can only do with other people.

Greg: So with it, hopefully with the trained philosopher, or does it need to be, I mean.

Agnes: Socrates wasn't a trained philosopher, self trained.

Greg: Yeah. Yeah. But I mean, you also make a distinction between studiously trying to avoid error and courting error, but. By making assertions taking on beliefs, I mean, how are they different? Can you can you err too far in the direction of just trying to avoid mistakes?

Agnes: I think that you can't help but error in either of those directions unless you have an interlock ear. So in a way, this is like the central presentation that I give in the book of why inquiry requires 2 people is that in order to know anything, there are two things that have to be true of you. One is that you need to have some truths. That is, there needs to be some true things that you've got in your.

Unknown Speaker: Yeah.

Agnes: Yeah. No, anything that's. Not the case, but also you have to avoid it. Falsehoods, right? You can't just be believing bunch of false things and knowledgeable things like that. And now initially you might think, well, having truths avoid false is this the. Same. Thing and sort of retrospectively, if you have a truth that's correct, they are the same. That is, if you have any truth. For instance, if I learned that honey doesn't spoil, I've now avoided the. Falsehood that it does. But prospectively, when I'm not sure what I'm going to believe. Depending which of those two goals I'm optimizing for, I'll make the opposite choice. That is, if what I really want is. To have a. Truce then form a belief one way or the other, because that's the only shot at having a truce. And if you really want to have a bunch of truths as many trees as possible, form as many beliefs as possible, some are gonna be wrong. But at least you'll have as many truths as possible by forming as many beliefs as possible. If what you really want to do is avoid falsehood, suspend judgment about everything, then you'll avoid all the falsehoods. You won't have any falsehoods. If you don't have any beliefs. And so the problem here is that the two fundamental goals of inquiry are intention with one another. They pull you in two different directions, 1 of them is kind of think something have a view. Answer the question. Guess if you need to make something up. Make something up, you know is wrong. But still just say it, say something. And and that's the job of Socrates as interlocutor. And he'll, you know, he'll walk up to someone and say, OK, what's virtue? And they'll give the answer he's like, Nope. Try again. Right. And they just gotta keep trying. And then that person's job is to have a truth and Socrates's job. Is to question that and say wait a minute. I'm not sure I can accept that and hear the problems with it and and they work through it. And so you could save it. Socrates's job is the job of being the skeptic and the interlocutors job is the job of being the dogmatist. And both of those are vicious states considered by themselves. That is, you shouldn't be a skeptic and you shouldn't be. Pragmatist. But that's just to say that the person you should be is a person who is a social person.

Greg: Well, of course, most of the time when soccer teams came up to people and started doing this, people were like, yeah, I'm busy, you know, leave me alone and maybe even if they weren't busy, they would claim to be busy because they didn't find this to be enjoyable. I mean, why? Why don't people? I mean, I've always found this puzzling. You know, why don't people enjoy engaging in philosophical? Conversations. I mean, why? I mean, you said Socrates in in one sentence, if we wanted to. Boil it down as you know, persuade me or I'll persuade you. Yeah, right. But. If you walk up to somebody and say, hey, you know, persuade me or I'll persuade you, most people aren't interested in that, maybe they're interested in persuading the other person. But they're not particularly interested in being persuaded.

Agnes: Right. So the first thing to say is that Plato nowhere and Xenophon. I don't think anywhere. My knowledge of my my memory recalls xenophobes not as good. So I could be certain, but it records anyone just walking away from Socrates. That is the thing you describe doesn't happen. People don't do that. They in fact they respond, they are engaged by him. They walk away before he wants them to, so that's a fair thing to say, right? Well, you know, it's not even sampling, right? I mean, these are dramatic texts. They are. They are works of fiction. They're not records. Right. So how many?

Unknown Speaker: What's that?

Greg: People, when you went up to people on steps of Art Institute, engaged you. Earth.

Agnes: So the interesting thing is. That I believe all of them said yes to my initial question. Like do you want to have a? Philosophical conversation with me. Either all or almost all now my memory is just like not so clear and it's. A weird thing now which? Is that I've sort of told this story enough times that my. Telling it is overwritten my memory of it.

Greg: Why haven't you done it recently? Have you done?

Agnes: It I'll answer that in a second, but but so, so they all just agreed. But then when I actually tried to do it, they tried to get out of it really fast, way faster than what happens in the Socratic dialogues. So Socrates was clearly better at this than I was when I was.

