What Is It Like to Be a Philosopher? with Agnes Callard

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In this interview, Agnes Callard, Associate Professor in Philosophy at University of Chicago, talks about growing up in Hungary, Rome, and NYC, her mom, a doctor who worked with AIDs patients and prisoners at Rikers Island, and her dad, a steel exporter, Legos, Jeeves, genius, pyromania, pretending to be another person as a kid, developing an early interest in ethics, especially Kant, corresponding with Joe Genaro of the Dead Milkmen, arguing with Amy Kass about punctuation when she was in high school, and then going to U Chicago, physics, James Joyce, sex in the library, going to Berkeley to work on Classics then philosophy, kids, marriage, working with Longuenesse, teaching Greek and Latin, doing a dissertation on weakness of will with Alan Code and Sam Scheffler, returning to U Chicago to work, the crash of 2009, Kantistotle, her book: Aspiration, Socrates, slavery, being angry forever, Fernando Pessoa, Nietzsche, Twitter, a book on Bergman, why we should study history of philosophy, Wittgenstein, the Beatles, wool felting, Columbo, lecso, cucumber salad, meggy, and Aristotle's lost dialogues...

Where did you grow up?

I was born in **Budapest, Hungary** and left there with my parents (illegally) at the age of 5 by way of a "vacation" to Vienna. From there we continued to **Rome**, where we spent a year before coming to the US under the auspices of a Jewish organization that focused on bringing Russian Jews to the USA. In Rome, my parents report visiting the Italian kindergarten class they sent me to and seeing me teach the other children how to say "circle" in Hungarian. They also report that all the Russians in the hotel/hostel we stayed in for that year hated our family because I got the chicken pox and infected all their children. "Dirty Hungarians!" In the US we lived in various locations in**NYC** until I was a teenager, when we moved to a suburb. All of my extended family still lives in Hungary.

What did your parents do?

My mother is a **hematologist/oncologist**, when we first came to the USA in the 1980s she specialized in **treating the cancers of AIDS patients** because no one else was willing to deal with them. I have early memories of her screaming on the phone, accusing some other doctor of murder because he was giving inadequate care to someone just because they had AIDS. She is an emotional person, and a very good doctor. My father was training to be a lawyer in Hungary but he had to start over when we got to the USA, he started off selling carpets, had a variety of jobs, before he retired he was a steel-exporter with an office in the **Empire State Building**.

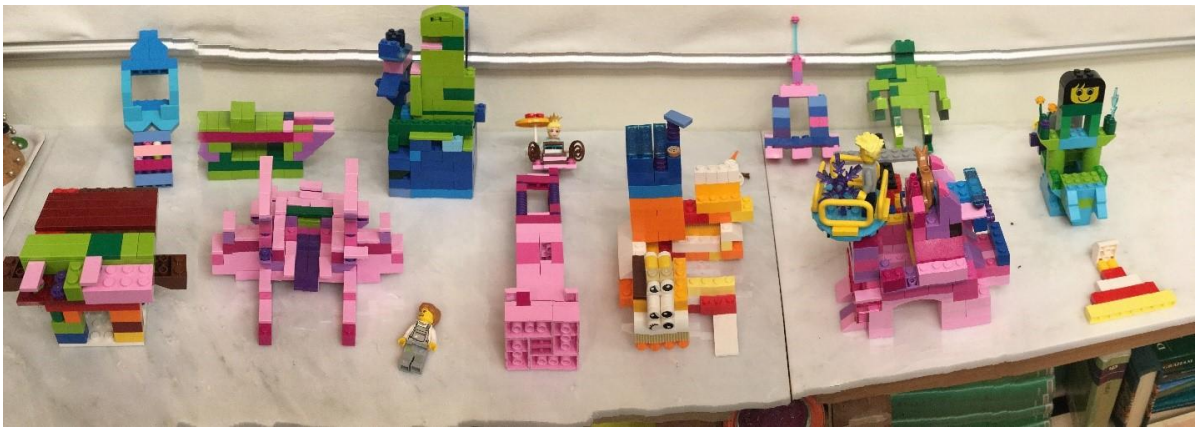
What was your family like?

We moved a lot. My mother has a need to relocate regularly. I am like that, but with thoughts.

Ha! Supportive parents?

