Agnes Callard on the Theory of Everything (Ep. 38)

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Is a written dialogue the best way to learn from philosopher Agnes Callard?

If so, what does that say about philosophy? Is Plato's Symposium about love or mere intoxication? If good people lived forever, would they be less bored than the bad people? Should we fear death? Is parenting undertheorized? Must philosophy rely on refutation? Should we read the classics? Is Jordan Peterson's moralizing good? Should we take Socrates at his word? Is Hamlet a Cartesian? Are we all either Beethoven or Mozart people? How do we get ourselves to care about things we don't yet care about?

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TYLER COWEN: Today, I'm here with Agnes Callard, who is a philosopher at the University of Chicago. She has a new book out called *Aspiration: The Agency of Becoming*, but like a true philosopher, she philosophizes about many things.

On Plato and Socrates

Let me start with a simple question. Why didn't Plato just write what he meant? Why is there the form of a dialogue at all?

AGNES CALLARD: [laughs] I think it's reasonable to conclude that one thing Plato meant to do was to preserve the memory and the activity of Socrates. There was this guy. There was this amazing guy who walked around asking people questions, and thereby inventing a new way of thinking and a new way of life, but he didn't write anything down.

Not just Plato, but a lot of people didn't want that to die with Socrates. I think that was one of Plato's motivations. What he did was a good way of achieving that goal.

COWEN: But does Plato even *like* Socrates? If I read these dialogues, it seems to me Socrates is full of fallacies. I tend to side more with Protagoras and with the Sophists. You read a dialogue such as *Meno*, "Oh, learning has to be recollection." You go through the arguments for that conclusion, they seem absurd.

So half the time, isn't Plato making fun of Socrates or really trying to tell us, "I, Plato, am better than Socrates?"

CALLARD: I don't know what Plato's trying to tell us. I don't think in the *Meno*, he doesn't quite come out and say, "Learning is recollection." Here's what he does. He's faced with a paradox that Meno puts forward, to the effect that there's no point to try to inquire about anything ever.

You can't inquire about what you don't know because how would you even know how to start? You can't inquire about what you do know because why would you inquire about what you already know?

COWEN: It's thiscrossing-the-bridge kind of problem that comes up in *your* work.

CALLARD: Yeah. So why not just give up?

Socrates says, "Well, let me tell you a story." He tells a long story about the opposite of the afterlife — the pre-life, the lives we had before we were born — and that maybe inquiry can make sense because we're, in some sense, remembering knowledge we had in the pre-life.

Then after he says that, he says, "Now, this all might be wrong. I can't really stand by any of it. Here's the bit, though, that I'll stand by: we'll be better and braver if we inquire than if we don't."

Even Socrates couches the theory of recollection in a similar ethical framework to what he'll couch later the myths in, at the ends of some of the dialogues.

I don't see where Plato is saying that that's wrong. In a way, Socrates is already saying it.

COWEN: Here's the kind of oversimplifying question that philosophers generally don't like. But for our readers, if you were to read all the dialogues, which I believe you have, and boil it down into a bottom-line essential takeaway, what's going on in them as a whole? Not the *Laws*, but the ones with Socrates. What's your take?

CALLARD: Could I give my take on all the dialogues that are conventionally dated before the *Republic*, say?

COWEN: Absolutely, yes.

CALLARD: Including *Republic* 1. That's a lot of dialogues.

COWEN: Don't worry about *Timaeus*.

CALLARD: Exactly.

I think a couple different things, but maybe I'll give two. Two things that are going on is, there's a set of ethical doctrines that are the groundwork of Socrates's life that

are being laid out in those dialogues. They have slogans, so they're actually really easy to give you in terms of bullet points.

There are things like, a good man can't be harmed. Weakness of will is impossible. Knowledge is virtue. Doing injustice is worse than suffering it. Those are sometimes referred to as Socratic intellectualism. They're Socrates's rules for living. One of the things the dialogues are doing is giving you that.

The other thing they're doing is giving you what philosophy is at the time. That is, they're showing you philosophy where, as I understand it, Socratic philosophy is a solution to a problem — sort of Meno's problem, but it could be put in a bunch of different ways — about how to acquire knowledge. How do you acquire knowledge when you don't have it?