Unknown Speaker: Oh.

Agnes: Like 18. I think that I think that I have spent my whole life since then figuring out how to do that but make it work and what I've found is walking up to strangers is not the way to do it. Socrates didn't do it that way. Actually, he didn't walk up to strangers. He always gets introduced to people. It's often people he knows or he or they know him from some context or whatever. What you got to do is. Turn yourself into the kind of person that people want to talk to, right? Like you wanna talk to me? You invited me on your podcast. That's not an accident. That's the thing I brought about. So, like, I've crafted my social world so that people are eager to talk to me and I can have inquiries with them. And that just takes more work than just walking up to random people. I just didn't understand when I was 18, how much work it took. To kind of get those conversations on the right footing, even when you start them on the right footing, as Socrates does in the Platonic dialogues, they go bad somewhere along the way, pretty much universally, that is, you know, people like youth, Afro. Unitus protagoras. Callicles. They're like, that's enough, Socrates. I'm. I've had enough of this. Right. So you're right about people seem to want to get out of it, but they actually are drawn into it. That is, they find it engaging. They find it kind of compelling. Kind of magnetic. You know, it's worth pointing out that Socrates was a world historical phenomenon, and such a kind of. Such a kind of attention magnet that after he died, people created a thing called the Socratic dialogue and all these people were writing these texts of Socrates talking to some guy, right. And we've lost most of them. But we have played and we have. Fun. And that's not like that doesn't happen to ordinary people, right? Ordinary people don't, like, get their life kind of immortalized, inspire other people to say these conversations are really important. We need to, like, create a record of this. So there's a sense in which people are very well aware that, like, we have to answer these questions, this is a really important thing that's just happened. But it's kind of there's a kind of high variance aspect to it, which is that like there's that group of people. And then there's a group. Of one to. Kill Socrates and he inspired both of those reactions.

Greg: I think he said that the most generous thing you could do for someone is to refute them, right? And so, I mean, why do most people not see it? See it that way? Why don't most people say, you know, please, please, please refute me? You know, I don't. I'll pay you. I'll pay good money and come, come and I use this. Sometimes I talk to my class about, you know, the the Pink Panther that. Cool. TV show or movie where the guy hired the other guy to jump out of the bushes and and try. To kill him, right? And to keep him on his toes and. And so I think instead of hiring yes men. Right. You know, we need to hire people in our organizations that are constantly trying to kind of poke holes and and, you know, Red team us and and and figure out what our blind spots. Actually are, but I mean that's not a huge industry. Why? Why don't people want that? Yeah.

Agnes: So there is some of it. Yeah, right. So good. This is a good point because the other thing, right, the thing you pointed out is. But Socrates thinks you should be grateful to people who refute you because they're doing a favor. Because if I refuse you, you're the one learning something. I already knew. Whatever I'm saying, right? So I'm not learning. And so it's the person being refuted who is being benefited in the interaction. And yet people don't see it that way. So I think I've heard of people, for instance. Paying people to find errors in their work or something, right? What's the difference? I think that. With a lot of these kind of fundamental questions. There is a skepticism or like a lack of faith, that we can improve upon what we've got. We're just trying to hang on to something because we don't think we have any reason to believe that anything better is on. Offer and so we feel like somebody is pulling the rug out from under us, taking away our resources for living our lives when there's like no hope that we could then get better ones, which is what Socrates thinks is. You know, like on offer for you. And so the people who want to be Red teamed or they want to a person to find their ears, it's because they're like, yeah. And then I'll just improve my work. So it's like just a win for me. But if you lacked faith in the philosophical enterprise, if you thought preferences are just given and that's it, then then you would think ohh someone is trying to hurt me by like taking away. Kind of my grip on.

Greg: Reality. It might also be a suspicion of their motivations. I mean, you talk about how politicization is a pathology of of politics, right? I mean, is it that we we can't distinguish between true disinterested philosophical conversations and? Battles of interest.