My mother worked very hard—she had a second, night job as a doctor in a prison (and not just any prison: **Rikers Island**). My father did much of the childcare, cooking etc. They both always wanted to be supportive of me, but I believe they were unsure how to do so, as they found me somewhat opaque. I was smart in weird and unexpected

ways and stupid in others; the pattern made me difficult to predict. Much later, my mother revealed she thought throughout my childhood that I was some kind of genius. In fact I am not, but I had a similar illusion: my childhood was characterized, above all, by the subjective certainty of being a prodigy at something, but not yet having found the 'thing'. For instance: there was a phase when I thought I was probably a genius at architecture because my interest in building with **Legos** continued past the normal age. It turned out I had no talent at architecture whatsoever—though I still play with Legos, to this day. Some version of this story repeated many times, but I never did find the thing I was a prodigy at; perhaps allowing me to grow up under the illusion of being a genius was the most supportive thing my parents did.



Hey, I still play with Legos too! Religious?

I went to very religious schools for elementary, because **Orthodox Jewish** schools were willing to give us free tuition as charity cases (refugees, plus all four of my grandparents were concentration camp survivors). My mother was alarmed that I was being, as she saw it, indoctrinated, so she told me the school was lying to me. This created conflicts with teachers, who I would often confront on this point, demanding proofs of the existence of God, and also with other kids, who couldn't come to my house because we weren't **kosher**.

As a little kid, what did you want to be when you grew up?

There was a long stretch (maybe ages 10-13) where I wanted to be a butler. This is because, once we became American citizens (when I was 10) we could go back to Hungary, and I spent my summers there up through college, but I didn't read in Hungarian and as far as English language books Woodhouse's ***Jeeves and Wooster*** series was, for some reason, what was most readily available, so I read all (yes, all) of those. The books gave me the impression that butlers were the people who really controlled the turn of events in human history, so that's what I wanted to be.

As a teenager, get into any trouble?

Not really. I was a **pyromaniac** but I was good at controlling the fires I started. Towards the end of High School I developed the practice of asking boys out on dates,

and this "aggression" on my part made them afraid of me and somewhat protected me in that arena. I went to my senior prom without a date—I was the only one in my HS who went solo—and over the course of the evening acquired someone else's date.

I set our kitchen table on fire! How were you most similar from the rest of your family? Dissimilar?

I have always felt very normal but been experienced by others as somewhat abnormal. I was close to my sister, we played games (cards, dice, etc.) and also imaginary games, e.g. one in which I pretended to be a girl named "Robin" when she turned over a certain coin. I enjoyed educating my sister, and tried to teach her to do many things I could not myself do (e.g. in gymnastics). Sometimes onlookers would correct me, and tell her not to listen to me as my suggestions were dangerous. I remember this happening at a swimming pool, when I was "teaching" her how to do complicated dives. Later, I tried to teach her German by speaking to her only in German. She was very annoyed at me at the time, but she is now a German professor, so draw your own conclusions.

Yes!

Throughout our childhood, she had friends and I did not, so I often tagged along with her, in fact my parents used to require her to take me along on play dates. But I was not sad or lonely to be alone, either. When I was 13 my other sister was born, and I obsessed over taking care of her. I found, to my surprise, that I could really commune with a baby/toddler.

What does your sister do now?

She is a special education lawyer (working to make sure students with disabilities get proper forms of educational access) in Poughkeepsie, NY. I also have a (much younger) brother, he is getting a PhD in Chemistry.

Did you read a lot? What kinds of books were you interested in?

I read through most of the books in my junior high school library on my walks home from school, a few books a day. I walked slowly and developed excellent peripheral vision for reading while crossing street. The librarians let me eat lunch in there in exchange for recommending books to people who came in. I liked novels best. I found, and continue to find, newspapers very confusing–as though someone handed me a book with the whole first part ripped out and expected me to jump in. I also struggle to understand history, for similar reasons. In high school I discovered philosophy through debate. Philosophy was the first subject where I thought it seemed important to own the books, so I went to **Barnes and Noble** and bought: Plato's **Republic**, Aristotle's **Nicomachean Ethics**, Mill's **Utilitarianism**, Kant's **Groundwork**, Rawls' **Theory of Justice**, Nozick's **Anarchy State and Utopia**. I liked them all, but I thought Kant the clear winner, so much so that it puzzled me that there was philosophy after Kant.

What attracted you to the normative stuff, you think?

I didn't know that there was non-normative philosophy until I got to college.

What did you dig about Kant?

The fact that he articulates the ground of moral worth (**the good will**); the fact that he explains what makes an action right or wrong (**universalizability**); his contempt for everything empirical. His idea that the Bible was actually commanding "practical" Kantian love rather than "pathological" ordinary love was my first taste of...creative interpretation.

Favorite music?

