Socrates is Not Who Agnes Callard Wishes He Was

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Apr 22, 2025

There is no doubting the centrality of the figure of Socrates, as depicted in Plato's dialogues, to the history of Western philosophy. We might think of it as analogous to the role of Confucius in Chinese thought combined with the role of Jesus in Christianity: a great thinker, a charismatic teacher and model, and a martyr to the truth.

Now, there have been many dramatic moments of revival and reconstrual in the history of Socrates-reception, for example, in the ancient school of skepticism; in Kierkegaard's dissertation and his whole mode of life (configured around Socratic irony and humility); in Leo Strauss's deep reading and distinction between exoteric and esoteric meanings. Owing to the wild and fascinating philosopher Agnes Callard's recent book *Open Socrates: The Case for a Philosophical Life*, we are in yet another resurrection.

Callard's book is comprehensible and compelling; no academic philosopher writes better. She has a personal stake in her own ideas, is sincerely absorbed in her own questions, and is an excellent reader and thinker besides. Also, semi-secretly I find her most basic point and personality compelling: semi-secretly I, like Callard, think that the very purpose of life might be formulating and trying to answer philosophical or "untimely" questions, as in "who are we, and why are we here, and what is *here,* i.e. what is the world?". (Yes, indeed, those are disclaimers as I wind up for the attack.) So the criticism will be directed above all not at Callard, nor even maybe at Socrates, but at Plato. The character of Socrates as Plato describes him is just exactly the opposite of what Callard says he is.

The Socrates that Callard so admires is a relentless inquirer, trying to find the meaning of basic concepts ('knowledge,' for example, or 'justice,' or 'virtue'). Supposedly, as each dialogue begins, Socrates does not know what the answer is, but under his guidance he himself and the young men who follow him make progress. Sometimes, as is the case with regard to 'knowledge' in the *Theaetetus*, for example, many definitions are put forward and refuted, and none is definitively defended. More frequently, Socrates ends up formulating a precise definition. 'Justice' is defined in the *Republic*, for example, as "each person doing the work for which they are best suited." (How good a definition is that?)

In establishing the character of Socrates as she understands it, Callard quotes one of his speeches in the *Gorgias*: "What kind of person am I? A person who would be glad to be refuted if I say anything untrue, and who would be pleased to refute anyone who says anything untrue; and one who, however, wouldn't be any less pleased to be refuted than to refute. . . . I count being refuted a greater good, insofar as it is a greater good for oneself to be delivered from the worst thing than to deliver someone else from it." (Callard quotes from Donald Zey's translation.) She characterizes Socrates's own intellectual virtues, and his demands on us, as "skeptical caution, open-mindedness, and intellectual humility." Believing falsely, for this Socrates, the very worst possible thing, so truth must be pursued fearlessly in philosophical conversation.

"Followers of Socrates," writes Callard, "will feel welcome to disagree with him, as long as we can explain why." This Socrates cares only about finding the truth and

fighting error and ignorance, which he equates with evil. To know the truth is to do the good, he argues throughout Plato's authorship. Knowledge is not power, exactly; it is virtue. What this Socrates wants most of all is to puncture illusions, his own first of all. This is Callard's inspiration.

However, I would like to cock an eyebrow. If what Callard writes were true, for example, you'd expect Socrates to be refuted a number of times in the course of the dialogues and to take it like a man, or even to welcome it and reverse his opinions. But in dozens of dialogues with hundreds of people, Socrates never is refuted. Sometimes, he purports to know all and then purports to prove it. Sometimes he's more focused on showing other people that they are ignorant. But he is never shown critically examining his own beliefs, much less being refuted, welcoming it, and changing his views, though he says over and over he'd be happy to be. Apparently, he just never met anyone in Athens smart enough to really challenge him on any matter whatsoever.

Far from being open collaborative conversations in search of the truth among equal interlocutors, the Socratic dialogues go like this: all opponents (the thinkers he condemns as 'sophists,' for example) are shown to be ignoramuses. Then his young followers spend the rest of the dialogue agreeing with everything he's putting forward, indeed falling all over themselves and one another to agree most enthusiastically and most repetitively. He lectures; they nod.

I am, for real, opening the *Collected Dialogues* of Plato at random and quoting the speeches of the interlocutors on a page or two (this is the *Sophist,* around marginal page 237): "Yes. Certainly. Necessarily Certainly. Yes. Yes. Clearly. Quite true. Quite true. Yes. Necessarily. Yes. Yes, that also. Yes. I do. Yes of course. Evidently. Yes. Certainly. Quite so. Yes." This is an obviously indefensible style of writing, but it goes on and on through the whole authorship (here are some examples). Socrates is portrayed by Plato as a person who needed people to say "very true" after every sentence he uttered, for 50 years. Is that the Socrates whom Callard admires? There is no other.

Socrates's interlocutors, if they are rival philosophers, are portrayed as having been destroyed immediately by a quick fallacious argument. If they are his followers, they are portrayed, every single time, as slavish yes-men. Callard says that the Socrates she's talking about is not the historical Socrates, and not even Plato's character, per se; it is "an ideal." This ideal is professed in Plato's dialogues, and is contradicted extremely in each.

The Republic is the best-known Socratic dialogue; in it comes the parable of the cave and a thousand other characteristically Plato moments. It is also quite typical, if extra large: first Socrates sees off a few sophists and then he settles down to teach his young men. And teach them he does, about the entire nature of reality as a whole, about all of ethics and aesthetics and political theory and theology and everything else. Occasionally he pauses to express his humility in this wise: "of course I might be wrong." But his interlocutors know he is not wrong and so does he. He always believes of himself that he is right, even if all the assertions he makes are wildly mistaken, which they definitely are.

The Republic is the first utopia: Plato's design for an ideal society, ruled by philosophers. Socrates straightforwardly suggests that the basic strategy of the rulers in their attempt to create a just society is to lie extremely and continuously to the people they rule. These lies will teach the citizens that each belongs by nature to a particular caste (and that justice consists of doing only the tasks assigned to your caste). This is false right now (we just made it up), but we can make it true by a selective breeding program. We'll tell the citizens that they are being randomly assigned to sex partners for breeding purposes, though that is entirely false, and then we'll breed the sorts of people we need.

The response of his interlocutors? Verbatim: "Very true, Socrates. Absolutely. Certainly. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes." No one raises any objections, because the last thing these people are looking for is the truth. But a simple objection, in a genuine philosophical dialogue. would go like this: "That contradicts everything that you ever taught, Socrates. You argue that all evil is due to believing falsely, and that goodness is the same as knowing and speaking the truth. Then by your own standards, you're arguing that it's an obligation on the part of rulers to make their people and themselves worse." It's just as though Jesus were preaching against the golden rule.

Now, it would have been easy for someone in the *Republic* to raise these obvious objections. It might have been an opportunity to portray Socrates as being the sort of person Agnes Callard wishes he was, the sort of person who admits when he's wrong (in this and many other cases, monstrously and ridiculously wrong). But that's not something he ever does, because Socrates is the very opposite of what Agnes Callard says he is.

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