Status Games, Polyamory and the Merits of Meritocracy

Can meritocracy ever be ethical? The philosopher Agnes Callard thinks so.

Ezra Klein & Agnes Callard

May 14, 2021

Contents

Agnes Callard is an ethical philosopher who dissects, in dazzlingly precise detail, familiar human experiences that we think we understand. Whether her topic is expressing anger, fighting with others, jockeying for status, giving advice or navigating jealousy, Callard provokes us to rethink the emotions and habits that govern how we live. She also happens to be one of my favorite columnists.

In this conversation, I wanted to hear what Callard had to say about a tangle of topics we've explored before on the show: how we measure and trade status, and how that feeds into the amorphous thing we call "the meritocracy." Callard's argument is that we can have a "nonpunitive" meritocracy, one that rewards us for our (virtuous) successes but doesn't blame us for our failures. I'm not so sure, but it's a fantastic conversation I'm still thinking about.

But as they say on the infomercials — that's not all! We also talk about why advice is useless, the benefits of jealousy, whether polyamory and monogamy suffer from the same problem, sad music, why Callard's office is such a riot of color and the secret to a good divorce. And at the end I've got some music recommendations for you. Enjoy!

"The Ezra Klein Show" is produced by Annie Galvin, Jeff Geld and Rogé Karma; fact-checking by Michelle Harris; original music by Isaac Jones; mixing by Jeff Geld; audience strategy by Shannon Busta. Special thanks to Kristin Lin.

Every Tuesday and Friday, Ezra Klein invites you into a conversation about something that matters, like today's episode with Agnes Callard. Listen wherever you get your podcasts.

`https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BsvEi6pxV68`

[You can listen to this episode of "The Ezra Klein Show" on Apple, Spotify, Google or wherever you get your podcasts.]

Intro

Ezra: I'm Ezra Klein, and this is "The Ezra Klein Show."

Right now, if I were to list my top five regular column writers, Agnes Callard would definitely be on that list. Callard is a philosopher at the University of Chicago. She's the author of the book "Aspiration." And she writes this wonderful public philosophy column for the magazine "The Point." And I love that column. Every one of them is just dense with insight on all kinds of different topics — status and jealousy and parenting

and arguing and anger, the things that we all live with, right? It's a problem in the news that you don't really have a news peg every day to write about what it means to be angry or what it means to be jealous. But those are topics that all of us are dealing with every single day. So her column I find is just a real model of how clear, precise philosophical thinking can illuminate topics we already think we know well. I just really get a lot out of it. So it's a joy to get to have her on the show. And this is one of those ones — I know it's a cliché in podcasting or interviews— we cover a lot of ground. But she writes about so many things that there is just vast territory that we range over in this conversation. But I do want to start and set you up for topics that we've covered before on the show, which is, how we define and communicate status and what are the merits of and the problems with the so-called meritocracy. Callard has really shaped how I view both of those topics, how I hear myself and others in conversation, and what the sort of meta level of what we're saying is doing. And then I try and parse the tension in the meritocracy debate between believing we're not really responsible for most of how our lives turn out. And so, a philosophical or moral structure that blames us, particularly for our failures, is unjust. And yet, it's also indispensable to have an idea in our own minds of excellence, to have something to strive for, a way to shape our efforts to sharpen the instruments of ourselves. And she just has a wonderful way of working through this debate. So I think you're really going to enjoy it. As always, my email is ezrakleinshow@nytimes.com. Here's Agnes Callard.

Conversation Begins

Ezra: So you have this fascinating column on status. And I want to start with how you define it. What is status to you?

Agnes: It's how much value other people accord you.

Ezra: That's a good way of putting it. So then you talk about the way we work through this in our everyday interactions. And you talk about the basic game and the importance game and the leveling game. Can you talk me through them?

Agnes: Sure, so the basic game is an attempt to find some common ground with a new person that you meet in terms of interests or a place that you come from or people that you know. It establishes that we care about at least some of the same things. The importance game is a game of jockeying for status, in which you try to be recognized by your interlocutor at sort of the maximum importance level that they can recognize you at. So you want to give them all the facts that they would need to see how important you are. And the leveling game is a game of finding common ground in feeling unimportant. So you find a way to talk to someone in such a way that you can both share an experience of powerlessness or struggle. And in a way, it's a way of deflecting from the importance game.

Ezra: So, model out a conversation for me. Let's say you and I just met. What might be things that one would say in a conversation that would establish each of these?

Agnes: So I think one thing that's hard is that with both the importance game and the leveling game, there is an element of disguise. We don't play them explicitly. We do play the basic game explicitly. We come pretty close to just being like, hey, let's find out what we have — what we're both interested in. Do you like this movie, right? But the other two are disguised. And so any time they show up in a conversation, they kind of show up in — you can't actually just say to someone, I'm going to explain to you why I'm important. And you can't actually just say to someone, let's empathize with one another, something like that. You have to kind of do it by way of doing something else. And so, a way that I see this show up often — and I'm an academic — in academic context is sort of talking about busyness. Academics talk a lot about how busy they are. And for a long time, this sort of puzzled me because I don't think we're the busiest people. But I think we talk about being busy more than any other group of people that I encounter. And I think that what busyness allows you to do is, it's a sort of — it's a way of playing both games at the same time. So if I tell you that I'm really busy, I'm telling you that I feel stressed, I feel overworked, I feel like I'm not in control of my life. I have all these demands being made on me, so you can empathize with me. But at the same time, I'm also telling you that look at all these people who want a piece of me. I'm pretty important, right? And so I think that that's a big part of what makes the busyness an attractive topic for people, is that it allows them to play both those games at the same time.

Ezra: And so how do you distinguish when these are about assessing relative status and when they're just about creating common ground in conversation? So if we're chatting — and I did not go to Harvard — but we're talking and I let slip that I went to Harvard. Maybe I'm saying, hey, hey, I went to Harvard, or maybe I'm just saying, that's where, in fact, I went to college. Or on the flip, if we're then talking later and I say, oh, I'm just totally overwhelmed lately, or I'm a really anxious person, or I just can't even do simple things in my life and get them done lately, maybe I'm saying, don't worry. Even though I went to Harvard, I'm just like you. Or maybe I'm just trying to create a space for us to have a conversation. So when is this a status game? And when is it just human beings assessing their own experience in concert with each other?

Agnes: I think it is just deeply indeterminate all the time. [KLEIN LAUGHS] And it kind of has to be, right? So one thing you can do is you can be sort of a very charitable listener to people, and you can always try to hear only the basic game in the conversation. And I know people who sort of do this, right? Or you can be very, very attuned to these other two games, right, and always be responding to that in the conversation. And I think that often, in fact, what we do is we combine the expectation of being heard in the basic way with interpreting others in one of the other two ways. So it's easy for me to think of myself, oh, I just happened to mention that I went to

the University of Chicago or something like that. That is, to hear in my own speech only the basic game, right? Which is a kind of charitable interpretation of myself, but then to be hypersensitized to the other person. And I think that there's always going to be an interpretive ambiguity because the leveling game and the importance game are always disguised.

Ezra: So you argue that we do all of these games and all of this status jockeying in part because we've left, to put it in your terms, important ethical theorizing undone. What is the ethical theorizing here that is undone?

Agnes: It's the question of what makes a human being valuable. I mean, you can say, what makes a cup valuable? Well, I can drink from it. What makes a work of art valuable? It's beautiful. What makes some weather valuable or something? It might be, well, it's pleasant to be in. Or it might be it's good for the environment or whatever. There are all kinds of ways of talking about why something is valuable. But a human being is a special case, right? And we're very interested in what makes us valuable. And I think that we have two basic answers to that question that we give at a philosophical level, but we're all giving those answers, which is, on the one hand, what makes a human being valuable is a certain kind of dignity or inner worth that everyone has simply in virtue of being human. You have it from the moment that you're born, or, depending on your theory, maybe even before you're born, and nothing you do can lose it. You can't lose it no matter what you do. And everyone has it equally, right? So that's one kind of worth. The other conception of value is of something acquired. And in some of the philosophy that I work on, ancient Greek philosophy, Plato and Aristotle, the word that's sometimes used for this is virtue, right? So a virtue is a kind of excellence of a human being that they have to do stuff to get. So you're not born with virtues. You're not born being courageous. You're not born with knowledge. So the other account of what makes a human being valuable is like, well, it's the value that they worked to acquire. And you either acquire it, or you don't. And if you don't, you don't have it. And so the first conception of value, you could think of it as a moral safety net that catches everybody, right? And the second one is one where it's possible to lack it. And it's possible to have it to a greater or lesser degree.

Ezra: Past societies have had much clearer status hierarchies. And recently, in America, you might say that we have a very intense one. And it's hard to have social mobility. But we also try to hide it in all kinds of ways. We have very complicated feelings towards it. You have a great quote in this piece, where you say, "A recent acquaintance told me that the least stressful new interactions in his life were in the army because status relations were immediately evident and common knowledge. You just looked at how many stripes a person had on his shoulder, and that was that — status negotiations complete. By contrast, in the extra military world, confusion reigns." Is there something about the way we relate to status hierarchies? Like, right now, today in modernity, that has created an unusual level of confusion. And is that a good or a bad thing, if so?

Agnes: I think the more social mobility you have, the more of this tension you'll have. So if you think about Plato's "Republic," OK, so in Plato's "Republic," he creates this ideal society. And in the society, there's this thing he calls the noble lie. The noble lie is that people have metals in their soul— bronze or silver or gold. And depending on which you have in your soul, you can either be in the ruling class or in the guardian class or in the sort of artisan class. And what's so interesting to me about this is that Plato inverts the modern — the idea that genetics is the hard truth. Namely, he thinks the lie is that we have a kind of innate fundamental difference that underwrites our social class. The truth is that those differences aren't there, but we have to pretend that they're there. So in effect, we have to pretend that there are these fundamental genetic differences that determine what class we're going to be in. And why would Plato think that? Well, if you think that the fact that you're not a ruler is because of some metal in your soul that can't be changed because it's locked in you, then you're not going to try to be one. And you're also not going to see the question of whether or not you can rule as determining your sense of worth. Your sense of worth is already there, right? So Plato's society is one that's rigidly socially immobile, right? And it does prevent a certain kind of strife.

Ezra: And so, in a way, that's in contrast to what we have or think we have or talk about having, which is a meritocracy, which is the idea that where you get is a reflection of your virtue, of your work ethic, of your talents, and how you've used them. And you've done a lot of writing about this. And there's been, particularly on the left, in recent years, a real questioning of meritocracy. I mean, it goes back further. But it's been Michael Sandel has wrote a book on it, Daniel Markovits has written a book on it. And there's this idea that the meritocracy blames people for their failures, which makes it, in many ways, immoral given the level of responsibility we do or don't have over our life outcomes. But on the other hand, the question of, well, isn't it good to give people something to aspire to? How do you parse that?

Agnes: Yeah, so one thing I've argued for is that, at least, ideally, what would be nice is a non-punitive meritocracy, right? So you could think that the rewards that people get are the products of their efforts without thinking that the people who don't get the rewards are culpable or blameworthy. And this is actually how we interact with people. People find this weird to think about it this way politically, but it's exactly how we interact with our friends, right? So when our friends have some achievement, we don't say, oh, well, you started off lucky. Of course, all our friends have various forms of luck, but we don't emphasize those when they achieve something. We say things like, well earned, you deserved it. This went to a great person. I say this all the time on Twitter when I see people getting things, and I'm happy for them. And I think it's great, right? On the other hand, when I have a friend get a paper rejected from a journal or — it happens to me all the time — we have various failures, and we might try to give them suggestions about how to improve for next time. But we don't say, well, this is your fault. It's earned. It's deserved, right? We treat these cases asymmetrically. In those cases, in the case of failure, we attend to all the outside influences. And I think

that kind of difference in attention makes sense. And it's sort of ethically justified as a good way to treat people.

Ezra: So what I read this argument from you, it made me wonder if I'm a bad friend, was the first take I had on it. [CALLARD LAUGHS] Because you're completely right in how I talk to and how my friends talk to each other, right? Somebody does something great, and we're like, hey, good for you. You've worked so hard. Then something bad happens to somebody, and it's like, oh my god, the world is cruel. And oftentimes, that is my view on the situation. But I don't think that's as ubiquitously true as that makes it sound. I think plenty of times within a friend group, there is somebody who, the friends, the various people think is actually kind of screwing it up. They're being a bad partner in their marriage. Or they're not working hard at their job. And then when the consequences eventually come, you're nice to people when that happens and forgiving and sympathetic and there with them, but I don't think it's true that the way they often get looked at is quite so asymmetric. That may be the way they're spoken to, but I'm not sure that's so deeply true. And that makes me wonder if this is actually as easy a thing to do as you're talking about, that we do want to believe, maybe only because it's self-protective to ourselves, that our personal effort and personal decisions have an outcome in life, all the way up to the way that ... there's an oft remarked phenomenon that when you hear about somebody dying young in the news, that people immediately want to know why, right? Were they a smoker? Did they live in an unhealthy way? Because they want to say, well, I'm not doing that, so I'm not going to have this problem. And so, it does seem to me there's something kind of deep in our desire to blame people, even if it's socially awkward to do it to their face. And so we try not to do that. There is a fair amount of blame that creeps even into social relations.

Agnes: Good. So I think that — I mean, one question is sort of, what is the correct ethical relation you have to this person, whose marriage is failing or their career is failing because they're making some of the wrong choices? And I tend to think that the correct ethical relation to that person is to try to help them, right? So you might say, look, here's how I think you can do it better. So is there any role for the punitive there? It's your fault. You brought this on yourself. And I tend to think the answer is just no. There isn't anything to be gained by that. And it might relieve a kind of psychological tension in oneself. But I don't think that the kind of meritocracy that I am trying to sketch in this piece, the non-punitive meritocracy, I don't think it's easy. So you say, is it maybe not as easy as you say? I agree with you. It's really not easy. It's super tempting to want to think that in addition to success being justified, suffering is also justified somehow. And I think it's almost unbearably painful to us to face unjustified suffering. As much as we say — this is the case of the young person who dies, right? As much as we might say, oh, life's not fair, bad stuff happens, that's just words. We don't accept that. On a deep level, we don't accept that that's possible. I don't think it's only, so it won't happen to me. I think it's like, it's not permitted to happen. It's not permitted for someone to experience profound suffering in a way

that is not justified. And there's something actually deeply philanthropic about being intolerant of that.

Ezra: I think it's a really interesting point. I mean, it makes me think of the God has a plan response to certain kinds of suffering, which is to say that even if you can't feel how it is justified now, in some way, it is justified. This is not my idea. I heard it from somebody else, and I'm sorry because I forgot who now. But there's this argument that the Book of Job would be more powerful if Job was not restored at the end — if, at the end of his testings, God did not reward him for his steadfastness. Because what that is saying, of course, is still, like, all suffering is, on some level, justified. There will be a reward in the end. And as you're saying, one of the difficult things about being a human being is, it's not — or at least, we have no way of knowing that our suffering amounts to anything much. And even our fundamental stories that try to acculturate us to the fact that suffering can be beyond our understanding, it's still at the end, they swerve from that a little bit. And so but we have enough understanding to say that there's somebody else with better understanding, some other force, and that there is a logic to that force.