The first piece of music I really loved was Simon and Garfunkel's "**I am a Rock**," played on guitar by my sixth grade teacher, and the cassette of that album was my first musical purchase. The **walkman** + headphones was a revelation to me, I loved having music in the background while I was doing other things, and that continues to this day—if I am not talking to someone, I am probably listening to music. If a day goes by in which I listen to music for fewer than 4 hours (e.g. I am at a conference) I get stressed and antsy. As far as *what* I listen to, I would describe myself as not having taste in music (which is distinct from having eclectic taste)—I like most things, classical, folk, rap, electronic, you name it, they key is to be listening to *something* and usually to listen to it on repeat over the course of a day. Jazz is the slight exception, there is not much jazz I like. It is probably not an accident that I have ended up with a job that allows me to wear headphones for most of the day.

What would your teenage self make of your current self?

First, she would be surprised that I am not doing math and physics, which were my main academic interests at the time. I really liked those subjects because there were answers, and in other subjects I was often told that my perspective was skewed, but could never be made to understand how. Also, I never knew when my work was done: I believe I stayed up all night writing and rewriting every paper I turned in in high school.

Second, she would be relieved that I do not laugh at her. As a teenager I lived in terror that when I was older I would look back at the oddities of my teenage self and laugh, for instance I was obsessed with making tiny people out of whittled chalk and carved/ melted crayons, my desk was lined with them; I thought I would look back on them and laugh, and that seemed to me to be a form of self-murder in prospect. But actually, I just wish I had kept some of them, they would go well in my office.

Third, she would love my office.

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Sweet setup! If you could give yourself advice back then, what would it be?

I would refrain from giving myself advice, **for reasons I explain here**. The advice I most often received at school was not to take so many advanced placement classes, esp. since my grades were not stellar. Nonetheless, I tried to take them all, even in subjects I had no interest in such as History (I took both AP European and AP American History). The school drew the line at AP Art, "you're not any good at art", unmoved by my concern over the possibility that I was an undiscovered artistic genius. I guess we'll never know.

Did you start thinking about college, if college was even on the table?

I knew from the outset exactly where I wanted to go: **Swarthmore**. I had romanticized it as the perfect college. I also applied to a bunch of Ivy League schools, in case I didn't get into Swarthmore. None of this was great reasoning, and it was lucky that after sending in all my applications, I ran into my high school advisor in the hallway. She told me, as gently as possible, that I had shot too high—my grades outside math and science were not that great, and I might not get into any of schools to which I had applied. I am overconfident by nature. She suggested I apply to the **University of Chicago** as a safety school, because their deadline was later than all the others and I still had time to get an application in.

In the 1990s, it was *much* easier to get accepted to UChicago than it is now, it did not really compete with Ivy League schools. I think she also had the sense that it was suitable for a weirdo like me. The application, however, was very long and full of essays, so many that I quickly ran out of material from my other applications. For one of them, I remember plundering a letter I was writing—at the time, I had a correspondence with **Joe Genaro of the Dead Milkmen**. I don't remember how this got started or what we talked about, except that he used to sign off his letters, "Butterfly Joe" and I'd sign mine, "Arachnid Agnes". Anyways I somehow managed to fill all the pages that same day, sent it in, and forgot about it.

Months later, I received many rejections from Ivy League schools, and an acceptance from...Swarthmore! I was thrilled, so much so that when a giant package arrived from the University of Chicago I ignored it for a few days until my mother made me open it. It turned out that all those essays were not part of the application, they were a separate application for a scholarship, which I accidentally applied for and won—a full scholarship. Incredibly enough, I was still leaning towards Swarthmore, so vehement was my unreasoned attachment to that school, but then I got a letter in the mail from the person at UChicago who had read my essays, a faculty member named **Amy Kass**. A teacher at a University, writing to me! And not just writing, but *disagreeing* with me: in one of my essays, I had imagined that punctuation marks were each members in a Royal Court (e.g. the King is the exclamation mark, the Queen is the question mark, etc.), and in her letter, as I recall, she objected to some of my assignments. That did it.

So you could say the University of Chicago gave me the hard sell, and it turned out to be worth it: I've now spent 15 years of my life there.

Was college what you expected? What was the plan?

College was much, much better than anything I could've expected. My plan was to study Physics, **James Joyce**, and Immanuel Kant. In High School I found myself so often in the position of spouting Kant to an incomprehending audience that I had this canned speech, something like, "Immanuel Kant was this thing called a philosopher. He wrote in German, in the 18th century..." When I got to college, the speech met with "yeah go on" impatience. It gave the speech a few times before it hit me: they have all heard of Kant. Only then did I realize at I had, without explicitly articulating it to myself, styled myself as the one who would introduce the world to Kant. Learning that that task was unnecessary was disappointing, and embarrassing besides, as it came hand in hand with learning that he wrote other books besides the one thin volume I had read.

Did you major in philosophy?

I did not major in philosophy, but in "Fundamentals," the undergraduate version of **the Committee on Social Thought**.

Inspirational teachers?