Agnes: I think that. One thing that happens to philosophical disagreements is that they get politicized when we lose hope in conducting them on philosophical terrain. So. You know, if you think about, like, what's happening at the heart of something like the abortion debate, it's like a a disagreement, A philosophical disagreement about an ethical disagreement about the value of a certain kind of life, the independence of a certain kind of life. The. What human rights entail for the mother, for the fetus? Those. Are all like. Questions that I tell you, we just don't know the answer to. And suppose that you saw well, there's no hope of getting answers to those questions, but like getting real answers, that is, there's no hope of getting. Knowledgeable answers, so it's just the answers I've got and the answer you've got, which is the opposite. One. And So what we're gonna do is instead of working through it, we're going to map this dispute onto a. Kind of game where one of us will be the winner of the game and one. Of us will be the loser. Of the game. Yeah, as you're a sum game. Yes. And so it's like, ohh if. You know, we repeal Roe V Wade. Then you've won. Let's say if you're on the other side. Right. And so there are, and then there'll be like, these kind of moments along the way that will take on this symbolic significance for me of, oh, I have one on this point here. But the the. So the politicization is. The inability to actually have the conversation because any attempt to have the conversation is going to be translate. You're platforming that person, right? It's gonna be translated into this sort of symbolic game. And we're very inclined to to do this with especially protracted disputes, even in a marriage, right? Even interpersonally with a friend, whatever. If there's been something where you've kind of for a long time not resolved it, you're gonna tend to politicize it, which is to say, to treat it as a. Kind of symbolic battle.

Greg: Well, I think there's also an ethics of persuasion, right. So in Business School, we always talk about ohh, you know, here's how you can get other people to, you know, do what, what what you want them to do and or here's how you can get people to do what is the right thing. But it always seems to me that there's a difference between. Getting them to do it by persuading them that it's the right thing and getting them to do it in in some other way, right by making them like you. Or. Offering them cookies or something like that. I mean, what? What does it mean to adhere to an ethics of of persuasion?

Agnes: I think that basically the thing you said earlier about obviously you or you persuade me is the crucial part that is persuaded to be persuaded if. The standard ethos is 1 where I'm just trying to bring it about by whatever means necessary that you have a certain belief.

Greg: Yeah. Get you to a sense to the proposition.

Agnes: Exactly. And maybe I don't even care whether you sent. Maybe I just care. You behave in accordance. With it or something, right? And but the thought there is like that might not be a success case if I was wrong in the 1st place, then if I've gotten you to agree with me, we're even worse off now. And so if I don't already take myself to have knowledge. Then I should view the success case in a disjunctive way. Is. We could succeed by me persuading you, or we could succeed by you persuading me. Those would both be equally successful resolutions of our interaction. And I think in the politicized interaction that's never going to be the case, it's never going to be the case with parties to an abortion debate that the person saying, look, we might both win by me becoming. Convinced that you're right about this, but the only way to conduct an inquiry, I think, is to have that view be shared among the participants or at the very least, it has to be the view of 1 of the participants. Suppose that I have that view, but you're actually right. Right. And maybe you don't have the view, that's OK because you're just going to teach me.

Greg: Is that is that politicization related to the impatience? That you talk? About right. Because you know when you start an argument or start doing some inquiry of some kind. I mean, oftentimes it requires a number of steps and a lot of people want to just cut to the chase. And so one way to cut to the chase is to just. Think about, well, you know, what are the spillover of facts or the implications or what's the probable intent and not actually listen to the the the questions. I mean is that is that related to the politicization driven in part by by? Patients.

Agnes: Yeah, I think that there's something right about that, because you do see much more politicization on a topic when people start to feel like it's urgent and then you get all this language that inflates the urgency as well of, like, lives are at stake. Someone's questioning my right to exist, right. There's ways of. To framing the situation that are meant to rule out the possibility that we could. Inquire about this.

Greg: And then it becomes a a fight instead of a an argument.

Agnes: Right. And what I think. Is that a fight? Is a pretend argument, and so in effect, you can't win a fight because you're. Trying to do something that is impossible given the tools that you've allowed yourself.

Greg: And I think in in one of the chapters of the book, you have a a view of of romance, which is a continual argument. Yeah. And, you know, it's funny. I've I've saw Sass in my whole life, which is why I guess I'm still unmarried. Yeah. No, I I I definitely agree with that. I mean, there's something very romantic about an argument. There's something very intimate. If you're doing it right where you're actually listening and being listened to, it's very special. It's not something that you can achieve with most people is. I mean, it seems like a very. Rare view.

