The Secret to a Good Life? Thinking Like Socrates.

In "Open Socrates," the scholar Agnes Callard argues that the ancient Greek philosopher offers a blueprint for an ethical life.

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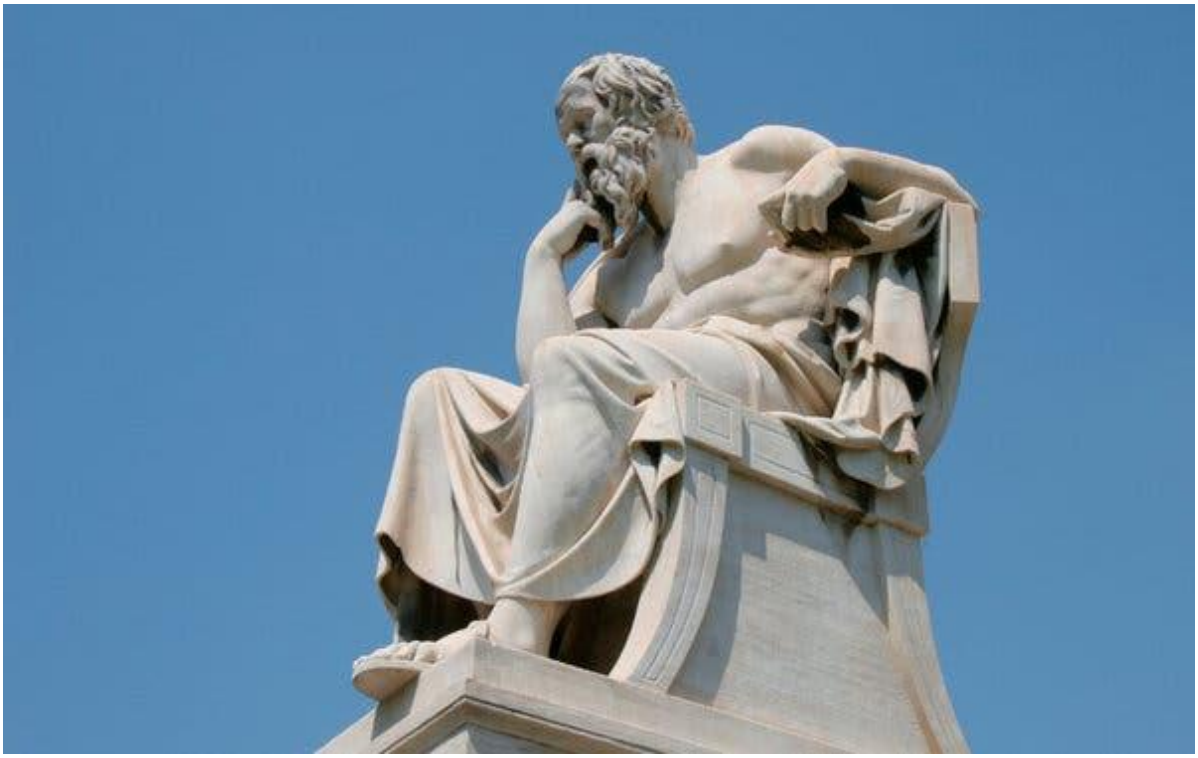

Callard says that Socrates has too often been treated like a "sauce" that could enhance one's critical thinking instead of as the main event, whose ethics, if properly understood, were nothing short of radical.

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OPEN SOCRATES: The Case for a Philosophical Life, by Agnes Callard

Maybe this is the year that you have resolved to drink less and exercise more. Or maybe you want to be kinder, gentler and more caring to the people around you.

In "Open Socrates," Agnes Callard suggests that self-improvement, at least as we usually understand the term, isn't so much a matter of willpower, but of ideas. It's not that we are weak-willed creatures, who know what "the good" is and then fail to pursue it; it's that we haven't given enough thought to what "the good" is in the first place. "The hard work of struggling to be a good, virtuous, ethical person" is, "first and foremost, intellectual work," she writes.