Amy Kass. It is a good thing this is a typed interview because when I try to talk about her I often start crying (she died a few years ago). She had this gift of asking questions and then looking at you in such a way as to make it seem that the weight of the world lay on your answer. Once she asked me, "Would you want to be the sun?" Her classes made me realize that there were real, truth-directed questions that lay outside of math and physics. She taught in the "Fundamentals" program, as did her husband, **Leon Kass**. I took many classes with them, went over to their house for Shabbat and Passover, remained close with them all through grad school.

In college, what did you do in your spare time?

I spent my spare time in the library. I even had sex there.

Nice! How did your interests change as an undergrad?

I became more and more interested in Greek and Latin.

When did you decide to go to grad school?

My plan was to get one of those fancy scholarships to go study in England (**Rhodes**, **Marshall**, there were a few that were UChicago specific), I was pretty sure I would get one, but applied to grad school in both Classics and Philosophy as a backup. That turned out to be another case of overconfidence, so I ended up going to grad school (but not in philosophy).

How did you decide where to go to grad school, and who helped you through that process?

I asked Leon Kass what the two best programs in Classics and Philosophy were, and he said Harvard and Berkeley in Classics, and Princeton and Pitt in philosophy, so I applied to those 4 programs.

What was your writing sample on?

How we can love the beautiful when it doesn't benefit us. With reference to Plato's ***Symposium***.

What did your parents make of your decision to go to grad school?

They were confused by it. My father asked me what I would do there and I said to him, in Hungarian, "I will write papers," and he asked me, "Isn't paper what you write *on*?" But, as explained above, they were also somewhat accustomed to being confused by me.

Any major world events–political, technological, cultural changes or trends, etc.–that had a significant impact on your life and worldview during college?

I didn't know what was happening in the world when I was in college. I still mostly don't, except what dribbles in through **Twitter**.

Where did you get in and where did you go?

I was accepted by Berkeley in Classics and by Princeton and Pitt in philosophy. I decided I wanted to do Classics, so I went to Berkeley. I spent 4 years in Classics (completed coursework and exams, left before starting dissertation), then a year visiting at Princeton in philosophy, then back to Berkeley to start over, this time in philosophy.

Good year in Princeton?

Very. Princeton philosophy was claustrophobically close-knit, which is just what you want for a visiting year—though I think any more than a year would've felt, well, claustrophobic. Also I had a motorcycle, and the roads around there are great for riding.

Inspirational teachers or classes?

In grad school I took classes with some big guns, including **Michael Frede**, **Barry Stroud**, **Bernard Williams, Donald Davidson**, and **Richard Wollheim**, but none of them were that inspiring to me: likely the fault was mine. In all five cases I find their writings to be immensely so, to this day. My most inspiring class was on political philosophy: Hobbes, Kant and Rousseau, taught by a visitor, **David Hills**, from Stanford. I credit my love of Hobbes to Hills' patient, detailed, informationally dense exposition in that class.

Beatrice Longuenesse and **Sarah Broadie**, who I worked with during my year at Princeton, were also inspiring. Beatrice was full of energy and love and knowledge of Kant, and Sarah was...well let me tell a story of one of my earliest experiences with her. In a reading group on Plato's *Republic*, someone translated a line, and I raised my hand and offered a different translation. Sarah said, "no, that's wrong." I explained how I was construing the grammar, she gave reasons for finding my construal unnatural. A student, who happened to have a commentary, said, "but Adam reads it Agnes' way," and Sarah said, "well then Adam obviously doesn't know Greek!" She is hardcore, and couldn't care less about authority. That comment was enough to earn my fealty for life.

Love it. What was Williams like? Davidson?

Williams was a very engaging lecturer, but I always had this suspicion that he was making things up or hiding things, that somehow the real story was happening behind the scenes. Davidson bored me, I skipped class often.

Who did you talk with most about philosophy? Who did you hang with?

In Berkeley philosophy, I talked to the students in my cohort, at first (**Beri Marušić**, **Jen Smalligan**, **Jerry Vildostegui**, **James Genone**, **Hui-Chieh Loy**). Once I started dating fellow Berkeley philosophy grad student **Ben Callard** (we later married), I talked philosophy to him a lot, several hours a day, usually by phone. We still talk philosophy most days. I also hung out with my Classics friends, especially **Yelena Baraz**, now at Princeton, who is my spirit-sister.

What did you do for fun?

Long distance biking, 200-300 miles per week. Also I had a child, and he was fun, especially once he could talk.

Cool. Advice for managing a kid and going to grad school? Increasingly common!

