Should You Question Everything?

In "Open Socrates," the philosopher Agnes Callard reminds us how thinking should feel.

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January 21, 2025

Every few months, out of curiosity, I red-pill myself. Usually, I start with YouTube. The algorithm is extraordinarily responsive: give a couple of videos a thumbs-up, and your whole feed swerves in a new ideological direction. My political default is center-left, and so the move is to shift it rightward. There's Ben Shapiro debating a bunch of college students; there's Charlie Kirk doing the same. Here's Elon Musk turning the tables on Don Lemon. A random tough guy is talking to Shawn Ryan about home defense, and a badass mom is excoriating a school board for something or other—I'm not sure what's at stake, but it's satisfying to watch.

Those are just the quick hits, of course; to get the full effect, you have to move past the merely provocative toward what's genuinely interesting. Watch some episodes of "The Joe Rogan Experience," but don't skip Lex Fridman and Dwarkesh Patel; subscribe to ReasonTV, and listen to some interviews on "Conversations with Tyler." Find some veterans talking about their experiences during Joe Biden's withdrawal from Afghanistan. By this point, your feed will have expanded beyond politics, and red-pilling will have given way to a broad contrarianism—a sense that it's exciting to rethink your views. People can be contrarian about all sorts of things—fitness, money, history, parenting, the meaning of life—and not all of it is crazy. You might order some books with which you could profoundly disagree (Patrick J. Deneen's "Regime Change," or Abigail Shrier's "Bad Therapy") and subscribe to some Substacks. There's a place behind the building where the left and right meet; from there, the country doesn't seem divided so much as scrambled up.

Part of the point of red-pilling yourself is to understand where other people are coming from. Your sister-in-law talks a lot about the depredations of identity politics; your teen-age son is obsessed with how much women take from men during divorce; the guy from the hardware store has put half his savings into crypto, using a strategy based on astrology. Where do they get this stuff? Now you know. There's a diagnostic aspect, too. Just as you go to the doctor once a year to find out if you're fundamentally healthy, a semi-annual algorithmic derangement can help you learn whether your perspective is as immovable as you take it to be. Are you truly an atheist? Are regulations really a good thing? Could under-policing be the real problem? Your views on all sorts of issues might shift.

But there's a twist. The more time you spend having your mind changed online, the more you might sense that there's something odd about the way in which opinions tend to be formed and held today. To any question you can ask, there's apparently already an answer; in fact, there seem to be more answers than questions. Long before you've decided what you want to know, you're told what you should know—everyone's an insider, or has a theory, or knows the score. A decade ago, it was only journalists who offered "explainers," but now—even though everybody hates journalists—everyone's explaining. The Internet pushes us to question everything while foreclosing every question. It's a machine for telling you what to think.

"Right now our core political categories are contested," the New York *Times* columnist Ross Douthat wrote, last year. There is, he went on, "vigorous disagreement" about

the kind of society we want, with "unstable realignments" holding for only brief periods before collapsing. What's true for politics appears to be true in other areas, too: everything is seemingly up for grabs. In theory, a lack of consensus on so many subjects should mean that we live in a time of widespread intellectual foment, in which we turn over the fundamental questions, exploring them in earnest, searching deeply for durable answers. But is that what we're doing? Or have we mistaken a simulacrum of thinking for the real thing?

In "Open Socrates: The Case for a Philosophical Life," the philosopher Agnes Callard aims to rewind the tape to the beginnings of Western thought, where we can see its mechanisms in vivid relief. "What is thinking?" she asks. The Socratic dialogues—the few dozen semi-fictional texts in which Socrates is a main character, written in the fourth century B.C. by Plato, Xenophon, and others—explored a range of subjects, from the nature of virtue to how we should live with the certainty of death. But they were most important because they modelled a new and powerful way of applying our minds to the questions that matter. What was it?

We speak today of the Socratic method—the exploration of ideas through questions and answers. We often imagine the method to be a kind of "sauce," Callard writes, which we can pour over any intellectual endeavor. Professors love the Socratic method: they enjoy peppering their students with questions, partly to test them, partly to humble them so that they're ready to learn. We're also generally familiar with a style of contentious discussion in which we try to poke holes in one another's arguments. "We feel sure that we already are being Socratic," Callard observes.

Yet if all Socrates had done was pioneer the Q. & A., he probably wouldn't have been sentenced to death by his fellow-Athenians. In fact, his intervention was both more radical and more specific. Socrates, Callard argues, inaugurated a whole way of life—a new way of being a person. It's possible not just to employ the Socratic method, in other words, but to live by it. Doing this entails allowing yourself to be questioned about the basic ideas through which you've organized your existence. This is an uncomfortable, even painful, process, since, Callard writes, "by the time we have the conceptual wherewithal to wonder about how we should live our lives, we've long been taking heaps of answers for granted." We're born, we grow up, and before we know it we've made choices that depend on certain ideas. Believing in valor, we join the military; thirsting for success, we go to law school; drawn to love, we start a family. But what's the purpose of valor? What counts as success? What is love? These are what Callard calls "untimely questions." There's no good time to ask them; doing that could mess up our lives, because the way we live depends on answers we've perhaps unreflectingly accepted. But not asking them means living blindly.