Agnes: So my husband said to me like yesterday, he was like, I think the key to fighting in marriage. We had just had a fight is to realize that all the same norms for interaction apply during the fight, as otherwise that is the fight. Isn't some land of exceptions where you can suddenly be me? I mean right in an ordinary interaction with someone you love, you would never try to be cutting mean, sarcastic, whatever. You would never do that like to your child, to someone you love. We we don't think it's OK to hurt people we love, but we have this kind of all bets are off thing. With fights where it's. Like, well, now we're enemies. And so now I'm gonna try to hurt you. And we don't put it that way. Well, you deserve it. Or accountability or whatever you got other language to dress up. Our cruelty to one another. And I think you know what my husband was saying was like, fighting is a really important part of merit. Rage. But you lose that value if it becomes this like land, where cruelty is permitted. And so you have to learn how to fight, like respectably and responsibly. That is not how not to fight, because there are many things that is. You know, fight again is now a word that maybe I don't wanna. He was using the word fight, right. He wasn't thinking about. He meant argue, but like argue passionately. Like, where you really care and where something is really at stake. And you really disagree and it's significant. And right, that's what we mean by sort of like a marital dispute. He thinks like, those are pretty important in marriage. And you shouldn't be avoiding them or trying not to have them. But the only way to not avoid them is to learn to behave decently during them.

Greg: Yeah. I mean, one time I got into a fight with a girlfriend where she accused me of always wanting to. Be right. And and I said, well did does that mean you want to be wrong? I I think there's a difference between wanting to convince someone you're right, as opposed to wanting to actually be right, which can result. From being persuaded just as often as it can be. Can result from failure to find an adequate objection.

Agnes: Right. Like I think, like let's say, how does one deal with? You always want me to be right in a philosophical way. And you might think, well, like on the one hand. Everyone wants to be right all the time. In fact, we only want to be with people who want to be, right, right. You wouldn't want to be with someone who ever wanted to be wrong. But it's not even clear you could want to be wrong. But then the question is OK, but like, where is the accusation coming from? What is? Being tracked by that. And it might be something like ohh you're too willing to have fights or something. You're too willing to try to stand your ground when we're when I think something else. And you should just let it go and like, kind of agree to disagree. Or it could be something like. You're just not listening to me. That is, you're too stuck on the thing you're saying before, and you can't hear this alternative that I'm presenting you with, which if you kind of. We're attuned to it. You would see that. Is a way of objecting to the thing you said before that could be phrases you don't care enough about what's right, right? And like. I think that if you were a philosophical disputer, you would care about figuring out exactly which one of those things the person was saying. But is it would matter to you be significant to you. You wouldn't just be trying to come up with a witty retort or a cutting. Reply you. It would be like you would want to know. OK, where is that coming from?

Greg: And so if people were to adopt this Socratic view of of ethics, I mean, what would we lose? I'm always interested in trade-offs, so I mean is there anything and and I think you make the point that Socrates is not a big believer in tragic choices or or choice. He's interested in the unity of the good, the unity of the self, the unity of of knowledge. But are there any trade-offs?

Unknown Speaker: Thanks.

Greg: Umm. I mean, is there anything that? We would would have to give up.

Agnes: You know what's interesting is that. All four of the ethical theories that are kind of on the table here are trade-offs, denying ethical theories, that is, utilitarianism, because obviously gonna be pluses and minuses. But there's no minus to picking this option that has the most pluses, right. There's no trade off there. So your utilitarian. Choice is just you just do it. Just Max it every. For your content right then there is, you know, either there is some kind of contradiction in your maxim, or there isn't, and if there. Isn't you're good? And you know, it may be that you have to end up like suffering a lot or whatever, but from a content point of view, it's not a moral trade, it's morally cilium. Aristotelian point of view. You don't hear the virtues kind of like

Socrates, right? So there it's just he just takes on most of the unity, the virtues thesis, this. There's a slight wrinkle, but I think it's not a big one. And so here it's not like the Economist versus Socratic intellectualism. It's just the Economist versus ethical theory. And what you might say is like the the language of tradeoffs is appropriate at a certain level of reflection. Say when when you are. Solving the problem of getting necessary conditions on something or whatever right? Like so, there are necessary conditions on human life. Like you need food and warmth and you know we, we, we and health and all of that and. There are a bunch of different sort of needs we have in order to survive and sometimes not the same like we have to decide which of those directions we're gonna point our resources towards and. There could be trade-offs there. But it's almost definitional of speaking at the level of ethics, which is not to speak of necessary conditions, but to speak of sufficient conditions for happiness that we're not talking in terms of trade-offs. That said, I think that. One thing to say that I think is right, don't feel sure about it is that. Socratic intellectualism as a mood of life might presuppose quite a bit of wealth. That is, it is a lifestyle that is going to be fitting to a people who have a fair amount of. Leisure. And who are, you know, generally just like not living anywhere close to subsistence?