Agnes: Yeah, I mean, I think it might not matter so much that Job gets rewarded. That's not the part we remember. It's not the part that speaks to us, right? Like, when Jesus says, God, why have you forsaken me, does it matter that later, it presumably works out OK for Jesus in heaven or something? It's like these moments in which the cry for the suffering to be explained, to be explained right then, immediately, the fact that we can even tolerate that much is amazing. And maybe you're right about the swerve. I think that it's important to remember that the claim, oh, life's not fair — life's full of suffering — we just can't justify it — that's just another swerve. That's not actually facing up to it. The actual facing up to it is so painful that we can, at best, do it for a second under very weird circumstances of just actually really ... the only times I've ever really faced homelessness was when I was with my middle son. And he would — there was a period in his life where we just had to go over to every homeless person we saw and not just give them money, but there was this elaborate negotiation. If they had a dog, we had to give them money for the dog. And we had to explain to them how much of the money is for the dog. And later, he'd talk about it. It just wouldn't be over. With a homeless person, it's like, you want to give him the money, and then you want it to be over. And it would never be over. And I felt like I was facing this thing, this unjustified suffering, in a way that I just normally don't. I normally find a way around it, right? So we find 100 ways around it even when it's right in front of us.

Ezra: One of the really profound and profoundly sad things in life is the way we learn to close ourselves to suffering. I find that story about your son very moving. And I think there's a pretty common thing where children have not yet been taught how to ignore what is obviously not right. If you don't mind me asking, how did he grow out of that? You say that was a time in the past. And what did you think, watching that end? Were you, on some level, grateful that it was over, that you didn't have to

keep going up to every homeless person on the street? Or did you feel something was lost at that point in maybe his, but also your ethical relationship with the world?

Agnes: So he's just someone of overwhelming natural empathy. So I'll come home. And if there was something wrong, he'll just look at my face and be like, what happened, right? He could just sort of read it. And I think for me, it was a relief because he has to learn how to — one of his projects in life is going to be to learn how to manage that empathy that just threatens to become all that he is and consume him. But I do think that in general, yeah, there is this process by which children — it's almost like they move into — we move into a logic of what is deserved or what is earned or what is owed. And children are not yet in that space. I'll tell a little story about my other son. My oldest — so this is my middle son with the homeless person. But my oldest son, I used to actually avoid — we lived in Berkeley, California. And the playgrounds had toys. They were sort of covered with toys that people left there for the kids to play with. And there was a period where he never wanted to go there, except when other kids weren't there. Because here's how he put it: the other kids take the toys away from me. But here's what actually happened. He'd be sitting there. He'd be digging with a shovel or something. Another kid would walk up. And she would maybe glance at the shovel. And he would walk up to her and hand her the shovel. And his narrative of what happened was she took the shovel away from me, right? Now what was going on there? Well, he could sort of see that she wanted it, right? And he didn't want to give it to her. But he kind of felt like he had to, or he didn't know what's the rule for when you have to, right? He didn't know about property rights, you know? And I would be saying things to him. Like, it's your shovel. You don't have to share. The other parents would be looking at me, like it's obviously a playground shovel, you know? And be like, just keep digging. You can ignore her. I would be saying things like that, right? What am I trying to do there? I'm trying to give him a sense of the boundaries between himself and other people. And I think children have to learn that. And then it's really only when we're adults that we can sort of, I think, confront the problem or the profundity of there being such a boundary.

Ezra: That is such an interesting way to put it. I just sometimes wonder if what we think of as a more mature realistic way that adults look at the world is just much less true to the reality that we live in. Your story reminds me of this Louis CK riff, where he talks about walking down the street in New York with a cousin of one of his friends. And she sees somebody just in terrible shape. The person is homeless, and they're in rags. And they're ill, and they're just not well, right? A person obviously in need of terrible help. And she says we should help them. What should we do here? And he says, no, no, no, that person is fine, right? That person is exactly where they need to be. And I mean, he knows what's going on here, right? This is the point of his riff. But he is correcting her correct empathetic impulse to help, her correct understanding that what's going on there is unjust. And she has some moral responsibility towards it. And it sometimes seems to me that a lot of becoming an adult is learning or being taught to shut down that intuition of moral responsibility. I know this is a big question

in ethical philosophy broadly. It's Peter Singer's parable about the pond: that if you would walk by a child who seemed to be drowning at a pond and jump in and ruin your suit and your shoes to save them, well, why wouldn't you send the equivalent amount of money to save children in another country, who we know, right now, you could save by making that donation? And there's a real tension here between the filtering you need to do just to live in this world. But also, you can really over filter that. And then, all of a sudden, somebody who's simply on the wrong side of a line that means nothing except that 200 years ago, there was a war and one side won and the other didn't, they just lose all moral value to you. Obviously, this is a pretty deep question in philosophy, but I'm curious how you try to draw your line, as somebody who thinks about this quite a bit.

Agnes: Yeah, I think that maybe one way to think about it is to sort of reverse the standard, almost like Hobbesian story about the state of nature being basic selfishness and egoism. I don't see that when looking at children. So here's the story. OK, prior to entering into civil society, each of us is egoistic and cares only about our own needs and to such a degree that we're willing to do great violence to other people in order to get what we want. But we form this kind of agreement with other people to kind of respect their basic rights, at least, so that they'll respect ours and so that we can have mutually beneficial agreements through trade. And we might set a sovereign over us to regulate that whole process. So there's this, in effect, politics is overcoming the problem of egoism. That's one story, right? And a lot of political philosophy comes out of that and just believes that. But sometimes I think it's exactly the wrong story. That politics is overcoming the problem of altruism, that at some basic level, we respond to the suffering of other people viscerally. And we see it as just as much of a problem as our own suffering. And the problem of causing suffering to others. My husband once said to me — he got into a lot of fights as a teenager. And he said, what I learned was that it wasn't the strongest person who won the fight, it was the one who was willing to do the worst kind of damage. If you'll stick your finger in someone else's eye, you can win almost any fight with a 16-year-old, right? So we don't want to be brutal. We don't want to act brutally towards one another. We don't find it easy to ignore another person's suffering, right? And civil society, in some ways, is creating a structure in which each of us can be individuals and can limit the extent to which we attend to the suffering of others.

Ezra: Ooh, that is a very provocative thought. So do you think that is an optimistic or a pessimistic way of thinking about civil society?

Agnes: I think that it's optimistic. Because I think that the idea would be that as society progresses, in effect, we can accommodate more and more of our natural altruism. So the thing you spoke of where we have wars and we view the other side as an enemy, it's sort of like, well, we have this thought that it's a condition on the survival of our society that we close off our humanity to that group, right? But as that becomes less of a condition on survival, we then just permit ourselves to, in effect, activate our natural concern for one another.

Ezra: So that's actually a very nice bridge back to meritocracy, which we've gone a little bit of field of. But it brings up this idea of the sort of principle versus the instrumental case for the meritocracy. So the principled case for meritocracy might be that it is the right way to structure society. It's right to reward people and the people who are getting rewarded are the right ones. But the instrumental case is this idea that we are trying to improve society, that the best thing to do is to give people something to aspire to, that we've structured the things they aspire to in the correct way, and that by rewarding them for that and blaming, on some level, those who don't, we are driving society forward, getting technological innovations, managerial innovations, maybe even ethical innovations. And so, generation to generation, we are being able to help more people and build something better. I think this has fallen very much out of favor on the left. A lot of the critiques of meritocracy come at the idea that this doesn't work, and it's not principled, and it hurts the people who fail out. I do think there's something valuable to giving people ways to aspire to personal excellence.

Agnes: I do think there's a deep point here that has to be the ultimate justification of meritocracy, if there is one, which is this. You don't want people to be too happy with who they are too early in their lives, right? Like, a two-year-old should not be happy to remain a two-year-old. They're great, but they haven't encountered most of the really valuable things in life yet, right? So a really big part of life is coming to care about new things that you didn't even know were valuable beforehand. And we want people to do that. And there's a problem with how people can do it, because it's like, it doesn't seem valuable to them. So why are they — how are they going to start valuing it? And competition is a really powerful psychological mechanism for that, right? And so you see it in schools. People want to get a good grade. And because they want to get a good grade, they study. And because they're studying, they become immersed in a world. And so we use competition to leverage ourselves out of what would have been an impoverished point of view on value. And I think that that's got to be the ultimate justification of meritocracy. But that justification is a justification only of meritocracy as being a way to motivate people. It's not a justification of meritocracy as being a way to ultimately assess the value of your life or what you care about. It's a theory of transition, not a theory of the end point. And I think one of the really deep ways in which meritocracy gets corrupted is when people take it to be a theory of the end point. In effect, my view is: if you are comparing yourself negatively to someone else, which is, I think, a perfectly fine thing and a very useful thing to do, you'd better be in the process of trying to become better. If you're done, in that respect — suppose you look at your neighbor, and they're wealthier than you. If that motivates you to try to become more wealthy, great. But if all it does is create bitterness, then you've perverted meritocracy. That is, you've taken something whose function was to motivate you to become better, and you have applied it in a situation which is static.

Ezra: Well, wealth is, I think, a really important idea to draw in here because there's obviously the question in any hierarchy or in anything you want to call a meritocracy, which is, well, what is the merit? How are you measuring the merit? And I think that

if you asked people, conceptually, how do we measure merit? You might get all kinds of answers. And then I think if you actually look at it, it's just money. And so the way the meritocracy works is like, you have won the meritocracy if you are a high-up engineer at Facebook or you're at a high-up position at McKinsey. And you might say to somebody, do you think a high-up engineer at Facebook or a high-up executive at McKinsey is doing more good for the world than a social worker who works with hardcore addicts? You'd say, no, of course not, right? The social worker who works with hardcore addicts — that's a wonderful person, almost a saint. Then you might say, well, just look at society. Which do we value more? Who has more respect? Who's going to have an easier time on the dating market? Who's going to have an easier time having the things they want in life? And of course, it's the people at the top of these big companies. And to your point earlier about ethical theorizing left undone, I think we've really lost any kind of critical conversation of what we are trying to incentivize people to change towards and then how we do it. We've just left it a little bit to the market.

Agnes: Good. So first of all, I disagree with you about wealth being the only measure of merit or even the main one. I think it is a big one. So I think that with the advent of social media, the number of Twitter followers is, for some people, a measure of merit. I think honors in academia — I can tell you that people care a lot about honors. It's a very big deal to get tenure. But then after you have tenure, this amazing thing happens, which is that there are still these promotion levels that sort of don't mean anything, but people still care about them, right? They're like, oh, I want to be promoted to full professor. I want to be promoted to university professor, right? Yes, you make a little more money when you're promoted in those ways. But I don't think it's the money that motivates people. I think it's the honor. And I think the social worker gets a certain kind of honor, too. I think that they know that they're chosen in examples like the one you just gave, right? And they get to present themselves as a social worker. And I do think that there is a certain cachet to that. I agree with you. It isn't of the same order as the banker. Why do so many students go into those lucrative professions? Partly, it's that money is a measure of merit. Partly, it is fear. I think it isn't all them wanting the most honor or wanting to win the top of meritocracy. I think that students are worried about their survival. And they feel they need to make prudent choices, or they won't survive. And they feel like — so there's a certain amount, actually, I think, of risk aversion in some of the choices that are guaranteed to lead to financial success. On the one hand, there are questions about, who do we want to be personally, and what is it to have value as a human being? And then there's the question, how do you organize society so that, in effect, the right things end up at the top? And I don't think that we are crazy off with respect to that. But I think there's a lot of room for improvement.

Ezra: Money has this weird way ... it is a transferable form of achievement. So there are honors within industries or Twitter followers. And they really work in their local space. But money works everywhere. And so that gives it, I think, a distinctive

power. And it's one reason I wish we could attach money to things that I think are a little bit more socially valuable. That's my fundamental critique of the market. I just think it often rewards the wrong things because we leave it too much to its own devices. I don't think scarcity is always the right way to measure these things. This is, in many ways, a left-wing critique of the way the meritocracy works. But when I read the left-wing critiques of the way the meritocracy works, a place I feel uncomfortable is that I feel like the left, in trying to critique the meritocracy so much, has lost an idea of excellence, of, what is it you're supposed to be striving for? There's a negative version of it. You want to rid yourself of racist ideas and bias and toxic misogyny and so on. And that's good. And we should rid ourselves of those things. But you also need the positive version, right? Who are you trying to become? To your point about aspiration. And I guess I'll frame it this way. I think a lot about, what does a left-wing version of Jordan Peterson look like, or at least Jordan Peterson from a couple of years ago? What would that look like? Because I think you do need that. I think he speaks to something deep in people. You're not good enough yet, and you need to get better, and here's how you do it. So let me ask that of you. What would a left-wing Jordan Peterson be?

Agnes: One version of it is the idea that anti-racism could be turned into an excellence. I think we used to think, well, there's just not being racist. And being racist is horrible, and so it's like being a murderer or something. And just don't do that, and then you're fine, right? But I think that — so one — this is one version that already exists. And it is the idea that concern for the oppressed and the powerless is, itself, something that can be perfected and that you can be competitive at and be better at than other people. It's not super attractive, as a vision, I think. But it is something like that. In effect, Jordan Peterson is a really interesting case because he is dealing with this problem of the zero-sum game of self-respect, where it's like, people feel like they're losers. And he is pushing that in a left-wing direction by saying, everyone can have self-respect, right? You can, yes, improve yourself. But you can do it by cleaning your room or something that everyone can do, right? So he incorporates a certain kind of egalitarianism into his approach. And similarly, I think that the left-wing version of that would incorporate a certain kind of competitiveness. [MUSIC PLAYING]

Ezra: So at the core of this conversation, as you said earlier, is the way we give people incentives to shape themselves. And you have a line that's always stuck with me, which is that "the process of self-creation involved a fair amount of violence to myself." When we're creating ourselves and changing ourselves, what is the nature of that violence?

Agnes: I think it's that you have certain instinctive responses, and you can't trust them. And you even have to sometimes silence them. And the very mundane version of that is cases of weakness of will where you're like, I shouldn't eat this extra cookie or whatever, right? There is just a thing that we do to ourselves kind of all the time where we — it's like we're whipping ourselves into shape, where we are denying our

own desires. Those desires are judgments about goodness, right? So some part of me is saying, this cookie is good. And I'm telling her, you're lying. That's a kind of violence to the self, I think. And in the cookie case, maybe it's not so serious, right? But in the case of, I don't know, early teenage sexual desires and the kind — if you think about the kind of self-monitoring and self-criticism that we do about that, certainly more so if somebody is homosexual and living in a less tolerant community. But I think it's just true of everyone, that there's a kind of being grossed out by your own desires. And there's a kind of feeling of needing to hide them and needing to shape them and needing to tell them that they're making false judgments.

Ezra: I think it's really interesting, this question of, what is our desire? The voice in our head saying we don't want to eat the cookie, or I don't want to spend today on Twitter, or I want to work out more, or I want to spend an hour every morning reading books, or the more guttural, intuitive — like, I do want to look at Twitter. I want to sleep in. I don't want to read the book. How do you think about that conflict between what that voice in our head says we want and then what we do?

Agnes: I think we're way too quick to identify ourselves with the long-term goals, especially when we're not in the moment of being tempted. So we can say, look, I know how I should really live. And I know that I should really read those books, and I should not eat the cookies, and I should be less stressed about these things, and I should spend more time with my family. These are things I know. And I think the truth is that I do not know any of them. I believe them, and then I also believe the opposite. And some of my beliefs are, in a way, more presentable to other people, right? So I am more presentable to you if I say, "Yeah, I know I should really spend more time with my kids," than if I say, "I have a profound need to escape my kids." But both of those things are true of me. And I think that the violence to the self occurs as long as they are both true of you. I think — but this is me just agreeing with Socrates about something, which is that, if you had knowledge, you would not have that conflict. And a lot of people have the goal of mastering themselves — which is to say, of exerting enough violence over themselves to silence or to quiet that other voice, because they know — they say they know — the other thing, right? But the truth is that the fact that the other voice is there means you don't know it. And the violence over yourself is the trying to quiet it when it's really there. And knowledge would mean that you unanimously and obviously, and in a very simple way, did the thing you thought you should.

Ezra: So I'm trying to think through the implicit definition of knowledge, or knowing something, here. It seems like a much more embodied way of knowing something than our typical way of talking about knowledge.