Socrates came up with a method for doing that. His method was — I call it the adversarial division of epistemic labor. If you and I both want to find the truth, we can actually divide up the process of finding the truth or acquiring knowledge into two subordinate jobs. You do one and I do one. If we each do our job, together we can inquire. That's what I take Socratic philosophy to be doing, and the dialogues present that to us.

COWEN: I can't help but read the dialogues through the lens of Adam Smith. Let me give you my takeaway message, which may be strange, but tell me what you think.

I read the earlier ones, as a whole, as a fundamental critique of the division of labor. Even at the end of *Euthydemus*, there's the statement, "Well, don't listen to the philosopher. It's really about philosophy." So everyone is a fool, including Socrates who pretends to be so epistemically modest, but every now and then, that is made fun of.

Division of labor plays a central role in the *Republic*. But I think the *Republic* is ultimately critical of the idea of division of labor. People's professions — they're either put forward in the dialogues or the Athenians are supposed to know who these people are. None of them are, in a way, as reasoners that impressive.

It's about how there is this virtue to the well-ordered, philosophical mind in the *Republic*. In what was modern society for Athens, this was now impossible. You have blundering fools walking around who basically you poke fun of by writing up what they said.

CALLARD: I think first that the division of labor, say, between the refuter and the interlocutor — between let's say Socrates and Meno — that's quite different. There was a reason why I said that was the moral of everything up to the *Republic*.

I think in the *Republic*, you really get Plato's wheels start turning in a way more than Socrates's. What you get is the image, the idea that maybe you don't need an adversarial division of epistemic labor. Maybe one person, the philosopher, can do it all on his own.

The city in which there is this division of labor is being used as an analog for the soul, where all that's going to be within one person. Within one person, you can have all the different jobs. You don't need anybody else. In a sense, you can do it by yourself.

I take that to be a Platonic thought rather than a Socratic thought. It's a Platonic way of deploying a Socratic thought.

Let me say something, taking a step back, about your overall approach that I'm hearing coming out in several of these questions.

COWEN: Yes.

CALLARD: I would say that the dominant reading of Socrates in the literature has always been to think that he is, at least some of the time, either being ironic or being made fun of by Plato. And I don't share that reading.

One thing that's interesting is that Plato at several points has Socrates's interlocutors accuse him of irony. They use the word *eironeia*, irony, our same word. Socrates in the *Apology* says, "Now you guys are going to think . . . People are always saying this about me. They're always thinking I'm being ironic." I think that he isn't.

I think that he is serious in everything that he says, but it's really *hard* to read him that way. There's a way in which our tendency to think that Socrates doesn't really mean it is a way of pulling his words away from us. Because if he doesn't mean it, it doesn't have a bearing on us.

I actually think *ethically* it's a reading that we ought to try to resist, that there's something in the text that's more difficult and more challenging that we escape from if we think either that Socrates is being ironic or that Plato is being ironic about Socrates.

Sorry, I should have said, the people who accuse Socrates of being ironic are Versimicus and Callicles. They're not the good guys or the friends. The fact that it's *those* people accusing him suggests at least something about how Plato wanted us to think about the charge of Socratic irony.

COWEN: Why is it that people read these dialogues? If it's truly a conversational form, we could listen to them. You could teach your class by having people listen to a podcast of Crito and Socrates, Phaedrus and Socrates, but no one does that.

You could put them on tape and release it. I think, actually, more people would listen to us. Why is that? What does it tell us about the nature of philosophy also?

CALLARD: I think that certainly in the ancient world, they would have been spoken. But that doesn't mean that's the best way to receive them. It just means that there were certain limits at that time.

My own feeling is, the ideal way to engage with the dialogues is to read them and then talk about them with people. Ideally, you talk about them with the text in front of you so you can quote bits and read bits out loud.

It might depend on personally how you take in information or something. But I want to be able to *stop*, and I want to be in a kind of control over my thinking about the argument. A *lot* of the time what's going on in the text is the presentation of an argument.

One thing that must have appealed to Plato about the dialogue form is that there is no . . . I can't think of *any* more direct way to just put propositions on paper, on parchment, whatever, on papyrus . . .

COWEN: Doesn't it cause us to overrate propositions? But continue your answer.

CALLARD: Oh, I think Plato rated them highly, so there's the question what rating *he* had. You read any philosopher, you read Kant, you read Adam Smith, you read Hume, and you're looking for the arguments.

But in Plato, you don't need to look because Socrates was like, so do you think this? Yes. Do you think this? Yes. And that just shows you what the argument is. But I think taking that in, it's easier to take that in visually than through hearing.