My son was formula fed; he slept on his stomach, alone, in a crib, by way of "cry it out"; he was in diapers till he was nearly 4; I let him eat what he wanted and did not try to educate his tastes (and for a few months one of the things he ate was: sand); he was in daycare from a young age, when he was sick I mostly ignored it. He was born believing he was a grownup and I did not correct this—once he was a fluent speaker (18 months), every decision was made by argument and persuasion. I did, however, make use of his epistemic vulnerabilities so as to lie to him about the existence of magical powers/objects/creatures. (I figured he needed some kind of childhood.) We both preferred the playgrounds when there was no one else there, so we went in the early mornings, I would read while he played with toys that people left there. (In Berkeley, people left old toys in the playgrounds; he hated having to share them with other children. I'm not a big fan of sharing, either.)

All of the above went against advice I received, so I don't feel comfortable giving any: if you're anything like me, you ignore advice, and if you're not, why should you take my advice? In lieu of advice, I offer up this empirically-grounded conditional: if you live in a liberal enclave such as Berkeley CA or most academic communities, and you buy your child a lot of toy weapons (guns, swords, knives, cannons, toy soldiers too), all the other kids will want to come to your house.

Ha! What was your dissertation on? Who was your dissertation advisor? What was that process like?

My dissertation was on **weakness of will**, and my advisors were **Sam Scheffler**, **Alan Code**, and **John Ferrari**. Alan was hard to meet with and equally elusive in conversation. John was a huge influence on me both before and during the dissertation (and to this day!)—I don't think I could have asked for more in terms of a sensitive and thoughtful reader of both Plato and my own work. He was also the person with whom I had the most contact from my first days in Classics through my last days in philosophy, and I credit him with achieving the perfect advisorly balance between

holding on and letting go. The main thing Sam did was refute me, chapter by chapter, sentence by sentence, meeting after meeting. I view it as one of the greatest favors anyone has ever done me. When it got to be too much, I employed a trick I devised over the years working with him: I would restate one of his own objections, and say, "This objection is impossible to respond to!" and he would say, without missing a beat, "I can think of six possible responses..." **Essentially, I used his own powers against him.** I hope he never reads this, so that other people can benefit from this trick as well.

Like Bugs Bunny! Were you expected to publish in grad school?

I don't know, but it was far from my mind. I did not really consider sending an article to a journal until I was 4 or 5 years into my job at Chicago.

Teach?

Yes. I loved teaching, especially Greek and Latin. I really threw myself into it; I didn't like the textbook we were supposed to teach from so I made my own, on the fly, as we went along. Of course it was full of errors, especially with accents (it was a Greek textbook).

How did grad school hone your skills as a philosopher?

People who I eventually became friends with told me that when I started in philosophy everyone used to make fun of me behind my back, with reference to how much of a weirdo I was and how no one ever understood anything I said in class or at department colloquia. I did not pick up on any of this. I did, however, have a rule for myself: I had to ask a question at every event/class I attended, with the default being, "I did not understand anything you said, could you repeat the main point very simply?" Over time, I think I learned how to talk like a semi-normal person, and that is the most important skill a philosopher can have.

True! How'd your views change?

My views change all the time but with there is a definite upward trajectory with respect to my belief in the value and power of philosophy. When I started, sometimes I felt I was playing at it, and didn't really "mean it," wasn't really seriously asking these big questions. More and more, it seems like life and death. The deepest change has been learning to take myself as seriously as Amy Kass took me from the first moment she met me.

What was the job market like when you finished? Good experience? Horror stories? Sexism? Advice?

I went on the market in 2007-2008, right before **the crash**, so I was lucky in that there were jobs. I did very well, had lots of interviews and flybacks, I suspect some of my success could be attributed to what Girard called **mimetic desire** (a.k.a. **FOMO** on the part of the schools in question). The worst part of the job market was that I presented my ideas to some of the best philosophers in the country, and they refuted them thoroughly. That was also the best part, but it did have the effect of making me throw my dissertation in the trash.

Where did you land your first gig?

Where I am now, the University of Chicago. In fact when the jobs came out in the Fall of 2007 I told Sam Scheffler that the UChicago job was my job, and he said, that is not how it works, one does not pick one's job, someone picks you if you are lucky. **Even an overconfident person is bound to be right once or twice, like a broken clock**.

Were you still in touch with Amy and Leon Kass?

They visited me in Berkeley more than once—and when I got my job...until my divorce in 2011, of which they strongly disapproved. "Disowning" is too strong a word, but it is in the vicinity of their response to my divorce; the destruction of that relationship remains to this day the worst effect of my divorce, I am still heartbroken over it.

Why did they disown you?

Because I got divorced from someone who was an excellent father, and who treated me extremely well. I believe they saw this as irresponsible behavior with reference to my children.

How would you describe your department to an outsider?