Greg: Because because the savage commands of the body or not bothering you 24/7, right?

Agnes: Exactly like and also savage commands of kinship, like if your kin are threatening to kill you all the time. So there's a certain sense in which philosophy is a leisure activity, and leisure is appropriate for rich people. And so I do think that Socratic. This could be like 1 answer to why hasn't Socratic intellectualism come up earlier? Is like the world wasn't really rich enough for it. You know Athens was maybe rich enough, right? Athens was a wealthy place. Then you could have like a couple of guys wandering around not contributing much to production, but through most of human history. We weren't in that position and certainly we weren't in any position to do it at scale. But now that we kind of are we I think are often faced with this. Question like what are we gonna do with our wealth? You know, from, like, caines's essay about economic possibilities for a grand. Children, there's this thought like, well, maybe we all want to not work all the time. We don't think a life spent entirely in work is like the greatest thing.

Greg: Unless you're a philosophy professor.

Agnes: Right. Well, and then that's in effect, your work is leisure, right? But but we think leisure time is important, but then there's this question. Well, what would the serious use of leisure be if you spent, if you frittered away all of your leisure and relaxation, that seems like wasting it. And so I think philosophical inquiry is like a pretty decent. Answer and it's actually not so obvious how many decent answers there are to the question. What is a serious use of leisure? That isn't itself just a way to solve the problem. That not everyone has leisure yet.

Greg: So we need like a Club Med that specializes in philosophical discussions, right?

Agnes: Yeah. We kind of have it. It's universities, universities, our club meds. It's just what we haven't figured out is quite how to make them fill the role that we need to fill in our world. It's to me very interesting, you know, and I. I'm not that old, but I'm old enough that like when I. Graduated college let's say in 1997. I think universities did not have the status that they have now. That is, universities have risen in status even though they're also very contested, right? What happens when you rise in status is you start to get into like status competitions and and people putting you down. But basically it's that everyone goes to college. Now, that's an exaggeration. It's not, but. Way more true than when I went to college and and in 1997 it was way true, and then it was in 1950. So college has become this. Gateway to like having a job, right? And so universities are sort of integrated into the economy and into the social world. They have a significance that they haven't had in the past, but we haven't quite figured out how to turn that into the. Club Med for philosophy. Ideal.

Greg: Well, I think if anything it's serving that role, maybe less than it was in the past. I mean, I think you wrote an essay once about college as a place for.

Unknown Speaker: Yeah.

Greg: You know, essentially philosophical inquiry for for students and a lot of people would say that everybody's focused on becoming employable and the humanities have sort of vanished. And I think somewhere you. Said. Philosophy is something that most people do in small doses, even professional philosophers. Only do it in in small doses. So I mean why? Why is that? I mean, can't we? Up the quota. In the university, maybe and make it more mainstream and is has philosophy kind of gotten sidetracked as it becomes sort of a a problem solving exercise rather than a truly philosophical exercise? And and with college really become more about? Problem solving and asking deep questions.

Agnes: So I think that part of the product of universities rising in the world is them being more integrated into the economy. And that means that when you're in a university, you're on a certain kind. Of career track. Rather than being in a little island of leisure back when they were less important, they could more be islands of leisure. But I take that to be growing pains and we're trying to figure this thing out, you know, in certain moments, it doesn't go that well. I think that, you know, when I. My favorite people to talk to are professional academic philosophers. They are like so in my experience, they really are genuinely doing philosophy. They push back in the best ways they are. They insist on clarity in ways that really help you figure out what you're thinking. And so in that sense, I think yes, professional philosophers really are doing. Philosophy, but. Are they always asking the most interesting questions there? I have to say no. That is professional philosophy, just like the rest of the university has gotten a bit like sucked into what we all were doing anyway, rather than having its own separate agenda. And again, that comes from rising in the world. And you rise in the world, you become worldly. And so, you know, it's very competitive and what happens, I was very surprised to learn this. You know, I'm a fan of competition. I enjoy. I'm just a competitive person. And I had this kind of idea, this naive idea, that competition just improves things because if an area becomes more competitive, then we select the better people and we push them to do more work, harder. And they do it better. And that's just not true for philosophy, I think. I think that competition produces conformity. A lot of the time. That is, it produces templates for how to do the thing where that a lot of people are going. Through the motions. And so that's that's a bit of it's a that's kind of the professionalization problem. It doesn't just affect philosophy, it afflicts all of academia. I think. I think that Once Upon a time, academia was kind of more of a bunch of weirdos who actually cared about some weird, obscure thing that nobody cares about, and now it's like. A home for very successful, very ambitious people like the academics that I know that are coming up now are very successful, very ambitious people. And the academics that were more like the older generation. There were more weirdos there and more people who were just interested in some random thing. And so that's the thing we have to work through, not just in philosophy, but everywhere. But as a philosopher, my fundamental belief is if we understand what we're doing, we'll do it better. So having clarity about even what our goals are is kind of the crucial move. That's kind of the concept of Socratic intellectualism, right? Is it understanding is going? To do all the work for you.