Agnes: Weirdly, I almost feel like our typical way of talking about knowledge is very bodily. But maybe that's just my Socratism. So maybe here's why I would put it that other way. Suppose that I feel like having the cookie, but I know I shouldn't. I think people are inclined to think of the feeling that you have the cookie as bodily and the knowing that you shouldn't as not being bodily. I think that's bodily, too. That's

just how things look to you in a bodily way when you're looking at them from far away, right? So you are somebody who is just trapped in the images of things. And when you look at something like eating a cookie from close up, it looks really good to you. When you look at it from far away, it looks like it's not very good. And those are both bodily judgments. There's just proximate and distant bodily judgments. And what we do when we don't have knowledge is we just vacillate between these bodily judgments. And we dress one of them up as though it were knowledge, namely the distant one. But if you actually knew in your soul, I would say, then the bodily judgments would be like a play of images that you would ignore, right? So if I say to you, well, here's two piles of money, right? This one has $1,000, and this one has $100 — but the $100 one is taller because it's different denominations. So it looks bigger, right? But if you know that this one is $1,000, you're going to go for the $1,000. You won't be like, well, that one is bigger. And so there's a way in which we are fooled by images, because all we're doing is, in some sense, doing what we feel like at every moment. And to have knowledge would be to just not be subject to those images.

Ezra: Why would knowledge resolve conflict as opposed to making it clear that there's always going to be conflict, which is to say, maybe — I want to ask this question correctly. Maybe, simply, things in their opposite are true, which is something I see a lot in your work, actually — a kind of recognition of living in the conflict of things. Why would it be true knowledge to resolve conflicts as opposed to true knowledge to say the conflicts are the truth of it?

Agnes: So I think the difference there is just in thinking how far from knowledge we are. So I think the way I am is that I see a bunch of conflicts, and I don't know how to resolve them. And that's just my ignorance. If I had knowledge, I would know how to resolve them. But what I at least try to do is to not be under the illusion that I have the knowledge already. To say knowledge would involve resolving them is to acknowledge that we are very, very, very far from that. It's not clear that it's achievable within a human lifetime, but it is. And so there's a different question, which is, how do we make do without knowledge, right? And we have to do some of that. But once you see it that way, nothing can really look as attractive to you as just having knowledge. You have to make do without it while you're looking for it. But I guess I think the whole "living with contradictions, accepting contradictions" thing is just — it's a way of swerving. It's a way of dressing up your own ignorance as being somehow responsibility and realism. But I think I can see what it would be to know. And it would be something amazing that's way better than where I am.

Ezra: I like that, at least as a goal. So one way people try to get to that kind of knowledge is by asking other people for advice. And you have a wonderful column on the problems of advice. So I want to begin with a distinction you draw between coaching and instruction and giving advice. Can you talk me through that?

Agnes: Yeah. So in this piece, I'm using the word "advice" in a slightly limited way. I think, naturally, it occupies a broader territory. But I'm thinking of what — I was motivated by just listening to a lot of podcasts in which people are often asked

to give generic advice to people who want to be like them. And the people on the podcasts were always these really idiosyncratic, weird people who you feel sure that they did not become that person by following someone else's advice. So there was some kind of a performative contradiction there of, why don't you give people a recipe for becoming the person for whom you could never have a recipe, and then become that person? But here are some things I think you can do. So I think you can give people instrumental, factual knowledge about how to achieve some technical goal, right? So if there's something where I don't know how to do it, like, how do you get to this place? How do you operate the photocopier? Then you can explain that to someone. And the reason you can explain it to them is, you don't need to know their bigger life goals and motivations and values in wanting to get to that place or wanting to operate the photocopier. You can know a relatively limited amount about them and still help them. So that's one kind of thing, instruction. And I think coaching — what I mean by coaching is a kind of intimate, long-term relationship in which you become familiar enough with someone's goals that you're almost like an appendage of who they are. But you're a little bit better attuned to those goals, and you can nudge them in that direction. There was a wonderful piece in "The New York Times" yesterday or the day before about gymnasts, older gymnasts, and people going back to the sport — people who've been told that they're too old and they can't do it anymore. And the relationships they have with their coaches, by contrast with the younger gymnasts, where the older gymnasts, their coaches are less tyrannical and are more like extensions of themselves. And coaching is something I do lots of in my life because I do lots of advising of different kinds of undergraduates, of graduate students, of mentoring colleagues, et cetera. So I think that's totally possible. But what I don't think is possible is that you can tell some stranger how to live, where that is understood in some very abstract way of, there's a good life, and you're going to help them achieve it, because I think that in order to help someone achieve big goals, like the coaching style, you have to know who they are. And I think you can help people achieve small goals, like, how do you work the photocopier? But that's not what the advice is geared to. So I see advice as in existing in this incoherent space between trying to help someone in a big way who you don't know.

Ezra: So this is really interesting to me. So is part of what you're saying here that for these more profound kinds of — now, I don't want to use the word advice or instruction for this, but these more profound kinds of direction — how do I become a great writer? How do I become a better person? That to make some of these changes that are more difficult for people to make, that if it's going to happen, it has to be grounded relationally, that you have to know the person and that whole thing, and what's happening in advice is you're trying to offer that kind of guidance, but non-relationally, and so it's untethered from the sort of soil it needs to be rooted in, to mix a metaphor, in order to take hold?

Agnes: Yes, that's right. Maybe another way to put it would be, I don't think becoming a great writer is a coherent goal. I think what you want to become is the

particular kind of great writer that you can become, whatever that is, and you don't know what it is, right? That's what your goal is. And who can help me with that? Well, my editor, because she has some sense of who I am and of who that great writer is that I'm trying to be. But I think that trying to become a great writer in the abstract is a non-goal. One way I describe it in my book is that having aspiration that is too open-ended — you'll just be flailing, like people who go to Europe to find themselves. Something fun might happen. But most likely, they're not going to find anything at all, because that goal is not concrete enough. And so I think that what coaching does is it allows people to help you with a more concrete goal — becoming the best gymnast you can be, where "you can be" is actually filled in with a certain kind of person that is known to you and the coach.

Ezra: My intuition is something similar to what you said at the beginning of this part of the conversation, which is that podcasting is an unusually advice-centric form of media, that compared to what happens on a television or in a newspaper or even in books, that even things that you don't think are going to be about advice — it's like everything asymptotically approaches just a bunch of advice on how to live. Why do you think podcasting has evolved in that way, or lends itself so much to advice?

Agnes: I think it's because it's the leveling game part of podcasting.

Ezra: Ooh, that's interesting.

Agnes: So podcasting, in effect, is elevating the interlocutor, right? You're important enough for me to invite to a podcast. And now the whole — the whole world — whoever listens to the podcast is, in effect, elevating that person, and being like, here's this important person, right? And a huge part of the world that we live in and the social-media world is being approachable. I think the advice part is mostly — the function of it isn't to actually give advice. It's to make that person seem approachable or wanting to help all the people who might otherwise resent them for being, in some way, above them.

Ezra: So a lot of internet advice — although, obviously, not all of it — ends up revolving around relationships, which I'm going to use as a segue to a fascinating piece you wrote about jealousy, of which you have a pretty unusual take on it, which is that you say it's a positive emotion. How is jealousy a positive emotion?

Agnes: By positive, I don't mean, say, praiseworthy or good. I leave that aside as to whether it is or not. What I mean by positive is that it is a form of desire or attraction rather than a form of aversion or fear, say, right? So we could classify emotions into whether the emotion is pulling you towards something or whether it's pulling you away from something. And I think jealousy is pulling you towards something. What it's pulling you towards, though, is the love that someone could never have for you, the love that they have for someone else, right? So I think that many people — me, certainly, but I think maybe most people — are, in some way, erotically attracted to that very love — the very love they can never have, the love that is, in some way, defined as being the love for somebody else. And I think that part of why we find that so attractive is that if you love someone, and you — it's like, who you are for them is

so limiting, in some way. Like, this is who I am, and I'm loved as this. And what if I want to be loved as someone else, too? If you see the relationship as a very central, metaphysically defining thing for who you are, then it can feel frustrating and limited to only be loved as yourself.

Ezra: Do you think there's a version of that, too, where you want not the love, exactly, the person has for someone else, but the version of them they are with someone else? If you love someone, you want to know them. And the sense that there is a part of them you cannot know because it is a part of them that emerges in a different dynamic with a different person, and so you can never have it — that's always struck me as a very deep part of jealousy.

Agnes: That's a great point, and I don't touch on it at all in the piece that I wrote. But I think you're right. When I think about times I've been jealous, I have wanted to know about the character of the conversations that my beloved was having with his other beloved, right? Where it's like, I want access to the you that you are for them. And what that speaks to is a kind of bottomless desire to own them. I want to own everything about you, even the parts of you that don't exist for me.

Ezra: Yeah, I think there's something very real there, or there always has been for me, at least. And you get a small taste of it when you go out in public with your partner. You go to a dinner party, and you see a version of them. You're like, wait. Yesterday, we were just hanging out. And where was this version of you? And then you realize, wherever it was, it wasn't there in part because of me. And that's a terrible feeling. [KLEIN LAUGHS]

Agnes: That is a big part of why people like going to dinner parties with their partners. I think jealousy is integrated, at a low level, into most romantic relationships. And it brings people pleasure. To see their partner being desired by others, kept at a certain simmer or something — even though they feel jealousy, and even though there's some kind of painful emotion, they want that pain. They want some of that pain.

Ezra: I think that's a very — a real point. I am not a very jealous person. But to the extent I sometimes get a bit jealous, I definitely find it to be a pleasurable emotion. Now, that might be because it's happening within an overall context of security. It would not be pleasurable — and I've had other relationships where it's not been pleasurable, because it was happening outside of a context of security. But inside a context of security, I find it to just be a little exciting, right? This recognition of unexplored vistas, this recognition that there is something unknown that is changing my relationship with my partner. It can be fun. And it gets to another line you have in that same piece, where you write, "I've never understood how polyamory is supposed to survive erotic rivalry, but I have exactly the same objection to monogamy." Tell me why those aren't more different for you.

Agnes: Yeah, because, in some sense, the problem is the same. Namely, in the case of polyamory, you're always going to want the love that — let me just throw some genders in there, right? So that he has for another woman, right? You want that

love, right? And so that's the jealousy that threatens to undermine the system. But in the case of monogamy, you also want the love that he has for another. It may not be embodied in another person at that moment, though it threatens to be at every moment. And at every dinner party, there's that potential, right? And so if you want the love that he has for another, whether or not that slot is filled, that's a problem.

Ezra: Yeah, I know polyamorous couples. And one of the things I will sometimes hear from them is that it's demystifying of that love, that, in some ways, it is less threatening to see your partner go out and then watch them come back, and they're just the same person and, in some cases, a little dissatisfied and tired the next morning, as opposed to wondering what it is they want that you cannot give them, that it is a — that that acculturation removes it of some of its mystical power.

Agnes: Yeah, good. And I would think, then, that you'd have to find some way to re-mystify. That is, if I'm right that jealousy is written, in some deep way, into the erotic relationship, that it's not just — we kind of need jealousy. There's a kind of flatness to love without the possibility of it, right? And so you'd almost worry that the polyamorous relationship that got too demystified would be like the monogamous relationship in which nothing could even get noticed at the dinner party.

Ezra: Let me ask about this from the other side, which is, what makes for a good divorce?

Agnes: I think most divorces are probably good divorces in the sense that very few people get divorced out of compulsion or necessity. Almost everyone chooses it because it's the best course, right? But that doesn't mean that they're always pursued as well as possible.

Ezra: Well, sometimes one of the partners doesn't want to get divorced.

Agnes: I'm not sure how to think about that sort of case. I suppose you're right that there could be a relationship — you could be in a relationship where someone doesn't want to be with you, but you still want to be with them. And it could be that, given a set of bad options, that's somehow still your best option. But that would be a very bad case. I would think that it would be hard to persistently want to be with somebody who really didn't want to be with you.

Ezra: I think, in those cases — and I'm no expert on divorce. But I think, in those cases, it's more that you are shocked and, on some level, disbelieving that the person doesn't want to be with you. You either wish it weren't true, or you think it will become untrue again.

Agnes: Right.

Ezra: Right? You think they're going through a thing.

Agnes: Right.

Ezra: And this is a bad idea. And let's just take a breath here and give it 5 or 10 or 15 or 50 years and see how you feel then.

Agnes: Yes. I got that advice a lot when I got divorced — [LAUGHTER] — because I did it very quickly. And people were like, wait, let's deliberate. So I think that that's a very good point. So one person might just think, over time, we can figure this out.

And the other person thinks that we can't figure this out. I think you're right. That's a real case where there's a disagreement over whether we can work something through or not. And to the person who thinks that we could, the divorce would just be a genuine loss. But even in the case where there's agreement — which is most of the divorces I know of, that at the end of the day, there's agreement on that question — I guess I think that maybe there's actually little more to a good divorce than the ability to continue to proceed by agreement. So marriage is proceeding by agreement, right? It's like, you deliberate together with your spouse about how to live. And I think you can continue to do that through a divorce and after a divorce. And the question might just be how much of your lives continue to be shared, which — if you shared kids, it's going to be a fair amount. But I think that there is this thought that — and maybe it's rooted in the very problem that you just described about the person who wants to keep trying and the person who doesn't — that divorce marks the end of deliberating together. And I think, if it does, then that's going to cause a lot of pain, because, in some sense, deliberating together is how we act together with one another's consent. And if we can't do that, we're going to be routinely doing certain kinds of violence to one another. And we're going to be operating using threats and incentives. So yeah, I would say it's the ability to deliberate together.

Ezra: So I ask you this because, from what I can tell on social media and podcasting, you have an unusually successful divorce. You celebrate your divorciversary, or at least some of them. I obviously cannot, given our earlier conversation, ask you for your advice for divorcing couples. But there's a specific thing you said, which is about creating space for deliberation. So I'm curious what have been, for you, the successful spaces for post-marriage deliberation.

Agnes: Well, so one thing is, I talk to my ex-husband a lot about philosophy. He's one of my best interlocutors. And that is important because it's not the case that we're always deliberating together. There's another thing we do together that isn't deliberating together. It's inquiring together. And maybe that creates a certain kind of backdrop of goodwill, I guess, that is relevant to deliberating together. But I think that it's something like — suppose there's some important decision that needs to be made about kids, school, or about — let's pick that, right? Something about the kids. I think the key to deliberating well with him has been not to think that I can settle that question on my own in my head and then try to sell him that plan as being the right plan. It's immediately obvious to someone when you're doing that. That is, persuasion is not the right tactic. Persuasion is much less commonly the right tactic than people suppose, I think. So it's not — I should actually figure out what we should do with his help, where I think there are important pieces of the puzzle that are unavailable to me until I talk to him.

Ezra: That's just good — oh, man. I can't say good life advice. That's good life instruction. [LAUGHTER] It's this very specific thing that one could put into practice. Often, between marriage and divorce — although often outside of marriage, too — people have kids. I have a two-year-old. And you wrote an essay — it was not that

long after I had a child — about the panic of parenting, which I love. And I've sent to other people who have children. But you talk in there about something that has just felt truer and truer to me every day, which is that it really shouldn't be called parenting. It should be called childing. Can you tell me why?

Agnes: Yeah. I think maybe the core thought there is that parenting suggests that you make your child into something. And that's just not the truth. It's more like your child is trying to figure out who they should be, and you're trying to help them without knowing what that is. And I think that it's hard. Before you — before I became a parent, anyway, I didn't get how psychologically difficult it would be to, in some sense, stand by and watch. And it means, every time you have an expectation for your child — and you cannot avoid having expectations — you also question it and say, am I having the right expectation for him? Is this the expectation I should be having? Because it's not one direction of fit. It's not like your child should meet your expectations, right? You want to have the ones that are the right ones for him. And so there's this direction of fit, from you to your child, that means that you are constantly second-guessing and questioning yourself as a parent.