As placing especially high value on **Hegel**, **Wittgenstein**, **Frege**, **Anscombe**, **Sellars**, **McDowell**, and, above all, Kantistotle.

Kantistotle? Explain!

It's like Kripkenstein, but instead of an intersection it's a union.

...sure! How has your teaching evolved?

My teaching doesn't change that much, despite the fact that I keep trying to change it. I am bad at letting go of the reins of a small group discussion, and the more I try to "relax" the more authoritarian I in fact become.

Your research?

Over time, I come to write for a larger and larger audience. When I started, I wrote only for Sam Scheffler.

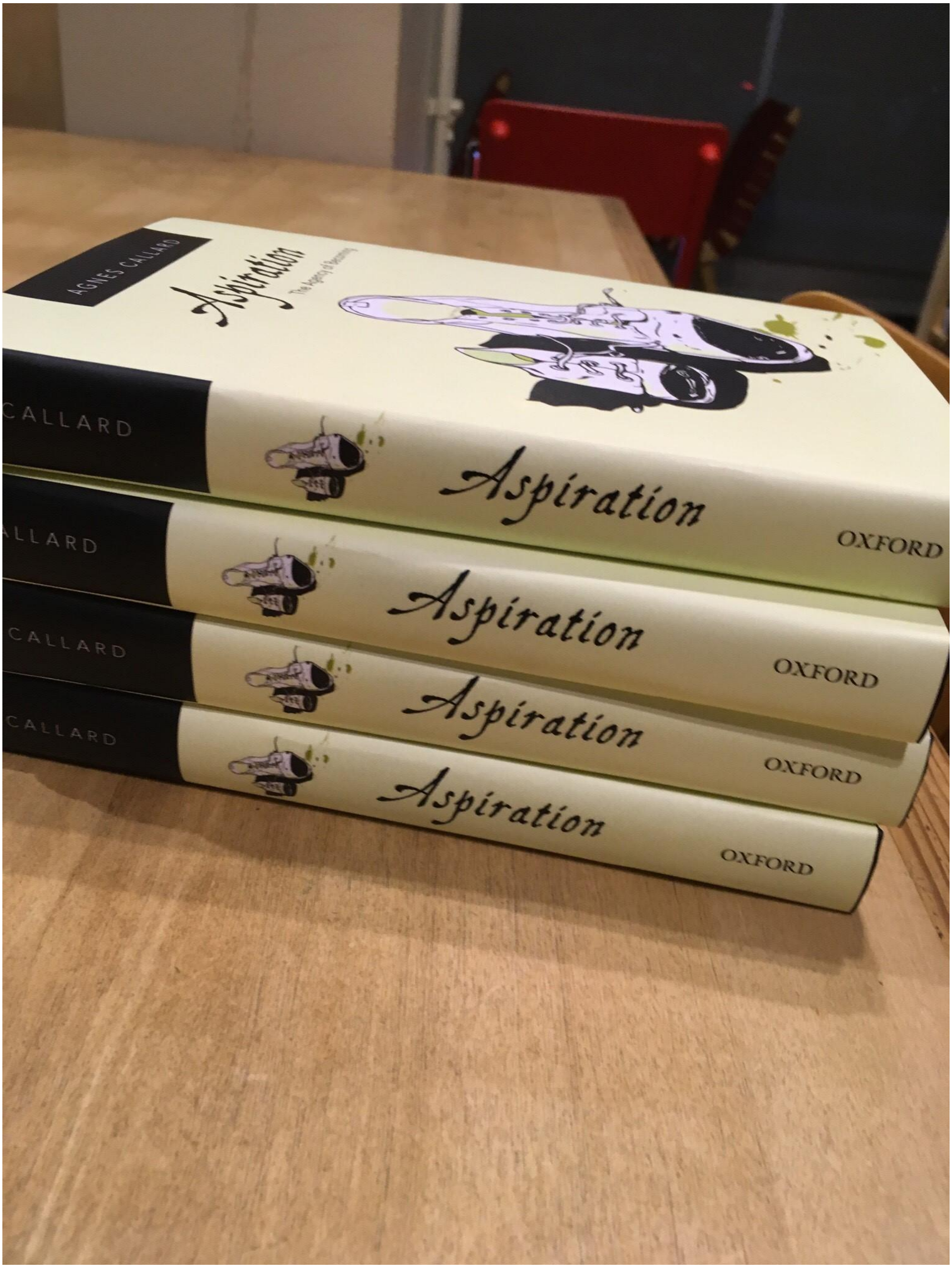
Of what you've written so for, what stuff would you say is the most important? Why?