The Socratic approach to untimely questions has both intellectual and social dimensions. Intellectually, it involves a kind of pressing yet pure inquiry—a willingness to sit with a question and look at it patiently, rather than search for a way to dismiss it quickly, or turn it into a problem that can be "solved," so that you can get on with your life. (Asking "What is success?" isn't the same as developing a retirement strategy;

asking "What is love?" isn't the same as asking, "What is my love language?") The social dimension is perhaps even more challenging. "The standard approach to thinking privileges what is private and unvoiced and 'in the head' as the core case," Callard writes, "so that what happens in conversation counts as thinking only insofar as it is an outer echo of an inner event: 'thinking out loud.' " But Socratic thinking inverts this picture. Thinking, Callard writes, happens when two people who see themselves as equals pursue a question together. It's a chimeric activity, shared but also private and enclosed. My goal, in our shared thought process, isn't to dominate you by scoring points, or to earn the respect of some audience, or to impress you. It's to change your mind, or to have my mind changed by you—an outcome that I would find equally satisfying.

There's a big difference between changing your mind for a day and changing it forever. A gulf separates shallow from substantive opinion; strongly felt convictions can have weak foundations, or deep roots. Socratic thinking is a way of braiding together the uncertainty required for growth with the rigor required for endurance. If you're victorious over me in a debate, I may have no choice but to concede that your arguments are superior—though I could still continue to believe that, for reasons I can't articulate, I'm right. But if we think together, we might arrive at a new and better idea in which we both believe. And if we think together over and over, we might construct a set of shared ideas for how to live.

We've all, one hopes, experienced this kind of thinking. Perhaps it happened formally, with a teacher, mentor, colleague, rabbi, or the like. Or maybe it occurred on the personal plane, in partnership with a loved one, friend, parent, or child. Reading Callard's book, I thought back to some of my own Socratic experiences. I was struck by the fact that I could remember so many of them; even years later, they stood out as remarkable. When was the last time I had that kind of conversation, and with whom? That's a question potent enough to make you change how you spend your time. Almost without exception, the people with whom I've Socratically conversed are the most important in my life; I don't talk with them often enough.

Many of the Socratic conversations I can remember were punctual events—hourlong talks in an office, say, or on a walk. Others unspooled over days, weeks, or longer. In every case, however, they were possible only because certain social arrangements had brought me and my interlocutor together under the right kinds of conditions. One of Callard's points is that good Socratic thinking requires an egalitarian context—one in which two people can talk openly, frankly, mind to mind. There's a very real sense in which "free speech is achieved neither by debate nor by persuasion," she writes; you speak most freely when you can describe your deepest concerns to someone whose opinion you value, and who is really listening to you and speaking honestly in reply. Post all you want online—even on the new, "uncensored" version of Facebook—and you probably won't find that kind of heightened freedom. One implication of this view is that it's possible to create a society in which debate thrives, but thinking does not.

A common objection to Socrates is that he's too negative: he just asks you questions until you're forced to admit to confusion or ignorance. Another is that he's too intellectual: he takes a concept that should be obvious and intuitive and, through interrogation, overcomplicates it. Why not just live your life, instead of talking about it endlessly? Callard argues that this sort of anti-intellectual skepticism is only possible if you underestimate the value of Socratic thinking. She recalls a student who was so taken by a sentence of Aristotle's that he proposed getting it tattooed on his arm. "Why don't you try to understand it instead?" she tells him. "That's like tattooing it onto your soul." A "Socratizing move," she writes, is to figure out, in the course of conversation, that "A is the real B"; the discovery that "understanding is the real tattoo" typifies how Socratic dialogue "scrapes the dust and cobwebs off of an ordinary or everyday concept and reveals it to be something higher, more transcendent, more demanding, and often more real than we had thought." ("One of life's hardest jobs," Saul Bellow wrote, in his novel "Herzog," is "to make a quick understanding slow.")

The protagonist of "Open Socrates" lived more than two thousand years ago, and wore no shoes. It isn't, strictly speaking, a book about technology. But it *is* about process and method, and so we can ask whether the technologies we use today, in the course of thinking, aid us or distract us. Clearly, there is value in discovering new opinions and learning new facts; in explaining your views to strangers (or, for that matter, to an A.I.); and in questioning received wisdom. The technologies in which we're immersed facilitate all of this. But they don't, in themselves, exhaust the work of thinking. Provocations furnished by an algorithm can only take you so far; thoughts shared one way, through the narrow apertures afforded by "debate," only count for so much.

This is because, oddly, it's not what *you* think that matters. If you live on a desert island, Callard writes, then you might tell yourself that you have an independent cast of mind; you might boast of knowing what you think. On the island, you're free to question everything and decide on your own answers. But what good is isolated certainty, ultimately? "It is only when our independence is the product of a shared agreement about how to live that it counts as a form of freedom," Callard argues. Thinking, in other words, must be social, because living is social. There are different kinds of social life; some strengthen our thinking more than others. Could it really be true that, outside of the scientific method, we've invented no better technology for the generation of durable, shared agreement than deep, open, one-on-one conversation? It might be worth arranging a walk with a friend, to talk it over. ⊠

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The New Yorker.
<www.newyorker.com/culture/open-questions/should-you-question-everything>