Ezra: And that it feels like — my kid is a little bit young for this at this point. But from the older parents I know, at times from my own parents — and that it feels like a failure, that you have failed them if their lives — or even, in a local way, their year, their month — doesn't turn out the way they wanted to, right? It does seem to me that the agony of parenting is believing that you can control things you cannot control. But also, it would be very agonizing to think, I was doing this without any control, any influence. How do you think about that? That desire to — what do you do in parenting? What's the point of all this? [KLEIN LAUGHS]

Agnes: So I like that point about failure. I used to give that example earlier about my kid not wanting to go to the playground to play, because the other kids took the toys away from him. And I struggled with him. And I would give him these speeches about how, it's yours. Don't share it. But eventually, I just gave in, and we would just go to the playground really early when there weren't any other kids. There was a year when we just did that, just to avoid the conflict, right? And I was thinking to myself, I'm not educating him. I'm not teaching him that he's supposed to hold onto stuff. And I saw it as a failure. But I'm like, this is my compromise. I'm just going to not get into this situation — and of course, it worked out fine, right? But I think that failure is necessary as part of the story, in that I think what you're doing, as a parent, is you're coming up with goals for your kid constantly. And you're just making them up. And you're making them up partly on the basis of stuff you hear from other people and stuff you hear from your parents and stuff you read in some book. But you're like, here's how his life should be, right? And then insofar as you fall short of that, you feel bad, and you readjust, and you come up with some new goal. And you're constantly doing that. You're constantly making up fake goals. And I think it's because if you didn't do that, you wouldn't know what else to do, right? It's like, the way you can see that so clearly is with infants, right? It's amazing if you look at the way people

deal with infants. They treat a bunch of stuff that is obviously not important as being super important — whether the child is fed with breast milk or formula, how they sleep, how often they sleep, even whether their clothing is organic or not, when they are toilet trained. There are all these details about infant life that parents obsess over. And you might look at that saying — I looked at it, actually, saying, people are nuts. None of these things are important. They just don't matter at all, right? But you have to care about something, right? You need some kind of goal. And I think that parenting is this process where, slowly, you learn to have the right goal for your kid, to have the goal that actually matters. And you have to start out with dumb goals that don't matter, like how they're born and how they're swaddled and et cetera. But you're almost triangulating until you come to the goal for them that is their goal.

Ezra: That's such an interesting way of putting it. What I was thinking about while you were saying that was, so I did very poorly in school, starting in seventh grade. It was junior high. I remember the class where I got my first D. And from there through to when I was — so I'm probably 13 there, something like that — from there to the end of high school, until my senior year, my grades, for whatever reason, got little bit better. And also, it's over, one way or the other. It was just a constant source of really difficult tension between me and my parents and disappointment for them. They wanted me to get better grades. Frankly, I wanted me to get better grades. And I just couldn't, for whatever reason. It was not a lack of trying. And the strange thing is, it all worked out, right? Looking back from where I am now, I'm a "New York Times" columnist. I have a job. It's all fine. I went to college. It all worked out. But of course, they couldn't have known that. And I couldn't have known that. And so, in a way, the goal was wrong at that time. And it caused everybody a lot of tsuris, to use the Yiddish word. But it's not like I can fault — the goal seemed right. It's not like I thought they were wrong about being mad at me about my terrible grades. And so sometimes, with this kind of way of looking at parenting, it becomes this real difficult question of, how do you rate tension? I think about this with — again, I have a very young toddler, so he can't learn much from me in discipline yet. So it's like, OK, I'm just trying to avoid tension. And I sometimes succeed and failed this morning because we did not have the right kind of juice. And there's nothing I could do about it. But to what you're saying, one way of looking at it is like, yeah, just chill a little bit as a parent. Do you believe that to be true, or do you think that it's actually good to take your best guess of the goal and that the tension creates something valuable in the conflict?

Agnes: I think it's very hard to know. I'm —

Ezra: Well, damn. [LAUGHTER]

Agnes: — reflexively averse to the goal of chill. I think nobody ever believes that. People say it. Nobody believes it. Nobody acts upon it. I do think it's important for your kid to see that you care who they become. And having that tension is a way for that care to manifest itself. Part of what you're doing is being your kid's superego, in some way. You're maintaining — you're holding a place for their conception of who

they're going to be. And you want that to be big and expansive. And you want it to be much bigger than a toddler or an eight-year-old or a 12-year-old or a 17-year-old, as my kids are, can imagine. You want it to take up more space than that, right? You want them to expect a lot of themselves. And part of how you're doing that is by expecting a lot of them. [MUSIC PLAYING]

Ezra: How do you think about the question of setting good goals for oneself or anyone else? A through line of our whole conversation here is about goals, right? The goals the meritocracy sets for us, the goals we set for ourselves aspirationally, the goals we set for our children, and then, also, how often those goals can be wrong. They're not true to who we really are or how things actually work out. So you've clearly done a lot of thinking about goals. How do you set goals for yourself?

Agnes: So one thought that I have about goals, in general, is that you can get much less far ahead of yourself than you think you can. So that's part of the illusion of what I said — the fact that the judgment from a distance is also a bodily judgment. It's like, if I have this goal of, I want to, I don't know, read a lot more books or something, then I can almost convince myself that I'm already the person who cares about that, right? But if I were, then I would be doing it. And so I think, in myself, the way that I live that out is that there's a lot of randomness in what I do. I'm constantly exploring new avenues where, this might be me trying to become a different person. But I never really know, because if I were, this would just be the first step, and I would be confused about it. So I think that's taking up a lot of hobbies and starting new projects, and then a lot of them fail, where I don't have big, abstract, long-term goals except insofar as it's something like, I have philosophical projects, and I want to bring it to a conclusion, wherever that will be. So yeah, there's a lot of random movement.

Ezra: That makes sense to me. Let me ask you a question I didn't realize I'd be asking you. But now that I'm actually able to see you here — and the audience can't, but you have a lot of color on. Behind you is one of the most colorful walls I've ever seen. I see a lot of cacti with eyes, flowers — possibly real. I can't actually tell. What is your relationship with color and visual stimulation?

Agnes: I need a lot of visual stimulation all the time. So actually, my office hasn't always looked like this. It actually used to — when I first got my job — this is my university office — it was like a regular office.

Ezra: This is your university office I'm looking at?

Agnes: Yes.

Ezra: Oh, wow. [LAUGHTER] I thought this was at your home.

Agnes: No.

Ezra: It's very cool. And people can actually find pictures of this online, I realize, now.

Agnes: Yes. It's on, actually, my Twitter page. It's the background photo or something, so you can see it.

Ezra: Got it.

Agnes: Yeah. We actually had a fire in the philosophy department a few years ago. So this is the second instantiation because it was destroyed. But when they came in here, the — whatever insurance people came in here after the fire, they were so confused by the room. And they were like, is this some kind of therapy room? [CALLARD LAUGHS] Yeah. So I'm actually puzzled by other people who don't have a lot of color. The clothing with a lot of color on it pretty much costs the same as the clothing with very little color on it. So I'm confused by why people aren't making what, to me, is the obviously superior choice. But color is amazing. It's one of the most amazing features of the world. We could have lived in an uncolored world, right? A lot of the features of our world would still be in place. But there's just this element of beauty that is out there of beauty and order and pattern and contrast. And it's like, I want to experience it all the time. And I was starting to say that my office used to be normal. And I found myself actually googling the word "color" on my computer just to look at colors. And I'm like, this is ridiculous. I should have some color in my office. So I had one of these tapestries — actually, not these ones, but the pre-fire versions. And then I was like, oh, this is awesome. Let me add something else. Let me add something — my whole ceiling is covered, too. You can't see it. And yeah, my husband and my kids would come in. And they'd be like, OK, but now you're done, right? They'd keep saying that. But I keep finding new spots where I can add stuff. And to me, it's one of the most obvious arenas in which maximization makes sense. Most things, you shouldn't try to maximize. You shouldn't try to maximize how much money you make. You shouldn't try to maximize how much honor you get. But I don't see why you shouldn't try to maximize how much color is in your life.

Ezra: So there's color, and then there's visual stimulation. And I think the thing you would normally hear from people and think, I would immediately think, is it would be distracting. You'd be looking around. And you'd always be caught on something. And I end up — when I'm writing, I have to clean my desk really intensely, and there's nothing on it. And I would actually like more color in my room. But I tend to have very clean work spaces. So do you find that it leads to a different quality of thinking, or is it just a context in which you think best? You clearly don't find busyness in the visual field to be distracting. But what is it for you?

Agnes: I like being distracted, I think. That's the randomness I was describing, right? You can't segregate randomness like that. It has to be available to you at every moment of your life, that you might start doing something else. It creates some persistence problems with getting things done, for sure. I like patterns. I like visual patterns. I like them because they're distracting. And I suppose, I think, that there are forms of distraction that I would find unpleasant. So there are definitely forms of distraction I find unpleasant, like if someone is talking while I'm trying to work or something like that. So maybe it would be interesting to think about why some forms of distraction feel pleasant, and others feel unpleasant. And I've never thought about this before, but I would guess that there's a feeling of voluntarism with the visual where I can look at it, but it doesn't force me to look at it. Whereas a voice that is

speaking, it's producing meaning in a way where I cannot detach from that. I have to receive that meaning. It's like, a friend of mine once told me that she used to really enjoy the way the Coca-Cola signs looked — the swirls. And then she learned how to read, and she couldn't see the pattern anymore —

Ezra: Huh.

Agnes: — because she was receiving the meaning, right? And so there's this way in which a world of visual patterns is not a world that is conveying meaning to me. And that makes it feel unintrusive. It allows me to think all the meaning thoughts I want without having them being imposed by my space.

Ezra: That's really interesting. And I find that you do something else that I do but that I don't know that many other people do, which is, always, if I'm working, I'm listening to music. And I'm listening to one song on repeat. And whatever I am doing, it's like, I have to find — I take a lot of time, when I'm beginning to write, finding the right song and then rejecting songs because they're not the right mood, and they're not the right vibe, and this one is distracting me. But when I find it, it's just like, then it's just on repeat for six hours. And then we're done with the piece. And I'm curious, because you do this, too, one, a little bit how you came to it, but two, how you choose the songs.

Agnes: I'm much less systematic than you. And I often choose the wrong song and just live with it. And I actually almost — sometimes I can enjoy the pain of the fact that it's the wrong song that I'm listening to —

Ezra: That's amazing.

Agnes: — over and over again. So there's a perversity to it. But I think it also depends on what I'm writing. If I'm writing about anger or sadness — if I'm writing about emotions, I have to feel the emotion that I'm writing about. This is actually one of my biggest frustrations with academic writing on the emotions, is that so much of that writing has, as its content, the claim that there's a distinctively emotional way of thinking where that thinking cannot be communicated except by way of the emotion, but the piece is unemotional. And it's like, well, do you believe it or not, right? So I feel like academic writing is not well-suited to writing about the emotions for that, because you're not allowed to write emotionally. But for me, in order to write emotionally, I have to feel, to some extent, the emotion. So in that case, I don't know. If I'm writing about anger — there was one time when I listened to the Neko Case song "I'm a Man" over and over again. That's an angry song. Or sadness, especially. If I'm writing about grief or loss or suffering, then I want music that expresses that. But often, it will just be pretty random.

Ezra: I like that. And I like the idea that you can get into the pain of the wrong song. I'm going to try that for a piece that has to be a little jarring sometime. I think it's a good place to end. So let me ask you what is always our final question, with one addendum, which is, what are three books you would recommend to the audience that have influenced you? And then what is one song you use to feel either sadness or grief?

Agnes: So a month ago, two months ago, I read a biography for the first time. I'd never read a biography.

Ezra: For the first time?

Agnes: Yes, first time.

Ezra: Wow.

Agnes: I thought I'd hate biographies because I associated them with history. And I don't like history. It doesn't make sense to me. It's a bunch of facts, and I don't know how to fit them together. And then there's a story being told about them. But I'm always like, is this just one story that's chosen, and could there be others? And also, the story always began before it began. And so I find history quite confusing. So I stayed away from biographies. But then I was just reading a lot of Tolstoy. And I'm like, let me try. And I read a Tolstoy biography by Rosamund Bartlett. And I loved it. And I realized that biographies are not history. They are like voyeurism. It's like, you get to peer inside someone's life and find out the things that they would not have wanted to tell you. So I'm going to recommend that. And I actually thought, maybe I'll never read another biography, because it was so perfect. And maybe I'm just done. But then I got sent a new biography about Fernando Pessoa, who is someone else I'm into. And it's not out yet, but —

Ezra: Who's Fernando Pessoa?

Agnes: He is a Portuguese philosopher, poet, master of personnae. So early 20th century. He wrote under heteronyms, not pseudonyms, heteronyms, because he saw them as aspects of who he was. And he had 50 to 100 of them. But there were three or four that became prominent in his work. He published almost nothing over his life. He put all the stuff, papers, in a trunk. And his most famous book is called "The Book of Disquiet." I'll recommend that, too. It's wonderful. It is a book about the restless mind, right? What is it if you can just never fix on who you are or fix on how to live your life, and at every moment, you're shifting and thinking, what if I saw this slightly differently? He calls it "My Factless Autobiography." But anyway, I read this biography of Pessoa that was also wonderful. It was, like, 1,000 pages, and I read it in a week. I just couldn't stop reading it. So I'll recommend that, too. I started one last night. I started a biography of Augustine —

Ezra: Do you know what it's called, the Fernando Pessoa biography?

Agnes: It's called "Pessoa."

Ezra: "Pessoa."

Agnes: Zenith is the author. It's coming out in July. And last night, I started a biography of Augustine by Peter Brown. That's just a super famous biography that everyone is like, if you like biographies, you should read this one because it's great. And it's good. I've read maybe 50 pages. But I feel like, now, well, you pick any person who was passionate and driven and weird, like Clarice Lispector or W. E. B. Du Bois or Simone Weil, or someone like that. Their biography is going to be great, right? The thing about biography is that you get to see the sincerity of someone's passion as it

drives them to develop over the course of their life. And I really didn't get that before I read one. So I recommend the genre.

Ezra: I love that.

Agnes: Sad songs. There's so many of them. For some reason, the one that's jumping into my head is a song called "Real Death" by Mount Eerie.

Ezra: That does sound sad.

Agnes: It's —

Ezra: By who, you said?

Agnes: Mount Eerie, I think, is the name. It's about the death of — someone makes a song about the death of his wife. And his wife has just died. And he's like, this is not art. This is real life, and I'm actually really sad. And it's, somehow — the first line is, "death is real." Death is not for making art about. And it's this very sincere attempt to almost transcend the act of turning something into art and presenting it to you directly, telling you, like, the backpack that his wife ordered for their child whose school days she knew she would never see arriving in the mail, and giving you these details, but it's almost spoken. That one, I can't actually listen to a lot if I'm writing. It's almost too sad. But anyway, that's what jumped into my head.

Ezra: That's an amazing recommendation. Agnes Callard, this has been such a pleasure. Thank you so much.

Agnes: Thank you. It was really fun. [MUSIC PLAYING]

Ezra: That is the show. Thank you all for listening. If you enjoyed it, please rate it in your favorite podcast app or send it to a friend. You know I sometimes, at the end of these, do recommendations of my own on something related to our conversation. So we talked there about how Agnes and I both will put on individual songs over and over and over again while we're working. And I thought I'd list a few that I've been listening to recently. So this one is an album, actually, not a song, but Spencer Brown's "Stream of Consciousness," which is lush electronica. Really, really good for work but actually pretty sonically interesting, really well-crafted. I've really enjoyed that. I've listened to it a lot recently, actually a Roge Karma recommendation to me. I was gutted that MF Doom died. I'm a big MF Doom fan from back in the day, and so I've been listening to a lot of him. But if you don't know where to start, "Doomsday" is just one of my favorite songs, full stop. And it's been on in the background for me — actually, in the foreground for me — a lot lately. And then, finally, I just ran into this song. Not really great for working, but just beautiful vocals. "Someone Else" by Bishop Briggs featuring Jacob Banks. You can turn that one on loud, and you will really feel something. "The Ezra Klein Show" is a production of New York Times Opinion. It is produced by Roge Karma and Jeff Geld, fact-checked by Michelle Harris. Original music by Isaac Jones, and mixing by Jeff Geld.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Ezra: I'm Ezra Klein, and this is "The Ezra Klein Show."