My book, because it introduces a new idea. I think we do things better when we can think them through, and so if the theory of aspiration gets worked out (and my book is only a first step in that direction), people will become better and bolder aspirants.

Describe the book a bit! How did you discover the topic?

I had this talk on **weakness of will** that people kept refuting, and I was torn between recognizing the correctness of their counter-arguments (especially one by **Kate Manne**, then a grad student at MIT), and the feeling my theory was right. I realized: it was a bad theory of weakness of will, but a good theory of another thing. That other thing was aspiration. So the topic came last in the order of discovery.

The book describes the conditions of the possibility of aspiration. It tries to show the reader that the current philosophical landscape stacks the deck against acknowledging the phenomenon. If we assume, in the theory of rationality, that all practical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rationality boils down to the rationality of decision making; in moral psychology, that **all reasons are internal reasons**; in the theory of moral responsibility, that there is no such thing as self-creation—then we are depriving ourselves of the conceptual apparatus required for recognizing the fact that people exercise agency in learning to have different values than the ones they have. The book argues that aspiration comes into view when we acknowledge the possibility of **proleptic** rationality (the rationality of activities that are essentially extended over time); intrinsic conflict (deliberative questions that are not only undecidable but unposeable from the point of view of the agent); and teleological normative guidance ("creating oneself" by subjecting oneself to the governance of the person one will be).

In philosophy, are there views that are considered controversial that shouldn't be, in your estimation?

Hmm. That's a high bar. Let me instead offer up some views that I think are true, and should be considered a lot less controversial than they are:

(1) Socrates was not ironic.

(2) Plato wrote dialogues because that format is ideal for presenting arguments in premise-conclusion form.

(3) Aristotle's **enkratic person** can (and, indeed, must) have **phronesis**.

(4) **Aristotle's pro-slavery stance runs deep into his ethics**, not clear whether it can be excised.

(5) Kant's ethics forms the basis of our strongest moral reactions.

(6) **Nietzsche's view of ethics** as a way of justifying/sanctifying violence under the label of punishment is worth considering as a possible theory of punishment (and not just as Nietzsche scholarship).

(7) **Fernando Pessoa** was a philosopher.

(8) The idea of human rights is the most important achievement of humanity to date.

(9) It is not obvious that one should refrain from entering **the experience machine**.

(10) Reading literature can help you do philosophy, but only if you let yourself get carried away by the literature. Otherwise you just use the literature to dress up what you already thought philosophically.

(11) Philosopher is the best job in the world.

(12) There's no such thing as being good or bad at philosophy.

(13) If you (truly, deeply) romantically love A you can nonetheless, while continuing to love A, fall (truly, deeply) romantically in love with B.

(14) We do not shape our children that much.

(15) It is good to have children.

(16) You haven't really made a philosophical contribution until a caricatured, oversimplified version of your thought exists.

(17) **Twitter** is, all things considered, good for philosophy.

(18) When philosophers explicitly endeavor to chat non-philosophically, that is bad.

(19) Though it is true that pleasure is an activity rather than a feeling, no one really knows what that means.

Of these, the one I believe most strongly is (12) and **the one that comes closest to being something that should not be controversial at all is (3)**. The ones I would most like to persuade other philosophers of are (7), (17) and (18). The ones I would most like to persuade nonphilosophers of are (1), (12) and (13).

How is it not possible to be bad at philosophy?

You can be good at something either by having mastered it or having a talent for it. Philosophy is unmasterable—there is no body of knowledge that could ground a claim to expertise. As for talents, the ones I can think of—being quick with distinctions, being a good writer, being good at learning formal or natural languages—are double edged swords, because they make you easily divertible from the project of philosophizing. I think we project a talent for philosophy into anyone we respect as a philosopher to protect ourselves against the scary thought that it's our own fault we're not like that. In fact, nothing's stopping us but ourselves.

When, if ever, should we be angry forever?

Well, if ever, then forever, right? I think anytime you are good and angry with someone it should feel as though you will be angry with that person forever, just as when you are in the throes of grief you cannot see out the other side, to when indifference will have set in. This is the inner perspective of the emotion, and **it should not be ignored**.

Would you say your personal life–like, having kids–influences the way you do philosophy, or does philosophy influence the way you live your life?

I think I'm almost always doing philosophy. Perhaps most of all when I argue with my husband. His ability to be philosophical even inside of a heated lovers' quarrel is why I married him.

How'd you meet your current husband?

He was a student in a grad seminar I taught on Aristotle's ethics. He came to office hours every week, our discussions ranged outside the ethics but not outside of Aristotle. (One of our meetings, as I recall, was entirely devoted to ***Metaphysics* Iota**). During the final office hours session of the quarter, he told me he was in love with me. I immediately realized the same was true of me, although we had never discussed anything but Aristotle up to that point. We have since, but Aristotle does tend to predominate.