On the usefulness of refutation in philosophy

COWEN: You gave a recent talk, I think at Princeton, as to why philosophers refute each other so much. As a method for doing philosophy, is one philosopher trying to refute another, say through the medium of a public talk? Do we do too much of that or too little in philosophy?

CALLARD: I actually ended up giving a different talk at Princeton, but I did give that talk at Michigan.

COWEN: OK.

CALLARD: I changed my mind last minute.

Anyway, I think we do roughly the right amount of it in philosophy. I wrote that talk because there's been a lot of discussion about the underrepresentation of certain groups of people in philosophy — women and minorities — and the fact that some practices that we have in philosophy might be contributing to that.

There can be quite a lot of rudeness and just nastiness in the way that people conduct themselves, and that perhaps that kind of aggression is putting groups of people off of the discipline. That's an important reflection that we're having.

However, in the context of that, I heard several people say, "Yeah, why do we even refute one another? Why are we doing it *that* way?" And that made me think, "Uh-oh, somebody better explain why we're doing that." Because that's really important. We have to do that.

We have to not do it *badly.* We have to not do it in an inhumane way, but I think it's essential to philosophy. It's sort of what philosophy is, that we refute one another. But that's because, in a sense, I agree with Socrates.

I heard several people say, "Yeah, why do we even refute one another? Why are we doing it *that* way?" And that made me think, "Uh-oh, somebody better explain why we're doing that." Because that's really important.

We have to not do it *badly*, but I think it's essential to philosophy. It's sort of what philosophy is, that we refute one another.

I think we do the right amount of it, though there's some amount of it's being threatened right now.

COWEN: If I look at at least some parts of the American legal system, there's a kind of adversarial method. I'm not sure that works well.

If I look at many parts of the American private sector, in business meetings, people aren't focused on refuting each other. They work together in small teams, and they

try to improve each other's arguments. The private sector, to me, on average seems to work better than the legal system.

So why don't we do more philosophy like this? Someone presents a paper. You then have seven or eight people stand up. It's kind of assumed most arguments are wrong or insufficient. Those seven or eight people try to improve on what the person said. They can only say positive things, only build up the argument in various ways.

Then at the end, everyone goes away. It's like, "is this project worthwhile?" Almost like venture capitalists, most of the time it's "no." But sometimes, the initial talk and those improvements will be *so* good, people will say, "Oh, if most ideas are wrong to begin with, and this is rationally known, why spend all this time on refutations?"

CALLARD: We all think that our ideas are right, at least at the time that we're proposing them.

COWEN: But *that* can't be rational, right?

CALLARD: It's actually rationally required in the sense that to believe . . . Say I say, I believe there's snow on the ground outside. That's a belief of mine. Then I also believe that's true. Then I can also say, "There's snow on the ground outside." Those are just three ways of saying the same thing. In order to have any beliefs at all, you have to think that those beliefs are true.

COWEN: Some beliefs, the snow beliefs. But the "Is there free will?" beliefs, you figure whatever you think, it's probably wrong.

CALLARD: If you go to a philosophy talk about free will, they're not going to say that there's free will or there isn't.

COWEN: Exactly. Complicated.

CALLARD: They're going to say something much, much smaller and much more complicated, something that they feel they *can* say. We say what we feel we can say, right?

At the very least, we believe it at the time. And that's quite important. When you say most arguments are bad arguments or wrong, in a way, that's right. It's really hard to be Socrates's interlocutor. It's much harder to be the interlocutor than to be Socrates, and I think Socrates very much appreciates that. He's very grateful to his interlocutors, and he praises them constantly.

To put something forward is an act of courage, and especially when you know people are going to tear it down. But I think tearing it down is the right response. So let me defend that, as opposed to the helping.

About the justice system versus the private sector: generally speaking, they have different goals. Generally speaking, most of the private sector is not aiming at justice, and it's not aiming at the particular form of justice.

COWEN: But it's aiming at truth, right? Getting something done by blending synthetic knowledge.

CALLARD: I don't know whether it's aiming at truth either. What I would mean by aiming at truth is aiming at knowledge. I would think that, most of the time, the knowledge would be, at most, a kind of proximate goal but not an ultimate goal.

The reason why we have adversarial systems for pursuing certain goals is that there's actually a tension inside the goal itself. The goal threatens to pull itself apart. In the case of justice, we have the goal that we want to convict the guilty, and we want to acquit the innocent. And those are not the same goal.