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Right now, if I were to list my top five regular column writers, Agnes Callard would definitely be on that list. Callard is a philosopher at the University of Chicago. She's the author of the book "Aspiration." And she writes this wonderful public philosophy column for the magazine "The Point." And I love that column. Every one of them is just dense with insight on all kinds of different topics — status and jealousy and parenting and arguing and anger, the things that we all live with, right?

It's a problem in the news that you don't really have a news peg every day to write about what it means to be angry or what it means to be jealous. But those are topics that all of us are dealing with every single day. So her column I find is just a real model of how clear, precise philosophical thinking can illuminate topics we already think we know well. I just really get a lot out of it. So it's a joy to get to have her on the show.

And this is one of those ones — I know it's a cliché in podcasting or interviews— we cover a lot of ground. But she writes about so many things that there is just vast territory that we range over in this conversation. But I do want to start and set you up for topics that we've covered before on the show, which is, how we define and communicate status and what are the merits of and the problems with the so-called meritocracy. Callard has really shaped how I view both of those topics, how I hear myself and others in conversation, and what the sort of meta level of what we're saying is doing.

And then I try and parse the tension in the meritocracy debate between believing we're not really responsible for most of how our lives turn out. And so, a philosophical or moral structure that blames us, particularly for our failures, is unjust. And yet, it's also indispensable to have an idea in our own minds of excellence, to have something to strive for, a way to shape our efforts to sharpen the instruments of ourselves. And she just has a wonderful way of working through this debate. So I think you're really going to enjoy it. As always, my email is ezrakleinshow@nytimes.com. Here's Agnes Callard.

So you have this fascinating column on status. And I want to start with how you define it. What is status to you?

Agnes: It's how much value other people accord you.

Ezra: That's a good way of putting it. So then you talk about the way we work through this in our everyday interactions. And you talk about the basic game and the importance game and the leveling game. Can you talk me through them?

Agnes: Sure, so the basic game is an attempt to find some common ground with a new person that you meet in terms of interests or a place that you come from or people that you know. It establishes that we care about at least some of the same things. The importance game is a game of jockeying for status, in which you try to be recognized by your interlocutor at sort of the maximum importance level that they can recognize you at. So you want to give them all the facts that they would need to see how important you are.

And the leveling game is a game of finding common ground in feeling unimportant. So you find a way to talk to someone in such a way that you can both share an

experience of powerlessness or struggle. And in a way, it's a way of deflecting from the importance game.

Ezra: So, model out a conversation for me. Let's say you and I just met. What might be things that one would say in a conversation that would establish each of these?

Agnes: So I think one thing that's hard is that with both the importance game and the leveling game, there is an element of disguise. We don't play them explicitly. We do play the basic game explicitly. We come pretty close to just being like, hey, let's find out what we have — what we're both interested in. Do you like this movie, right? But the other two are disguised. And so any time they show up in a conversation, they kind of show up in — you can't actually just say to someone, I'm going to explain to you why I'm important. And you can't actually just say to someone, let's empathize with one another, something like that. You have to kind of do it by way of doing something else.

And so, a way that I see this show up often — and I'm an academic — in academic context is sort of talking about busyness. Academics talk a lot about how busy they are. And for a long time, this sort of puzzled me because I don't think we're the busiest people. But I think we talk about being busy more than any other group of people that I encounter. And I think that what busyness allows you to do is, it's a sort of — it's a way of playing both games at the same time.

So if I tell you that I'm really busy, I'm telling you that I feel stressed, I feel overworked, I feel like I'm not in control of my life. I have all these demands being made on me, so you can empathize with me. But at the same time, I'm also telling you that look at all these people who want a piece of me. I'm pretty important, right? And so I think that that's a big part of what makes the busyness an attractive topic for people, is that it allows them to play both those games at the same time.

Ezra: And so how do you distinguish when these are about assessing relative status and when they're just about creating common ground in conversation? So if we're chatting — and I did not go to Harvard — but we're talking and I let slip that I went to Harvard. Maybe I'm saying, hey, hey, I went to Harvard, or maybe I'm just saying, that's where, in fact, I went to college. Or on the flip, if we're then talking later and I say, oh, I'm just totally overwhelmed lately, or I'm a really anxious person, or I just can't even do simple things in my life and get them done lately, maybe I'm saying, don't worry. Even though I went to Harvard, I'm just like you. Or maybe I'm just trying to create a space for us to have a conversation. So when is this a status game? And when is it just human beings assessing their own experience in concert with each other?

Agnes: I think it is just deeply indeterminate all the time. [KLEIN LAUGHS] And it kind of has to be, right? So one thing you can do is you can be sort of a very charitable listener to people, and you can always try to hear only the basic game in the conversation. And I know people who sort of do this, right? Or you can be very,

very attuned to these other two games, right, and always be responding to that in the conversation.

And I think that often, in fact, what we do is we combine the expectation of being heard in the basic way with interpreting others in one of the other two ways. So it's easy for me to think of myself, oh, I just happened to mention that I went to the University of Chicago or something like that. That is, to hear in my own speech only the basic game, right? Which is a kind of charitable interpretation of myself, but then to be hypersensitized to the other person. And I think that there's always going to be an interpretive ambiguity because the leveling game and the importance game are always disguised.

Ezra: So you argue that we do all of these games and all of this status jockeying in part because we've left, to put it in your terms, important ethical theorizing undone. What is the ethical theorizing here that is undone?

Agnes: It's the question of what makes a human being valuable. I mean, you can say, what makes a cup valuable? Well, I can drink from it. What makes a work of art valuable? It's beautiful. What makes some weather valuable or something? It might be, well, it's pleasant to be in. Or it might be it's good for the environment or whatever. There are all kinds of ways of talking about why something is valuable.

But a human being is a special case, right? And we're very interested in what makes us valuable. And I think that we have two basic answers to that question that we give at a philosophical level, but we're all giving those answers, which is, on the one hand, what makes a human being valuable is a certain kind of dignity or inner worth that everyone has simply in virtue of being human. You have it from the moment that you're born, or, depending on your theory, maybe even before you're born, and nothing you do can lose it. You can't lose it no matter what you do. And everyone has it equally, right? So that's one kind of worth.

The other conception of value is of something acquired. And in some of the philosophy that I work on, ancient Greek philosophy, Plato and Aristotle, the word that's sometimes used for this is virtue, right? So a virtue is a kind of excellence of a human being that they have to do stuff to get. So you're not born with virtues. You're not born being courageous. You're not born with knowledge.

So the other account of what makes a human being valuable is like, well, it's the value that they worked to acquire. And you either acquire it, or you don't. And if you don't, you don't have it. And so the first conception of value, you could think of it as a moral safety net that catches everybody, right? And the second one is one where it's possible to lack it. And it's possible to have it to a greater or lesser degree.

Ezra: Past societies have had much clearer status hierarchies. And recently, in America, you might say that we have a very intense one. And it's hard to have social mobility. But we also try to hide it in all kinds of ways. We have very complicated feelings towards it.

You have a great quote in this piece, where you say, "A recent acquaintance told me that the least stressful new interactions in his life were in the army because status

relations were immediately evident and common knowledge. You just looked at how many stripes a person had on his shoulder, and that was that — status negotiations complete. By contrast, in the extra military world, confusion reigns." Is there something about the way we relate to status hierarchies? Like, right now, today in modernity, that has created an unusual level of confusion. And is that a good or a bad thing, if so?

Agnes: I think the more social mobility you have, the more of this tension you'll have. So if you think about Plato's "Republic," OK, so in Plato's "Republic," he creates this ideal society. And in the society, there's this thing he calls the noble lie. The noble lie is that people have metals in their soul— bronze or silver or gold. And depending on which you have in your soul, you can either be in the ruling class or in the guardian class or in the sort of artisan class.

And what's so interesting to me about this is that Plato inverts the modern — the idea that genetics is the hard truth. Namely, he thinks the lie is that we have a kind of innate fundamental difference that underwrites our social class. The truth is that those differences aren't there, but we have to pretend that they're there. So in effect, we have to pretend that there are these fundamental genetic differences that determine what class we're going to be in.

And why would Plato think that? Well, if you think that the fact that you're not a ruler is because of some metal in your soul that can't be changed because it's locked in you, then you're not going to try to be one. And you're also not going to see the question of whether or not you can rule as determining your sense of worth. Your sense of worth is already there, right? So Plato's society is one that's rigidly socially immobile, right? And it does prevent a certain kind of strife.

Ezra: And so, in a way, that's in contrast to what we have or think we have or talk about having, which is a meritocracy, which is the idea that where you get is a reflection of your virtue, of your work ethic, of your talents, and how you've used them. And you've done a lot of writing about this. And there's been, particularly on the left, in recent years, a real questioning of meritocracy. I mean, it goes back further. But it's been Michael Sandel has wrote a book on it, Daniel Markovits has written a book on it. And there's this idea that the meritocracy blames people for their failures, which makes it, in many ways, immoral given the level of responsibility we do or don't have over our life outcomes. But on the other hand, the question of, well, isn't it good to give people something to aspire to? How do you parse that?

Agnes: Yeah, so one thing I've argued for is that, at least, ideally, what would be nice is a non-punitive meritocracy, right? So you could think that the rewards that people get are the products of their efforts without thinking that the people who don't get the rewards are culpable or blameworthy.

And this is actually how we interact with people. People find this weird to think about it this way politically, but it's exactly how we interact with our friends, right? So when our friends have some achievement, we don't say, oh, well, you started off lucky. Of course, all our friends have various forms of luck, but we don't emphasize those when they achieve something. We say things like, well earned, you deserved it.

This went to a great person. I say this all the time on Twitter when I see people getting things, and I'm happy for them. And I think it's great, right?

On the other hand, when I have a friend get a paper rejected from a journal or — it happens to me all the time — we have various failures, and we might try to give them suggestions about how to improve for next time. But we don't say, well, this is your fault. It's earned. It's deserved, right? We treat these cases asymmetrically. In those cases, in the case of failure, we attend to all the outside influences. And I think that kind of difference in attention makes sense. And it's sort of ethically justified as a good way to treat people.

Ezra: So what I read this argument from you, it made me wonder if I'm a bad friend, was the first take I had on it. [CALLARD LAUGHS] Because you're completely right in how I talk to and how my friends talk to each other, right? Somebody does something great, and we're like, hey, good for you. You've worked so hard. Then something bad happens to somebody, and it's like, oh my god, the world is cruel. And oftentimes, that is my view on the situation.

But I don't think that's as ubiquitously true as that makes it sound. I think plenty of times within a friend group, there is somebody who, the friends, the various people think is actually kind of screwing it up. They're being a bad partner in their marriage. Or they're not working hard at their job. And then when the consequences eventually come, you're nice to people when that happens and forgiving and sympathetic and there with them, but I don't think it's true that the way they often get looked at is quite so asymmetric. That may be the way they're spoken to, but I'm not sure that's so deeply true.

And that makes me wonder if this is actually as easy a thing to do as you're talking about, that we do want to believe, maybe only because it's self-protective to ourselves, that our personal effort and personal decisions have an outcome in life, all the way up to the way that ... there's an oft remarked phenomenon that when you hear about somebody dying young in the news, that people immediately want to know why, right? Were they a smoker? Did they live in an unhealthy way?

Because they want to say, well, I'm not doing that, so I'm not going to have this problem. And so, it does seem to me there's something kind of deep in our desire to blame people, even if it's socially awkward to do it to their face. And so we try not to do that. There is a fair amount of blame that creeps even into social relations.

Agnes: Good. So I think that — I mean, one question is sort of, what is the correct ethical relation you have to this person, whose marriage is failing or their career is failing because they're making some of the wrong choices? And I tend to think that the correct ethical relation to that person is to try to help them, right? So you might say, look, here's how I think you can do it better. So is there any role for the punitive there? It's your fault. You brought this on yourself. And I tend to think the answer is just no. There isn't anything to be gained by that. And it might relieve a kind of psychological tension in oneself.

But I don't think that the kind of meritocracy that I am trying to sketch in this piece, the non-punitive meritocracy, I don't think it's easy. So you say, is it maybe not as easy as you say? I agree with you. It's really not easy. It's super tempting to want to think that in addition to success being justified, suffering is also justified somehow. And I think it's almost unbearably painful to us to face unjustified suffering. As much as we say — this is the case of the young person who dies, right? As much as we might say, oh, life's not fair, bad stuff happens, that's just words. We don't accept that. On a deep level, we don't accept that that's possible.

I don't think it's only, so it won't happen to me. I think it's like, it's not permitted to happen. It's not permitted for someone to experience profound suffering in a way that is not justified. And there's something actually deeply philanthropic about being intolerant of that.

Ezra: I think it's a really interesting point. I mean, it makes me think of the God has a plan response to certain kinds of suffering, which is to say that even if you can't feel how it is justified now, in some way, it is justified. This is not my idea. I heard it from somebody else, and I'm sorry because I forgot who now. But there's this argument that the Book of Job would be more powerful if Job was not restored at the end — if, at the end of his testings, God did not reward him for his steadfastness. Because what that is saying, of course, is still, like, all suffering is, on some level, justified. There will be a reward in the end.

And as you're saying, one of the difficult things about being a human being is, it's not — or at least, we have no way of knowing that our suffering amounts to anything much. And even our fundamental stories that try to acculturate us to the fact that suffering can be beyond our understanding, it's still at the end, they swerve from that a little bit. And so but we have enough understanding to say that there's somebody else with better understanding, some other force, and that there is a logic to that force.

Agnes: Yeah, I mean, I think it might not matter so much that Job gets rewarded. That's not the part we remember. It's not the part that speaks to us, right? Like, when Jesus says, God, why have you forsaken me, does it matter that later, it presumably works out OK for Jesus in heaven or something? It's like these moments in which the cry for the suffering to be explained, to be explained right then, immediately, the fact that we can even tolerate that much is amazing.

And maybe you're right about the swerve. I think that it's important to remember that the claim, oh, life's not fair — life's full of suffering — we just can't justify it — that's just another swerve. That's not actually facing up to it. The actual facing up to it is so painful that we can, at best, do it for a second under very weird circumstances of just actually really ... the only times I've ever really faced homelessness was when I was with my middle son. And he would — there was a period in his life where we just had to go over to every homeless person we saw and not just give them money, but there was this elaborate negotiation.

If they had a dog, we had to give them money for the dog. And we had to explain to them how much of the money is for the dog. And later, he'd talk about it. It just

wouldn't be over. With a homeless person, it's like, you want to give him the money, and then you want it to be over. And it would never be over. And I felt like I was facing this thing, this unjustified suffering, in a way that I just normally don't. I normally find a way around it, right? So we find 100 ways around it even when it's right in front of us.

Ezra: One of the really profound and profoundly sad things in life is the way we learn to close ourselves to suffering. I find that story about your son very moving. And I think there's a pretty common thing where children have not yet been taught how to ignore what is obviously not right. If you don't mind me asking, how did he grow out of that? You say that was a time in the past. And what did you think, watching that end? Were you, on some level, grateful that it was over, that you didn't have to keep going up to every homeless person on the street? Or did you feel something was lost at that point in maybe his, but also your ethical relationship with the world?