Do you talk philosophy with your kids?

A few days ago we were arguing about whether cleaning the water on the floor of the bathroom is the job of the person who showered, or the next person, and my 15yo asked "How do families without philosophers in them solve these problems?" In some way I see the value of having children as that of a captive philosophical audience—unlike other people, they can't escape me. I've raised them not to even understand that there are alternatives.

What are you working on nowadays?

Proximally: A book on **Socrates**, refutation, and our cantankerous intellectual culture. **Distally**: A book on love, marriage, divorce and the movies of **Ingmar Bergman**.

Biggest differences between you and other philosophers?

I think I tend to be/have

(1) More colors.
(2) More female.
(3) More children.
(4) More lists.
(5) More trouble with eye contact.
(6) More inclined to talk about myself.
(7) More dominating of conversations.
(8) More half-baked theories.
(9) Fewer well-developed theories.
(10) Fewer arguments.
(11) More inclined to glaring lapses in basic knowledge.
(12) Less stressed or guilty in relation to my work.
(13) More intellectually impulsive/destructive.
(14) Worse memory.
(15) More ungrounded confidence in self.
(16) More of an oversharer.
(17) Much less easy to offend.
(18) More worn out by group socializing.
(19) More optimistic.
(20) More refutable.
(21) More inclined to believe in God.
(22) More competitive.
(23) Less political.
(24) Less precise.
(25) Less clear.
(26) More rhetorical.
(27) More similar to undergraduates.
(28) More popular in the short term.
(29) Less popular in the long term.

What I mean by (28)-(29) is: if you meet me and some random other philosopher at a conference, you're more likely to want to talk to me at the conference than the other philosopher, and 2 years later you are less likely to want to email me than the other philosopher. Many find that my charms wear thin over time.

Philosophical archenemy, that is, the best philosopher you disagree most?

Plato says it is easier to fight two opponents (Republic 422b), so I have two philosophical archenemies: the great misanthrope **Jean-Jacques Rousseau** and the great **misologue** Ludwig **Wittgenstein**.

What is philosophy? Why should we study it?

Philosophy is unbounded inquiry that aims at knowledge of what is and what is not. We should study it because we want to have that knowledge, and also because we never want to hit the point in any conversation where we throw up our hands and say "that's too rich for my blood" or "isn't that just a matter of how you use the words" or the like. I think, **contra Wittgenstein**, that philosophy is what makes it impossible for language to go on holiday.

Why should we study ancient philosophy?

Ancient philosophy is where we got the concepts and distinctions that we take for granted in thinking about anything at all—not only as philosophers, but also as human beings. I agree with Wolfgang Mann that **there is a sense in which Aristotle discovered "things."** If we want self-knowledge, we need to study ancient philosophy.

How do you see the future of philosophy? Exciting or disconcerting trends?

I think that more and more people are becoming interested in doing (some form of) philosophy. This is an exciting trend. But it also makes it hard to feel like philosophy is a community—fields are splintering, few people read through top journals, the academic philosophy space feels less and less like a single conversation. Twitter helps though!

Will philosophy ever die?

If and when humanity does.

Favorite books? Movies? Music? TV shows? Art in general?

I need to make these more specific, so I will do so in random ways to suit my fancy:

Favorite book of essays about movies and pop culture: ***The Immediate Experience*** by Robert Warshow.

Favorite movie about poetry: **Poetry** (South Korea, 2010).

Favorite music to listen to on repeat when I can't fall asleep: Beatles, **Golden Slumbers**.

Show I loved most as a teen: **Columbo**.

Favorite artist whose work I have only seen online never IRL: **Stephen Mandelbaum**.

What do you do in your spare time nowadays?

The last hobby I picked up (though I have already dropped it) was **wool-felting colorful patches** onto clothing. On the lookout for my next one, suggestions welcome.

Last meal?

Lecso (Hungarian pepper stew), **cucumber salad**, and **meggy** (Hungarian sour cherries, the really dark ones).

If you could ask an omniscient being one question, and be sure you were going to get an honest, comprehensible, answer, what would it be?

I asked my kids:

6yo: "Where are you in space and why don't you fall?"

10yo: "Are there objective moral rules?"

15yo: “Is the world basically material or immaterial?”

My question is already answered by the question, but if I got to ask another, and assuming I am allowed a computer to type on, and can request that OB speak slowly, it would be: recite all of Aristotle’s lost dialogues. Mostly because scholars squabbling over my typos for millenia satisfies the twisted form that my desire for immortality takes. I guess that proves that I am a classicist at heart.

Thanks Agnes! It’s been fun.

Cliff Sosis
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