They pull apart a little bit because if you're really, really, really committed to acquitting the innocent, you'll be like, "Look, if there's *any* doubt, if there's any possible doubt of any kind, we should acquit." Then you're not going to get to the other goal. It's that tension inside of the goal itself of justice that's generating need for the adversarial system.

There's a similar tension inside the goal of philosophical knowledge. It's one that I think was best articulated by William James in his famous article, "The Will to Believe."

There's the goal of having truths. You want to have some truths. You don't just want to be a skeptic. You want to have some beliefs. You *need* beliefs for living your life and everything like that. On the other hand, you don't want to believe anything false.

James thought that the science and epistemology of his time was too obsessed with that second goal: "Well, if there's any doubt at all, just don't believe it." He was pointing out that we had this other goal too.

I don't agree with James about how we solve the problem, but he's right that there's a real problem there, that the goal threatens to pull itself apart. And it's in *those* contexts that the adversarial division of labor makes sense.

On Platonic love

COWEN: As you know, Plato has a whole work, the *Symposium*, which is about a number of different — you could say almost competing — speeches about Eros and the nature of love. Who has the best speech? And why?

CALLARD: [laughs] Of course, I'm going to say either Socrates or Alcibiades. I like Aristophanes's speech, too. It's beautiful, but Socrates's speech affects me the most intellectually.

When I read it, it's one of the places that I go to for understanding the Theory of the Forms and what it would be like for one to work one's way up to a Form, something like that. It's a short, concentrated bit of text that addresses that issue, so that's really great.

But Alcibiades' speech is more moving to me, and it's one of the places that I would go to in the corpus for trying to understand what it's like to meet someone like Socrates, and for him to be in the world with you. To be one of the people in the world that's around Socrates. Alcibiades's speech is the best place for that.

Those would be my two favorites, for different reasons.

COWEN: Let me give you part of my take on *Symposium*, and then you give me your interpretation, or a better interpretation.

I think of the dialogue — much of it is being about people actually aren't that interested in Eros. If you think about Alcibiades, so much of his speech is putting

down of Socrates, and keeping him at a length, and saying, "Well, you're not so great. You're not as modest as you appear to be."

Most of the speeches have these long digressions from the topic of love. Most of the speeches, as pure logic, I don't find very impressive. I think the dialogue as a whole is extraordinarily impressive, but it's through the *failings* of the speeches.

And it's striking that at the end that what people really just want to do — what Danny Kahneman told me once — is sit around talking to their friends, and they want to get drunk. So self-intoxication is in some ways a more fundamental concept than Eros, and there's a complacency. Even at the beginning, people are getting drunk, and the speech of Alcibiades — he's talking about alcohol early on, multiple times.

The one person who really focuses on love and gives you a compelling vision is Aristophanes. He exactly is the dramatist. He does false things. His account of being split from your other half and then reunited is *obviously* false, but completely wonderful and brilliant and beautiful.

So we have this myth of love and Eros, which is at the center of society. But it's actually something we pretend we are much more interested in than what we really care about, and that's talking with our friends, our petty rivalries, getting drunk, and just sitting around. What's your take?

CALLARD: One bit of textual evidence against at least a part of that is that they decide not to drink, that is they . . .

COWEN: *Socrates* doesn't drink.

CALLARD: No, no, they all actually, early in the dialogue, they say, "What we *usually* do is get drunk." They had gotten drunk the night before. They've got

hangovers, and they decide for the purposes . . . in order to have a more civilized conversation, not to drink.

That all gets overturned with the arrival of Alcibiades, but for the first bunch of speeches, actually, there isn't any drinking, or maybe it's moderate. I'm actually maybe not remembering, but it's maybe moderate drinking.

In any case, they cut back on the drinking in order to speak, so there's a sense in which the dialogue presents the kind of friendly conversation that they're having as being a bit in tension with the drinking.

What do I think the dialogue as a whole is about? At least one thing it's about is suggested by the frame and the ending. It's about the cult of Socrates. That's at the very beginning, right?

COWEN: Right.

CALLARD: People are telling stories about Socrates, and they're also imitating Socrates. They're walking around barefoot and stuff. In their idea, he was a bit of a joke.