Agnes: So he's just someone of overwhelming natural empathy. So I'll come home. And if there was something wrong, he'll just look at my face and be like, what happened, right? He could just sort of read it. And I think for me, it was a relief because he has to learn how to — one of his projects in life is going to be to learn how to manage that empathy that just threatens to become all that he is and consume him. But I do think that in general, yeah, there is this process by which children — it's almost like they move into — we move into a logic of what is deserved or what is earned or what is owed. And children are not yet in that space.

I'll tell a little story about my other son. My oldest — so this is my middle son with the homeless person. But my oldest son, I used to actually avoid — we lived in Berkeley, California. And the playgrounds had toys. They were sort of covered with toys that people left there for the kids to play with. And there was a period where he never wanted to go there, except when other kids weren't there. Because here's how he put it: the other kids take the toys away from me.

But here's what actually happened. He'd be sitting there. He'd be digging with a shovel or something. Another kid would walk up. And she would maybe glance at the shovel. And he would walk up to her and hand her the shovel. And his narrative of what happened was she took the shovel away from me, right? Now what was going on there? Well, he could sort of see that she wanted it, right? And he didn't want to give it to her. But he kind of felt like he had to, or he didn't know what's the rule for when you have to, right? He didn't know about property rights, you know?

And I would be saying things to him. Like, it's your shovel. You don't have to share. The other parents would be looking at me, like it's obviously a playground shovel, you know? And be like, just keep digging. You can ignore her. I would be saying things like that, right? What am I trying to do there? I'm trying to give him a sense of the boundaries between himself and other people. And I think children have to learn that. And then it's really only when we're adults that we can sort of, I think, confront the problem or the profundity of there being such a boundary.

Ezra: That is such an interesting way to put it. I just sometimes wonder if what we think of as a more mature realistic way that adults look at the world is just much less true to the reality that we live in. Your story reminds me of this Louis CK riff, where he talks about walking down the street in New York with a cousin of one of his friends. And she sees somebody just in terrible shape. The person is homeless, and they're in rags. And they're ill, and they're just not well, right? A person obviously in need of terrible help. And she says we should help them. What should we do here?

And he says, no, no, no, that person is fine, right? That person is exactly where they need to be. And I mean, he knows what's going on here, right? This is the point of his riff. But he is correcting her correct empathetic impulse to help, her correct understanding that what's going on there is unjust. And she has some moral responsibility towards it. And it sometimes seems to me that a lot of becoming an adult is learning or being taught to shut down that intuition of moral responsibility.

I know this is a big question in ethical philosophy broadly. It's Peter Singer's parable about the pond: that if you would walk by a child who seemed to be drowning at a pond and jump in and ruin your suit and your shoes to save them, well, why wouldn't you send the equivalent amount of money to save children in another country, who we know, right now, you could save by making that donation?

And there's a real tension here between the filtering you need to do just to live in this world. But also, you can really over filter that. And then, all of a sudden, somebody who's simply on the wrong side of a line that means nothing except that 200 years ago, there was a war and one side won and the other didn't, they just lose all moral value to you. Obviously, this is a pretty deep question in philosophy, but I'm curious how you try to draw your line, as somebody who thinks about this quite a bit.

Agnes: Yeah, I think that maybe one way to think about it is to sort of reverse the standard, almost like Hobbesian story about the state of nature being basic selfishness and egoism. I don't see that when looking at children. So here's the story. OK, prior to entering into civil society, each of us is egoistic and cares only about our own needs and to such a degree that we're willing to do great violence to other people in order to get what we want. But we form this kind of agreement with other people to kind of respect their basic rights, at least, so that they'll respect ours and so that we can have mutually beneficial agreements through trade.

And we might set a sovereign over us to regulate that whole process. So there's this, in effect, politics is overcoming the problem of egoism. That's one story, right? And a lot of political philosophy comes out of that and just believes that. But sometimes I think it's exactly the wrong story. That politics is overcoming the problem of altruism, that at some basic level, we respond to the suffering of other people viscerally.

And we see it as just as much of a problem as our own suffering. And the problem of causing suffering to others. My husband once said to me — he got into a lot of fights as a teenager. And he said, what I learned was that it wasn't the strongest person who won the fight, it was the one who was willing to do the worst kind of damage. If you'll

stick your finger in someone else's eye, you can win almost any fight with a 16-year-old, right?

So we don't want to be brutal. We don't want to act brutally towards one another. We don't find it easy to ignore another person's suffering, right? And civil society, in some ways, is creating a structure in which each of us can be individuals and can limit the extent to which we attend to the suffering of others.

Ezra: Ooh, that is a very provocative thought. So do you think that is an optimistic or a pessimistic way of thinking about civil society?

Agnes: I think that it's optimistic. Because I think that the idea would be that as society progresses, in effect, we can accommodate more and more of our natural altruism. So the thing you spoke of where we have wars and we view the other side as an enemy, it's sort of like, well, we have this thought that it's a condition on the survival of our society that we close off our humanity to that group, right? But as that becomes less of a condition on survival, we then just permit ourselves to, in effect, activate our natural concern for one another.

Ezra: So that's actually a very nice bridge back to meritocracy, which we've gone a little bit of field of. But it brings up this idea of the sort of principle versus the instrumental case for the meritocracy. So the principled case for meritocracy might be that it is the right way to structure society. It's right to reward people and the people who are getting rewarded are the right ones. But the instrumental case is this idea that we are trying to improve society, that the best thing to do is to give people something to aspire to, that we've structured the things they aspire to in the correct way, and that by rewarding them for that and blaming, on some level, those who don't, we are driving society forward, getting technological innovations, managerial innovations, maybe even ethical innovations.

And so, generation to generation, we are being able to help more people and build something better. I think this has fallen very much out of favor on the left. A lot of the critiques of meritocracy come at the idea that this doesn't work, and it's not principled, and it hurts the people who fail out. I do think there's something valuable to giving people ways to aspire to personal excellence.

Agnes: I do think there's a deep point here that has to be the ultimate justification of meritocracy, if there is one, which is this. You don't want people to be too happy with who they are too early in their lives, right? Like, a two-year-old should not be happy to remain a two-year-old. They're great, but they haven't encountered most of the really valuable things in life yet, right?

So a really big part of life is coming to care about new things that you didn't even know were valuable beforehand. And we want people to do that. And there's a problem with how people can do it, because it's like, it doesn't seem valuable to them. So why are they — how are they going to start valuing it?

And competition is a really powerful psychological mechanism for that, right? And so you see it in schools. People want to get a good grade. And because they want to get a good grade, they study. And because they're studying, they become immersed

in a world. And so we use competition to leverage ourselves out of what would have been an impoverished point of view on value. And I think that that's got to be the ultimate justification of meritocracy.

But that justification is a justification only of meritocracy as being a way to motivate people. It's not a justification of meritocracy as being a way to ultimately assess the value of your life or what you care about. It's a theory of transition, not a theory of the end point. And I think one of the really deep ways in which meritocracy gets corrupted is when people take it to be a theory of the end point.

In effect, my view is: if you are comparing yourself negatively to someone else, which is, I think, a perfectly fine thing and a very useful thing to do, you'd better be in the process of trying to become better. If you're done, in that respect — suppose you look at your neighbor, and they're wealthier than you. If that motivates you to try to become more wealthy, great. But if all it does is create bitterness, then you've perverted meritocracy. That is, you've taken something whose function was to motivate you to become better, and you have applied it in a situation which is static.

Ezra: Well, wealth is, I think, a really important idea to draw in here because there's obviously the question in any hierarchy or in anything you want to call a meritocracy, which is, well, what is the merit? How are you measuring the merit? And I think that if you asked people, conceptually, how do we measure merit? You might get all kinds of answers. And then I think if you actually look at it, it's just money.

And so the way the meritocracy works is like, you have won the meritocracy if you are a high-up engineer at Facebook or you're at a high-up position at McKinsey. And you might say to somebody, do you think a high-up engineer at Facebook or a high-up executive at McKinsey is doing more good for the world than a social worker who works with hardcore addicts? You'd say, no, of course not, right? The social worker who works with hardcore addicts — that's a wonderful person, almost a saint.

Then you might say, well, just look at society. Which do we value more? Who has more respect? Who's going to have an easier time on the dating market? Who's going to have an easier time having the things they want in life? And of course, it's the people at the top of these big companies. And to your point earlier about ethical theorizing left undone, I think we've really lost any kind of critical conversation of what we are trying to incentivize people to change towards and then how we do it. We've just left it a little bit to the market.

Agnes: Good. So first of all, I disagree with you about wealth being the only measure of merit or even the main one. I think it is a big one. So I think that with the advent of social media, the number of Twitter followers is, for some people, a measure of merit. I think honors in academia — I can tell you that people care a lot about honors.

It's a very big deal to get tenure. But then after you have tenure, this amazing thing happens, which is that there are still these promotion levels that sort of don't mean anything, but people still care about them, right? They're like, oh, I want to be promoted to full professor. I want to be promoted to university professor, right? Yes,

you make a little more money when you're promoted in those ways. But I don't think it's the money that motivates people. I think it's the honor.

And I think the social worker gets a certain kind of honor, too. I think that they know that they're chosen in examples like the one you just gave, right? And they get to present themselves as a social worker. And I do think that there is a certain cachet to that. I agree with you. It isn't of the same order as the banker.

Why do so many students go into those lucrative professions? Partly, it's that money is a measure of merit. Partly, it is fear. I think it isn't all them wanting the most honor or wanting to win the top of meritocracy. I think that students are worried about their survival. And they feel they need to make prudent choices, or they won't survive. And they feel like — so there's a certain amount, actually, I think, of risk aversion in some of the choices that are guaranteed to lead to financial success.

On the one hand, there are questions about, who do we want to be personally, and what is it to have value as a human being? And then there's the question, how do you organize society so that, in effect, the right things end up at the top? And I don't think that we are crazy off with respect to that. But I think there's a lot of room for improvement.

Ezra: Money has this weird way ... it is a transferable form of achievement. So there are honors within industries or Twitter followers. And they really work in their local space. But money works everywhere. And so that gives it, I think, a distinctive power. And it's one reason I wish we could attach money to things that I think are a little bit more socially valuable. That's my fundamental critique of the market. I just think it often rewards the wrong things because we leave it too much to its own devices. I don't think scarcity is always the right way to measure these things.

This is, in many ways, a left-wing critique of the way the meritocracy works. But when I read the left-wing critiques of the way the meritocracy works, a place I feel uncomfortable is that I feel like the left, in trying to critique the meritocracy so much, has lost an idea of excellence, of, what is it you're supposed to be striving for?

There's a negative version of it. You want to rid yourself of racist ideas and bias and toxic misogyny and so on. And that's good. And we should rid ourselves of those things. But you also need the positive version, right? Who are you trying to become? To your point about aspiration.

And I guess I'll frame it this way. I think a lot about, what does a left-wing version of Jordan Peterson look like, or at least Jordan Peterson from a couple of years ago? What would that look like? Because I think you do need that. I think he speaks to something deep in people. You're not good enough yet, and you need to get better, and here's how you do it. So let me ask that of you. What would a left-wing Jordan Peterson be?

Agnes: One version of it is the idea that anti-racism could be turned into an excellence. I think we used to think, well, there's just not being racist. And being racist is horrible, and so it's like being a murderer or something. And just don't do that, and then you're fine, right?

But I think that — so one — this is one version that already exists. And it is the idea that concern for the oppressed and the powerless is, itself, something that can be perfected and that you can be competitive at and be better at than other people. It's not super attractive, as a vision, I think. But it is something like that.

In effect, Jordan Peterson is a really interesting case because he is dealing with this problem of the zero-sum game of self-respect, where it's like, people feel like they're losers. And he is pushing that in a left-wing direction by saying, everyone can have self-respect, right? You can, yes, improve yourself. But you can do it by cleaning your room or something that everyone can do, right? So he incorporates a certain kind of egalitarianism into his approach. And similarly, I think that the left-wing version of that would incorporate a certain kind of competitiveness.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Ezra: So at the core of this conversation, as you said earlier, is the way we give people incentives to shape themselves. And you have a line that's always stuck with me, which is that "the process of self-creation involved a fair amount of violence to myself." When we're creating ourselves and changing ourselves, what is the nature of that violence?

Agnes: I think it's that you have certain instinctive responses, and you can't trust them. And you even have to sometimes silence them. And the very mundane version of that is cases of weakness of will where you're like, I shouldn't eat this extra cookie or whatever, right?

There is just a thing that we do to ourselves kind of all the time where we — it's like we're whipping ourselves into shape, where we are denying our own desires. Those desires are judgments about goodness, right? So some part of me is saying, this cookie is good. And I'm telling her, you're lying. That's a kind of violence to the self, I think.

And in the cookie case, maybe it's not so serious, right? But in the case of, I don't know, early teenage sexual desires and the kind — if you think about the kind of self-monitoring and self-criticism that we do about that, certainly more so if somebody is homosexual and living in a less tolerant community. But I think it's just true of everyone, that there's a kind of being grossed out by your own desires. And there's a kind of feeling of needing to hide them and needing to shape them and needing to tell them that they're making false judgments.

Ezra: I think it's really interesting, this question of, what is our desire? The voice in our head saying we don't want to eat the cookie, or I don't want to spend today on Twitter, or I want to work out more, or I want to spend an hour every morning reading books, or the more guttural, intuitive — like, I do want to look at Twitter. I want to sleep in. I don't want to read the book. How do you think about that conflict between what that voice in our head says we want and then what we do?

Agnes: I think we're way too quick to identify ourselves with the long-term goals, especially when we're not in the moment of being tempted. So we can say, look, I know how I should really live. And I know that I should really read those books, and

I should not eat the cookies, and I should be less stressed about these things, and I should spend more time with my family. These are things I know.

And I think the truth is that I do not know any of them. I believe them, and then I also believe the opposite. And some of my beliefs are, in a way, more presentable to other people, right? So I am more presentable to you if I say, "Yeah, I know I should really spend more time with my kids," than if I say, "I have a profound need to escape my kids." But both of those things are true of me. And I think that the violence to the self occurs as long as they are both true of you.

I think — but this is me just agreeing with Socrates about something, which is that, if you had knowledge, you would not have that conflict. And a lot of people have the goal of mastering themselves — which is to say, of exerting enough violence over themselves to silence or to quiet that other voice, because they know — they say they know — the other thing, right?

But the truth is that the fact that the other voice is there means you don't know it. And the violence over yourself is the trying to quiet it when it's really there. And knowledge would mean that you unanimously and obviously, and in a very simple way, did the thing you thought you should.

Ezra: So I'm trying to think through the implicit definition of knowledge, or knowing something, here. It seems like a much more embodied way of knowing something than our typical way of talking about knowledge.

Agnes: Weirdly, I almost feel like our typical way of talking about knowledge is very bodily. But maybe that's just my Socratism. So maybe here's why I would put it that other way. Suppose that I feel like having the cookie, but I know I shouldn't. I think people are inclined to think of the feeling that you have the cookie as bodily and the knowing that you shouldn't as not being bodily. I think that's bodily, too.

That's just how things look to you in a bodily way when you're looking at them from far away, right? So you are somebody who is just trapped in the images of things. And when you look at something like eating a cookie from close up, it looks really good to you. When you look at it from far away, it looks like it's not very good. And those are both bodily judgments. There's just proximate and distant bodily judgments.

And what we do when we don't have knowledge is we just vacillate between these bodily judgments. And we dress one of them up as though it were knowledge, namely the distant one. But if you actually knew in your soul, I would say, then the bodily judgments would be like a play of images that you would ignore, right?

So if I say to you, well, here's two piles of money, right? This one has $1,000, and this one has $100 — but the $100 one is taller because it's different denominations. So it looks bigger, right? But if you know that this one is $1,000, you're going to go for the $1,000. You won't be like, well, that one is bigger. And so there's a way in which we are fooled by images, because all we're doing is, in some sense, doing what we feel like at every moment. And to have knowledge would be to just not be subject to those images.