Greg: Well, last question and I think I know your answer is philosophy something that should be studied independent of everything else. Or should it be baked into everything? If we think about here at the Business School, should we have, you know, we have a separate course on ethics? Occasionally we have a course on critical thinking. We kind of hope that. That. It pops up from here to there, here and there in, in our classes. Same in law school. Should philosophy be. Baked into everything? Or should we expect students to get exposure to philosophy? I mean, I'm like you, I I. Got exposed to Plato as a teenager and you know, was sort of monomaniacal about consuming dialogues and everything. But it it seems like where do people encounter this way of thinking? Where do people acquire this as they start maturing and growing in their education?

Agnes: I'm curious what answer you think I'm gonna give cause I had to some very interesting question and I don't have to be answered, but. What answer did you think I was gonna give?

Greg: My guess is that you would argue that if. People adopt universally. If people adopt this. Ethical approach to life. The socratically this passive of inquiry. Then they're they can't help but engage in it with people no matter where they are. So if they're teaching a course on accounting, they're going to it's somehow going to come out. They're they're they're, they're a philosopher who's engaging in the teaching of accounting, and so it'll it'll rub off on the students.

Agnes: So yes, I think that's true. That is that philosophy gets integrated. Integrates itself into sort of everything you do once it has its hold on you. I also think that there's quite a bit of value in sort of pure philosophy like in so many people. You're not the only one. I'm not the only with a story about reading Plato as a teenager, a lot of us read Plato as teenagers and having that concentrated dose of philosophy made a real difference to us in getting us keyed into the thing itself. I think there are certain authors that do that for young people and certain kinds of inquiries that do that for young people, like Plato's one of the niches and other. One like it's just not an accident that, like teenagers, read these books and you know, they're not as much reading human dialogues on natural religion, even though those are dialogues too. Right. But there's a way in which Plato's dialogues seem like they feel. You're real people and engaging in the with the concreteness of their lives that I think. Think makes the reader feel like ohh this thing could really speak to like my concerns and could inform the conduct of my life. So there's a weird way in which the pure philosophy is the kind of will present itself as integrable. Into what you do.

Greg: Well, I lied. One more question because you also mentioned how fiction is a place where we can kind of ask questions that we wouldn't otherwise ask whether it's fiction or theatre. I I see Plato as. Straddling the line between fiction and philosophy and and so I mean is what is it about fiction that unlocks our our capacity to? I mean you you mentioned how Tolstoy was able in his fiction to kind of do things all through his career, that he only did explicitly as an individual, maybe later in his life.

Agnes: So. I think we love it when something happens in the same order that we have to store the information in our brains, which is like what's going to be true if somebody is telling you a story, right? Like first this happened, then this happened, then this happened and that's the same order that you put it in your head. Whereas like if I give. You a philosophy? Argument. There's no part of it that's like, first, there's no temporal order in an argument. You could have the conclusion. In the premises, it's not temporally organized and so that may be just one of very many ways in which stories really grip.

Unknown Speaker: US.

Agnes: People love stories. And you know, a big part of getting people to even dip a toe into philosophical waters is you got to find a way. To engage them. And so I think that stories. Are a good way to do that and they, you know, the great writers, what they do is sort of put your predicament in front of you, but in a form where it feels safe to talk about it, cause it's not you. There is a danger of just going all in on that. I think there's a way in which toast I went all in on it and and so I don't think it's like a substitute for philosophy, but I think it can be a road in I use it that way in my classes.

Greg: Well, maybe you'll write a novel next.

Agnes: Maybe.

Greg: Agnes, thanks so much for joining me. Look forward to future work and hope to chat.

Agnes: Again soon. Thank you. This is great.

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