Callard, a philosopher at the University of Chicago, is aware that "more intellectualism!" isn't exactly an easy sell, which is undoubtedly why she waits until Page 129 to describe her chosen approach as "hard-line intellectualist." But she is so earnestly excited by her subject that even a skeptical reader is bound to feel a swell of enthusiasm as she makes her full-throated case for a life of the mind. She wants her book to do double duty: advance a "neo-Socratic ethics" that can pass muster with her fellow

philosophers, and offer lay readers an accessible introduction to how "living a truly philosophical life" can "make people freer and more equal; more romantic; and more courageous."

This is a book that is charming, intelligent and occasionally annoying. The irritation is wholly appropriate: Socrates, whom Callard affectionately calls a "wet blanket," was known for challenging his interlocutors to the point of exasperation, pushing them to think harder about whether what they had just said was what they truly meant. "I realized, to my sorrow and alarm, that I was getting unpopular," Socrates ruefully reflected, after having alienated a number of powerful politicians in Athens and before being sentenced to death. Callard was so enthralled by Socratic philosophy as a college student that she wanted to "*be* Socrates" and set out to hound strangers at an art museum with big questions about the meaning of life. "They felt trapped," she recalls now, "and I felt not at all like Socrates."

Socrates died in 399 B.C., and it's not as if there's a shortage of writing about him or his thought. But Callard says that Socrates has too often been "diluted": treated like a "sauce" that could enhance one's critical thinking instead of as the main event, whose ethics, if properly understood, were nothing short of radical. He called himself a "gadfly" and also a "midwife" — refuting his interlocutors' falsehoods but also helping them bring true ideas into being. The acts of destruction and creation were connected, arguably even one and the same. Refutation was never to be done for its own sake; only by helping to peel the scales from people's eyes could they see the world anew.

Following Socrates' example is a lifelong pursuit. All too often, Callard says, we react instinctively to "savage commands": doing something because it is dictated to us in the moment by our body (to pursue pleasure and avoid pain) or by social bonds (to pursue pride and avoid shame). Such commands make us "waver," she says, and contradict ourselves: "They might give us a loud, clear answer as to what we ought to do, but the answers don't last."

The question of time comes up a lot in "Open Socrates." There is, most obviously, the matter of our limited time on Earth, and Callard agrees with Socrates that philosophy is preparation for death. Thinking more deeply about what we know and what we don't pushes us beyond our usual (unthinking) habit of "getting through the next 15 minutes." She opens her book with the example of Tolstoy, in his "Confession," recalling how his 50-year-old self suddenly wasn't sure what any of it — love, children, worldly success — was for.

Callard's name may be familiar to those who have read a profile of her in The New Yorker. She left her first marriage, to another philosopher, to marry a graduate student, also a philosopher. She talks as if love is an ecstatically intellectual pursuit, at least when it's going well. In "Open Socrates," she describes how we can get so caught up in our own thoughts that we don't let evidence from the world in; another person can reveal to us our own blind spots, nudging us just so in order to see what we were missing. Socratic inquiry, with its emphasis on dialogue, reveals thinking as a

communal process: “In the presence of others, something becomes possible that isn’t possible when you are alone.”

I find this notion inspiring, even if I’m not as confident as Callard that “our most fundamental wish” is to be treated “as an intellectual thing.” She puts so much stock in the power of thought that she suggests it can get us out of the most intractable dilemmas: “What appears to be a difficulty with *life*” is “in fact a difficulty in our *thinking* about life.”

But she also allows that “thinking about life” isn’t necessarily guaranteed to yield the knowledge one seeks. Socrates used to say that he knew nothing other than the fact of his own ignorance. Despite some of her grander pronouncements, Callard invites us to think alongside her. “Open Socrates” encourages us to recognize how little we know, and to start thinking.

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