Ezra: Why would knowledge resolve conflict as opposed to making it clear that there's always going to be conflict, which is to say, maybe — I want to ask this question correctly. Maybe, simply, things in their opposite are true, which is something I see a lot in your work, actually — a kind of recognition of living in the conflict of things. Why would it be true knowledge to resolve conflicts as opposed to true knowledge to say the conflicts are the truth of it?

Agnes: So I think the difference there is just in thinking how far from knowledge we are. So I think the way I am is that I see a bunch of conflicts, and I don't know how to resolve them. And that's just my ignorance. If I had knowledge, I would know how to resolve them. But what I at least try to do is to not be under the illusion that I have the knowledge already. To say knowledge would involve resolving them is to acknowledge that we are very, very, very far from that. It's not clear that it's achievable within a human lifetime, but it is.

And so there's a different question, which is, how do we make do without knowledge, right? And we have to do some of that. But once you see it that way, nothing can really look as attractive to you as just having knowledge. You have to make do without it while you're looking for it.

But I guess I think the whole "living with contradictions, accepting contradictions" thing is just — it's a way of swerving. It's a way of dressing up your own ignorance as being somehow responsibility and realism. But I think I can see what it would be to know. And it would be something amazing that's way better than where I am.

Ezra: I like that, at least as a goal. So one way people try to get to that kind of knowledge is by asking other people for advice. And you have a wonderful column on the problems of advice. So I want to begin with a distinction you draw between coaching and instruction and giving advice. Can you talk me through that?

Agnes: Yeah. So in this piece, I'm using the word "advice" in a slightly limited way. I think, naturally, it occupies a broader territory. But I'm thinking of what — I was motivated by just listening to a lot of podcasts in which people are often asked to give generic advice to people who want to be like them.

And the people on the podcasts were always these really idiosyncratic, weird people who you feel sure that they did not become that person by following someone else's advice. So there was some kind of a performative contradiction there of, why don't you give people a recipe for becoming the person for whom you could never have a recipe, and then become that person?

But here are some things I think you can do. So I think you can give people instrumental, factual knowledge about how to achieve some technical goal, right? So if there's something where I don't know how to do it, like, how do you get to this place? How do you operate the photocopier? Then you can explain that to someone.

And the reason you can explain it to them is, you don't need to know their bigger life goals and motivations and values in wanting to get to that place or wanting to operate the photocopier. You can know a relatively limited amount about them and still help them. So that's one kind of thing, instruction.

And I think coaching — what I mean by coaching is a kind of intimate, long-term relationship in which you become familiar enough with someone's goals that you're almost like an appendage of who they are. But you're a little bit better attuned to those goals, and you can nudge them in that direction.

There was a wonderful piece in "The New York Times" yesterday or the day before about gymnasts, older gymnasts, and people going back to the sport — people who've been told that they're too old and they can't do it anymore. And the relationships they have with their coaches, by contrast with the younger gymnasts, where the older gymnasts, their coaches are less tyrannical and are more like extensions of themselves.

And coaching is something I do lots of in my life because I do lots of advising of different kinds of undergraduates, of graduate students, of mentoring colleagues, et cetera. So I think that's totally possible.

But what I don't think is possible is that you can tell some stranger how to live, where that is understood in some very abstract way of, there's a good life, and you're going to help them achieve it, because I think that in order to help someone achieve big goals, like the coaching style, you have to know who they are.

And I think you can help people achieve small goals, like, how do you work the photocopier? But that's not what the advice is geared to. So I see advice as in existing in this incoherent space between trying to help someone in a big way who you don't know.

Ezra: So this is really interesting to me. So is part of what you're saying here that for these more profound kinds of — now, I don't want to use the word advice or instruction for this, but these more profound kinds of direction — how do I become a great writer? How do I become a better person?

That to make some of these changes that are more difficult for people to make, that if it's going to happen, it has to be grounded relationally, that you have to know the person and that whole thing, and what's happening in advice is you're trying to offer that kind of guidance, but non-relationally, and so it's untethered from the sort of soil it needs to be rooted in, to mix a metaphor, in order to take hold?

Agnes: Yes, that's right. Maybe another way to put it would be, I don't think becoming a great writer is a coherent goal. I think what you want to become is the particular kind of great writer that you can become, whatever that is, and you don't know what it is, right? That's what your goal is. And who can help me with that? Well, my editor, because she has some sense of who I am and of who that great writer is that I'm trying to be. But I think that trying to become a great writer in the abstract is a non-goal.

One way I describe it in my book is that having aspiration that is too open-ended — you'll just be flailing, like people who go to Europe to find themselves. Something fun might happen. But most likely, they're not going to find anything at all, because that goal is not concrete enough. And so I think that what coaching does is it allows people to help you with a more concrete goal — becoming the best gymnast you can

be, where "you can be" is actually filled in with a certain kind of person that is known to you and the coach.

Ezra: My intuition is something similar to what you said at the beginning of this part of the conversation, which is that podcasting is an unusually advice-centric form of media, that compared to what happens on a television or in a newspaper or even in books, that even things that you don't think are going to be about advice — it's like everything asymptotically approaches just a bunch of advice on how to live. Why do you think podcasting has evolved in that way, or lends itself so much to advice?

Agnes: I think it's because it's the leveling game part of podcasting.

Ezra: Ooh, that's interesting.

Agnes: So podcasting, in effect, is elevating the interlocutor, right? You're important enough for me to invite to a podcast. And now the whole — the whole world — whoever listens to the podcast is, in effect, elevating that person, and being like, here's this important person, right? And a huge part of the world that we live in and the social-media world is being approachable.

I think the advice part is mostly — the function of it isn't to actually give advice. It's to make that person seem approachable or wanting to help all the people who might otherwise resent them for being, in some way, above them.

Ezra: So a lot of internet advice — although, obviously, not all of it — ends up revolving around relationships, which I'm going to use as a segue to a fascinating piece you wrote about jealousy, of which you have a pretty unusual take on it, which is that you say it's a positive emotion. How is jealousy a positive emotion?

Agnes: By positive, I don't mean, say, praiseworthy or good. I leave that aside as to whether it is or not. What I mean by positive is that it is a form of desire or attraction rather than a form of aversion or fear, say, right? So we could classify emotions into whether the emotion is pulling you towards something or whether it's pulling you away from something. And I think jealousy is pulling you towards something.

What it's pulling you towards, though, is the love that someone could never have for you, the love that they have for someone else, right? So I think that many people — me, certainly, but I think maybe most people — are, in some way, erotically attracted to that very love — the very love they can never have, the love that is, in some way, defined as being the love for somebody else.

And I think that part of why we find that so attractive is that if you love someone, and you — it's like, who you are for them is so limiting, in some way. Like, this is who I am, and I'm loved as this. And what if I want to be loved as someone else, too? If you see the relationship as a very central, metaphysically defining thing for who you are, then it can feel frustrating and limited to only be loved as yourself.

Ezra: Do you think there's a version of that, too, where you want not the love, exactly, the person has for someone else, but the version of them they are with someone else? If you love someone, you want to know them. And the sense that there is a part of them you cannot know because it is a part of them that emerges in a different dynamic

with a different person, and so you can never have it — that's always struck me as a very deep part of jealousy.

Agnes: That's a great point, and I don't touch on it at all in the piece that I wrote. But I think you're right. When I think about times I've been jealous, I have wanted to know about the character of the conversations that my beloved was having with his other beloved, right? Where it's like, I want access to the you that you are for them. And what that speaks to is a kind of bottomless desire to own them. I want to own everything about you, even the parts of you that don't exist for me.

Ezra: Yeah, I think there's something very real there, or there always has been for me, at least. And you get a small taste of it when you go out in public with your partner. You go to a dinner party, and you see a version of them. You're like, wait. Yesterday, we were just hanging out. And where was this version of you? And then you realize, wherever it was, it wasn't there in part because of me. And that's a terrible feeling. [KLEIN LAUGHS]

Agnes: That is a big part of why people like going to dinner parties with their partners. I think jealousy is integrated, at a low level, into most romantic relationships. And it brings people pleasure. To see their partner being desired by others, kept at a certain simmer or something — even though they feel jealousy, and even though there's some kind of painful emotion, they want that pain. They want some of that pain.

Ezra: I think that's a very — a real point. I am not a very jealous person. But to the extent I sometimes get a bit jealous, I definitely find it to be a pleasurable emotion. Now, that might be because it's happening within an overall context of security. It would not be pleasurable — and I've had other relationships where it's not been pleasurable, because it was happening outside of a context of security.

But inside a context of security, I find it to just be a little exciting, right? This recognition of unexplored vistas, this recognition that there is something unknown that is changing my relationship with my partner. It can be fun. And it gets to another line you have in that same piece, where you write, "I've never understood how polyamory is supposed to survive erotic rivalry, but I have exactly the same objection to monogamy." Tell me why those aren't more different for you.

Agnes: Yeah, because, in some sense, the problem is the same. Namely, in the case of polyamory, you're always going to want the love that — let me just throw some genders in there, right? So that he has for another woman, right? You want that love, right? And so that's the jealousy that threatens to undermine the system.

But in the case of monogamy, you also want the love that he has for another. It may not be embodied in another person at that moment, though it threatens to be at every moment. And at every dinner party, there's that potential, right? And so if you want the love that he has for another, whether or not that slot is filled, that's a problem.

Ezra: Yeah, I know polyamorous couples. And one of the things I will sometimes hear from them is that it's demystifying of that love, that, in some ways, it is less

threatening to see your partner go out and then watch them come back, and they're just the same person and, in some cases, a little dissatisfied and tired the next morning, as opposed to wondering what it is they want that you cannot give them, that it is a — that that acculturation removes it of some of its mystical power.

Agnes: Yeah, good. And I would think, then, that you'd have to find some way to re-mystify. That is, if I'm right that jealousy is written, in some deep way, into the erotic relationship, that it's not just — we kind of need jealousy. There's a kind of flatness to love without the possibility of it, right? And so you'd almost worry that the polyamorous relationship that got too demystified would be like the monogamous relationship in which nothing could even get noticed at the dinner party.

Ezra: Let me ask about this from the other side, which is, what makes for a good divorce?

Agnes: I think most divorces are probably good divorces in the sense that very few people get divorced out of compulsion or necessity. Almost everyone chooses it because it's the best course, right? But that doesn't mean that they're always pursued as well as possible.

Ezra: Well, sometimes one of the partners doesn't want to get divorced.

Agnes: I'm not sure how to think about that sort of case. I suppose you're right that there could be a relationship — you could be in a relationship where someone doesn't want to be with you, but you still want to be with them. And it could be that, given a set of bad options, that's somehow still your best option. But that would be a very bad case. I would think that it would be hard to persistently want to be with somebody who really didn't want to be with you.

Ezra: I think, in those cases — and I'm no expert on divorce. But I think, in those cases, it's more that you are shocked and, on some level, disbelieving that the person doesn't want to be with you. You either wish it weren't true, or you think it will become untrue again.

Agnes: Right.

Ezra: Right? You think they're going through a thing.

Agnes: Right.

Ezra: And this is a bad idea. And let's just take a breath here and give it 5 or 10 or 15 or 50 years and see how you feel then.

Agnes: Yes. I got that advice a lot when I got divorced —

[LAUGHTER]

— because I did it very quickly. And people were like, wait, let's deliberate. So I think that that's a very good point. So one person might just think, over time, we can figure this out. And the other person thinks that we can't figure this out. I think you're right. That's a real case where there's a disagreement over whether we can work something through or not. And to the person who thinks that we could, the divorce would just be a genuine loss.

But even in the case where there's agreement — which is most of the divorces I know of, that at the end of the day, there's agreement on that question — I guess

I think that maybe there's actually little more to a good divorce than the ability to continue to proceed by agreement.

So marriage is proceeding by agreement, right? It's like, you deliberate together with your spouse about how to live. And I think you can continue to do that through a divorce and after a divorce. And the question might just be how much of your lives continue to be shared, which — if you shared kids, it's going to be a fair amount.

But I think that there is this thought that — and maybe it's rooted in the very problem that you just described about the person who wants to keep trying and the person who doesn't — that divorce marks the end of deliberating together.

And I think, if it does, then that's going to cause a lot of pain, because, in some sense, deliberating together is how we act together with one another's consent. And if we can't do that, we're going to be routinely doing certain kinds of violence to one another. And we're going to be operating using threats and incentives. So yeah, I would say it's the ability to deliberate together.

Ezra: So I ask you this because, from what I can tell on social media and podcasting, you have an unusually successful divorce. You celebrate your divorciversary, or at least some of them. I obviously cannot, given our earlier conversation, ask you for your advice for divorcing couples. But there's a specific thing you said, which is about creating space for deliberation. So I'm curious what have been, for you, the successful spaces for post-marriage deliberation.

Agnes: Well, so one thing is, I talk to my ex-husband a lot about philosophy. He's one of my best interlocutors. And that is important because it's not the case that we're always deliberating together. There's another thing we do together that isn't deliberating together. It's inquiring together. And maybe that creates a certain kind of backdrop of goodwill, I guess, that is relevant to deliberating together.

But I think that it's something like — suppose there's some important decision that needs to be made about kids, school, or about — let's pick that, right? Something about the kids. I think the key to deliberating well with him has been not to think that I can settle that question on my own in my head and then try to sell him that plan as being the right plan.

It's immediately obvious to someone when you're doing that. That is, persuasion is not the right tactic. Persuasion is much less commonly the right tactic than people suppose, I think. So it's not — I should actually figure out what we should do with his help, where I think there are important pieces of the puzzle that are unavailable to me until I talk to him.

Ezra: That's just good — oh, man. I can't say good life advice. That's good life instruction.

[LAUGHTER]

It's this very specific thing that one could put into practice. Often, between marriage and divorce — although often outside of marriage, too — people have kids. I have a two-year-old. And you wrote an essay — it was not that long after I had a child — about the panic of parenting, which I love. And I've sent to other people who have

children. But you talk in there about something that has just felt truer and truer to me every day, which is that it really shouldn't be called parenting. It should be called childing. Can you tell me why?

Agnes: Yeah. I think maybe the core thought there is that parenting suggests that you make your child into something. And that's just not the truth. It's more like your child is trying to figure out who they should be, and you're trying to help them without knowing what that is. And I think that it's hard. Before you — before I became a parent, anyway, I didn't get how psychologically difficult it would be to, in some sense, stand by and watch.

And it means, every time you have an expectation for your child — and you cannot avoid having expectations — you also question it and say, am I having the right expectation for him? Is this the expectation I should be having? Because it's not one direction of fit. It's not like your child should meet your expectations, right? You want to have the ones that are the right ones for him. And so there's this direction of fit, from you to your child, that means that you are constantly second-guessing and questioning yourself as a parent.

Ezra: And that it feels like — my kid is a little bit young for this at this point. But from the older parents I know, at times from my own parents — and that it feels like a failure, that you have failed them if their lives — or even, in a local way, their year, their month — doesn't turn out the way they wanted to, right?

It does seem to me that the agony of parenting is believing that you can control things you cannot control. But also, it would be very agonizing to think, I was doing this without any control, any influence. How do you think about that? That desire to — what do you do in parenting? What's the point of all this? [KLEIN LAUGHS]

Agnes: So I like that point about failure. I used to give that example earlier about my kid not wanting to go to the playground to play, because the other kids took the toys away from him. And I struggled with him. And I would give him these speeches about how, it's yours. Don't share it. But eventually, I just gave in, and we would just go to the playground really early when there weren't any other kids. There was a year when we just did that, just to avoid the conflict, right?

And I was thinking to myself, I'm not educating him. I'm not teaching him that he's supposed to hold onto stuff. And I saw it as a failure. But I'm like, this is my compromise. I'm just going to not get into this situation — and of course, it worked out fine, right?

But I think that failure is necessary as part of the story, in that I think what you're doing, as a parent, is you're coming up with goals for your kid constantly. And you're just making them up. And you're making them up partly on the basis of stuff you hear from other people and stuff you hear from your parents and stuff you read in some book. But you're like, here's how his life should be, right?

And then insofar as you fall short of that, you feel bad, and you readjust, and you come up with some new goal. And you're constantly doing that. You're constantly

making up fake goals. And I think it's because if you didn't do that, you wouldn't know what else to do, right?

It's like, the way you can see that so clearly is with infants, right? It's amazing if you look at the way people deal with infants. They treat a bunch of stuff that is obviously not important as being super important — whether the child is fed with breast milk or formula, how they sleep, how often they sleep, even whether their clothing is organic or not, when they are toilet trained. There are all these details about infant life that parents obsess over.

And you might look at that saying — I looked at it, actually, saying, people are nuts. None of these things are important. They just don't matter at all, right? But you have to care about something, right? You need some kind of goal. And I think that parenting is this process where, slowly, you learn to have the right goal for your kid, to have the goal that actually matters. And you have to start out with dumb goals that don't matter, like how they're born and how they're swaddled and et cetera. But you're almost triangulating until you come to the goal for them that is their goal.

Ezra: That's such an interesting way of putting it. What I was thinking about while you were saying that was, so I did very poorly in school, starting in seventh grade. It was junior high. I remember the class where I got my first D. And from there through to when I was — so I'm probably 13 there, something like that — from there to the end of high school, until my senior year, my grades, for whatever reason, got little bit better. And also, it's over, one way or the other.

It was just a constant source of really difficult tension between me and my parents and disappointment for them. They wanted me to get better grades. Frankly, I wanted me to get better grades. And I just couldn't, for whatever reason. It was not a lack of trying. And the strange thing is, it all worked out, right? Looking back from where I am now, I'm a "New York Times" columnist. I have a job. It's all fine. I went to college. It all worked out.

But of course, they couldn't have known that. And I couldn't have known that. And so, in a way, the goal was wrong at that time. And it caused everybody a lot of tsuris, to use the Yiddish word. But it's not like I can fault — the goal seemed right. It's not like I thought they were wrong about being mad at me about my terrible grades.

And so sometimes, with this kind of way of looking at parenting, it becomes this real difficult question of, how do you rate tension? I think about this with — again, I have a very young toddler, so he can't learn much from me in discipline yet. So it's like, OK, I'm just trying to avoid tension. And I sometimes succeed and failed this morning because we did not have the right kind of juice. And there's nothing I could do about it.

But to what you're saying, one way of looking at it is like, yeah, just chill a little bit as a parent. Do you believe that to be true, or do you think that it's actually good to take your best guess of the goal and that the tension creates something valuable in the conflict?

Agnes: I think it's very hard to know. I'm —

Ezra: Well, damn. [LAUGHTER]

Agnes: — reflexively averse to the goal of chill. I think nobody ever believes that. People say it. Nobody believes it. Nobody acts upon it. I do think it's important for your kid to see that you care who they become. And having that tension is a way for that care to manifest itself.

Part of what you're doing is being your kid's superego, in some way. You're maintaining — you're holding a place for their conception of who they're going to be. And you want that to be big and expansive. And you want it to be much bigger than a toddler or an eight-year-old or a 12-year-old or a 17-year-old, as my kids are, can imagine. You want it to take up more space than that, right? You want them to expect a lot of themselves. And part of how you're doing that is by expecting a lot of them.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Ezra: How do you think about the question of setting good goals for oneself or anyone else? A through line of our whole conversation here is about goals, right? The goals the meritocracy sets for us, the goals we set for ourselves aspirationally, the goals we set for our children, and then, also, how often those goals can be wrong. They're not true to who we really are or how things actually work out. So you've clearly done a lot of thinking about goals. How do you set goals for yourself?

Agnes: So one thought that I have about goals, in general, is that you can get much less far ahead of yourself than you think you can. So that's part of the illusion of what I said — the fact that the judgment from a distance is also a bodily judgment. It's like, if I have this goal of, I want to, I don't know, read a lot more books or something, then I can almost convince myself that I'm already the person who cares about that, right? But if I were, then I would be doing it.

And so I think, in myself, the way that I live that out is that there's a lot of randomness in what I do. I'm constantly exploring new avenues where, this might be me trying to become a different person. But I never really know, because if I were, this would just be the first step, and I would be confused about it.

So I think that's taking up a lot of hobbies and starting new projects, and then a lot of them fail, where I don't have big, abstract, long-term goals except insofar as it's something like, I have philosophical projects, and I want to bring it to a conclusion, wherever that will be. So yeah, there's a lot of random movement.

Ezra: That makes sense to me. Let me ask you a question I didn't realize I'd be asking you. But now that I'm actually able to see you here — and the audience can't, but you have a lot of color on. Behind you is one of the most colorful walls I've ever seen. I see a lot of cacti with eyes, flowers — possibly real. I can't actually tell. What is your relationship with color and visual stimulation?

Agnes: I need a lot of visual stimulation all the time. So actually, my office hasn't always looked like this. It actually used to — when I first got my job — this is my university office — it was like a regular office.

Ezra: This is your university office I'm looking at?

Agnes: Yes.

Ezra: Oh, wow.

[LAUGHTER]

I thought this was at your home.

Agnes: No.

Ezra: It's very cool. And people can actually find pictures of this online, I realize, now.

Agnes: Yes. It's on, actually, my Twitter page. It's the background photo or something, so you can see it.

Ezra: Got it.

Agnes: Yeah. We actually had a fire in the philosophy department a few years ago. So this is the second instantiation because it was destroyed. But when they came in here, the — whatever insurance people came in here after the fire, they were so confused by the room. And they were like, is this some kind of therapy room? [CALLARD LAUGHS]

Yeah. So I'm actually puzzled by other people who don't have a lot of color. The clothing with a lot of color on it pretty much costs the same as the clothing with very little color on it. So I'm confused by why people aren't making what, to me, is the obviously superior choice.

But color is amazing. It's one of the most amazing features of the world. We could have lived in an uncolored world, right? A lot of the features of our world would still be in place. But there's just this element of beauty that is out there of beauty and order and pattern and contrast. And it's like, I want to experience it all the time.

And I was starting to say that my office used to be normal. And I found myself actually googling the word "color" on my computer just to look at colors. And I'm like, this is ridiculous. I should have some color in my office. So I had one of these tapestries — actually, not these ones, but the pre-fire versions. And then I was like, oh, this is awesome. Let me add something else. Let me add something — my whole ceiling is covered, too. You can't see it.

And yeah, my husband and my kids would come in. And they'd be like, OK, but now you're done, right? They'd keep saying that. But I keep finding new spots where I can add stuff. And to me, it's one of the most obvious arenas in which maximization makes sense. Most things, you shouldn't try to maximize. You shouldn't try to maximize how much money you make. You shouldn't try to maximize how much honor you get. But I don't see why you shouldn't try to maximize how much color is in your life.

Ezra: So there's color, and then there's visual stimulation. And I think the thing you would normally hear from people and think, I would immediately think, is it would be distracting. You'd be looking around. And you'd always be caught on something. And I end up — when I'm writing, I have to clean my desk really intensely, and there's nothing on it. And I would actually like more color in my room. But I tend to have very clean work spaces.

So do you find that it leads to a different quality of thinking, or is it just a context in which you think best? You clearly don't find busyness in the visual field to be distracting. But what is it for you?

Agnes: I like being distracted, I think. That's the randomness I was describing, right? You can't segregate randomness like that. It has to be available to you at every moment of your life, that you might start doing something else. It creates some persistence problems with getting things done, for sure.

I like patterns. I like visual patterns. I like them because they're distracting. And I suppose, I think, that there are forms of distraction that I would find unpleasant. So there are definitely forms of distraction I find unpleasant, like if someone is talking while I'm trying to work or something like that. So maybe it would be interesting to think about why some forms of distraction feel pleasant, and others feel unpleasant.

And I've never thought about this before, but I would guess that there's a feeling of voluntarism with the visual where I can look at it, but it doesn't force me to look at it. Whereas a voice that is speaking, it's producing meaning in a way where I cannot detach from that. I have to receive that meaning. It's like, a friend of mine once told me that she used to really enjoy the way the Coca-Cola signs looked — the swirls. And then she learned how to read, and she couldn't see the pattern anymore —

Ezra: Huh.

Agnes: — because she was receiving the meaning, right? And so there's this way in which a world of visual patterns is not a world that is conveying meaning to me. And that makes it feel unintrusive. It allows me to think all the meaning thoughts I want without having them being imposed by my space.

Ezra: That's really interesting. And I find that you do something else that I do but that I don't know that many other people do, which is, always, if I'm working, I'm listening to music. And I'm listening to one song on repeat.

And whatever I am doing, it's like, I have to find — I take a lot of time, when I'm beginning to write, finding the right song and then rejecting songs because they're not the right mood, and they're not the right vibe, and this one is distracting me. But when I find it, it's just like, then it's just on repeat for six hours. And then we're done with the piece. And I'm curious, because you do this, too, one, a little bit how you came to it, but two, how you choose the songs.

Agnes: I'm much less systematic than you. And I often choose the wrong song and just live with it. And I actually almost — sometimes I can enjoy the pain of the fact that it's the wrong song that I'm listening to —

Ezra: That's amazing.

Agnes: — over and over again. So there's a perversity to it. But I think it also depends on what I'm writing. If I'm writing about anger or sadness — if I'm writing about emotions, I have to feel the emotion that I'm writing about.

This is actually one of my biggest frustrations with academic writing on the emotions, is that so much of that writing has, as its content, the claim that there's a distinctively emotional way of thinking where that thinking cannot be communicated

except by way of the emotion, but the piece is unemotional. And it's like, well, do you believe it or not, right? So I feel like academic writing is not well-suited to writing about the emotions for that, because you're not allowed to write emotionally.

But for me, in order to write emotionally, I have to feel, to some extent, the emotion. So in that case, I don't know. If I'm writing about anger — there was one time when I listened to the Neko Case song "I'm a Man" over and over again. That's an angry song. Or sadness, especially. If I'm writing about grief or loss or suffering, then I want music that expresses that. But often, it will just be pretty random.

Ezra: I like that. And I like the idea that you can get into the pain of the wrong song. I'm going to try that for a piece that has to be a little jarring sometime. I think it's a good place to end. So let me ask you what is always our final question, with one addendum, which is, what are three books you would recommend to the audience that have influenced you? And then what is one song you use to feel either sadness or grief?

Agnes: So a month ago, two months ago, I read a biography for the first time. I'd never read a biography.

Ezra: For the first time?

Agnes: Yes, first time.

Ezra: Wow.

Agnes: I thought I'd hate biographies because I associated them with history. And I don't like history. It doesn't make sense to me. It's a bunch of facts, and I don't know how to fit them together. And then there's a story being told about them. But I'm always like, is this just one story that's chosen, and could there be others? And also, the story always began before it began. And so I find history quite confusing. So I stayed away from biographies.

But then I was just reading a lot of Tolstoy. And I'm like, let me try. And I read a Tolstoy biography by Rosamund Bartlett. And I loved it. And I realized that biographies are not history. They are like voyeurism. It's like, you get to peer inside someone's life and find out the things that they would not have wanted to tell you. So I'm going to recommend that.

And I actually thought, maybe I'll never read another biography, because it was so perfect. And maybe I'm just done. But then I got sent a new biography about Fernando Pessoa, who is someone else I'm into. And it's not out yet, but —

Ezra: Who's Fernando Pessoa?

Agnes: He is a Portuguese philosopher, poet, master of personnae. So early 20th century. He wrote under heteronyms, not pseudonyms, heteronyms, because he saw them as aspects of who he was. And he had 50 to 100 of them. But there were three or four that became prominent in his work. He published almost nothing over his life. He put all the stuff, papers, in a trunk.

And his most famous book is called "The Book of Disquiet." I'll recommend that, too. It's wonderful. It is a book about the restless mind, right? What is it if you can just never fix on who you are or fix on how to live your life, and at every moment,

you're shifting and thinking, what if I saw this slightly differently? He calls it "My Factless Autobiography."

But anyway, I read this biography of Pessoa that was also wonderful. It was, like, 1,000 pages, and I read it in a week. I just couldn't stop reading it. So I'll recommend that, too. I started one last night. I started a biography of Augustine —

Ezra: Do you know what it's called, the Fernando Pessoa biography?

Agnes: It's called "Pessoa."

Ezra: "Pessoa."

Agnes: Zenith is the author. It's coming out in July. And last night, I started a biography of Augustine by Peter Brown. That's just a super famous biography that everyone is like, if you like biographies, you should read this one because it's great. And it's good. I've read maybe 50 pages.

But I feel like, now, well, you pick any person who was passionate and driven and weird, like Clarice Lispector or W. E. B. Du Bois or Simone Weil, or someone like that. Their biography is going to be great, right? The thing about biography is that you get to see the sincerity of someone's passion as it drives them to develop over the course of their life. And I really didn't get that before I read one. So I recommend the genre.

Ezra: I love that.

Agnes: Sad songs. There's so many of them. For some reason, the one that's jumping into my head is a song called "Real Death" by Mount Eerie.

Ezra: That does sound sad.

Agnes: It's —

Ezra: By who, you said?

Agnes: Mount Eerie, I think, is the name. It's about the death of — someone makes a song about the death of his wife. And his wife has just died. And he's like, this is not art. This is real life, and I'm actually really sad. And it's, somehow — the first line is, "death is real." Death is not for making art about.

And it's this very sincere attempt to almost transcend the act of turning something into art and presenting it to you directly, telling you, like, the backpack that his wife ordered for their child whose school days she knew she would never see arriving in the mail, and giving you these details, but it's almost spoken. That one, I can't actually listen to a lot if I'm writing. It's almost too sad. But anyway, that's what jumped into my head.

Ezra: That's an amazing recommendation. Agnes Callard, this has been such a pleasure. Thank you so much.

Agnes: Thank you. It was really fun.

Outro

Ezra: That is the show. Thank you all for listening. If you enjoyed it, please rate it in your favorite podcast app or send it to a friend. You know I sometimes, at the

end of these, do recommendations of my own on something related to our conversation. So we talked there about how Agnes and I both will put on individual songs over and over and over again while we're working. And I thought I'd list a few that I've been listening to recently.

So this one is an album, actually, not a song, but Spencer Brown's "Stream of Consciousness," which is lush electronica. Really, really good for work but actually pretty sonically interesting, really well-crafted. I've really enjoyed that. I've listened to it a lot recently, actually a Roge Karma recommendation to me.

I was gutted that MF Doom died. I'm a big MF Doom fan from back in the day, and so I've been listening to a lot of him. But if you don't know where to start, "Doomsday" is just one of my favorite songs, full stop. And it's been on in the background for me — actually, in the foreground for me — a lot lately.

And then, finally, I just ran into this song. Not really great for working, but just beautiful vocals. "Someone Else" by Bishop Briggs featuring Jacob Banks. You can turn that one on loud, and you will really feel something.

"The Ezra Klein Show" is a production of New York Times Opinion. It is produced by Roge Karma and Jeff Geld, fact-checked by Michelle Harris. Original music by Isaac Jones, and mixing by Jeff Geld.

Ezra Klein & Agnes Callard
Status Games, Polyamory and the Merits of Meritocracy
Can meritocracy ever be ethical? The philosopher Agnes Callard thinks so.
May 14, 2021

The Ezra Klein Show.
<www.nytimes.com/2021/05/14/opinion/ezra-klein-podcast-agnes-callard.html>
& <www.nytimes.com/2021/05/14/podcasts/ezra-klein-podcast-agnes-callard-transcript.html>

Books recommendations mentioned by Agnes:

- "Tolstoy: A Russian Life" by Rosamund Bartlett
- "Pessoa: A Biography" by Richard Zenith
- "Augustine of Hippo" by Peter Brown