Socrates gave rise to a whole bunch of Socrates imitators, as well as people who would write what Socrates wrote, like Xenophon and Plato. Plato's reflecting on this, on the kind of role of Socrates in the culture. And so you start with that, and you end with Alcibiades saying, "Here's what it's like to be around Socrates, to be affected by Socrates."

That question, the question of the role of Socrates in the culture — and the place of the kind of speech *he* gives in the context of the kinds of speeches other people gave — what's it like for Socrates to be one among many speakers in a group?

I find it hard not to think that that's at least in part about the question of, was he guilty? Did the Athenians make the correct decision? Did he corrupt the youth? Was he a positive influence in this culture or not?

I do think that's at least some of what the *Symposium* is about, and Plato is trying to defend Socrates. He's trying to say, "Let's take Exhibit A for the claim that Socrates corrupted the youth, Alcibiades, and let's get to the very heart of what Socrates's effect on Alcibiades, and let's look at him slipping away from Socrates towards ambition. Let's look inside of that and see, whose fault is it? Who's responsible?"

And I think his answer, in the form of Alcibiades's speech, is that Alcibiades is responsible.

COWEN: But isn't Alcibiades himself condemning Socrates? He calls him at least twice a Marsyas, who is pummeled and killed for having hubris, and it's implied in Greek mythology that he deserves it. Alcibiades says, "Well, I wouldn't go near you without a guardian," almost implying that was the more rational attitude. Whose side is he on?

CALLARD: Oh, I think Alcibiades is blaming Socrates, no question. [laughs] Plato's not agreeing. That is, I think that Socrates has a really interesting response to Alcibiades's speech. Alcibiades gives this whole speech about, "It's horrible to be in love with Socrates. Look at what he's done to me. He's put me in this terrible state."

Alcibiades, in effect, is making the case against Socrates, and then Socrates says, "It's really clear what you've been doing. You've been trying to become the lover of Agathon and make me fall in love with you." Socrates is essentially saying, "Look, you've turned away from me, and you hate the fact that you're in love with me," i.e., with the philosophical life.

It's sort of up to the reader whose side you're going to come down on. And whether or not Plato comes down on Socrates's or Alcibiades's, I don't know about that, but at the very least, there are materials in the *Symposium* for "What is Socrates's response to the claim that he corrupted Alcibiades?"

Socrates's response is, "No, Alcibiades didn't try hard enough. He turned away from . . . He had the door open to him, and he walked the other way."

On living the good life

COWEN: I have a friend who's interested in longevity research— to switch topics — and he tells me there's maybe a 10 percent chance that I actually will live forever due to possible scientific advances. I'm skeptical, but let's just say I were to live forever. How bored would I end up, and how do you think about this question?

CALLARD: [laughs] I think it depends on how good of a person you are.

COWEN: And the good people are more or less bored?

CALLARD: Oh, they're less bored. One thing is that you're kind of having to live with yourself for a very long time if you're immortal, or even just live for a couple thousand years, and a bad self, I think, is hard to live with. By bad, I don't just mean sort of, let's say, cruel to people or unjust. I also mean not attuned to things of eternal significance.

I think you can get by in a 100-year life not being too much attuned to things of eternal significance because there's so much fascinating stuff out there, and one can go from one thing to the next and not get bored. But if we're talking about eternity, or even thousands of years, you'd better find something to occupy you that is really riveting in the way that I think only eternal things are.

I think that what you're really asking is something like, "Could I be a god?" And I think, "Well, if you became godlike, you could, and then it would be OK."

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COWEN: Let me give you a hypothesis. You can react to it. That which is cultural, say, listening to music, I would get bored with, even though wonderful music maybe continually will be created. But those activities which are more primeval, more biological — parenting, sex, food, sleep, maybe taking a wonderful shower — that are quite brute, in a way, maybe I would substitute more into those as an immortal? Yes?

CALLARD: I don't see why you wouldn't get just as bored of bodily pleasures.

COWEN: You're programmed for those to be so immediate and riveting, right? You evolve to be maybe an 80-year-old being, or perhaps even a 33-year-old being, so you are riveted on things like reproduction and getting enough sleep. And that stays riveting, even when you're on this program to live 80,000 years.

CALLARD: I think that at least some of those activities stay riveting for us over the course of our lives because their meaning changes — eating, say. I liked to eat when I was five, and I like to eat now, but I eat very differently than I did then. If I hadn't changed and developed how I eat and what I eat, I would have gotten bored of it.

There's a question about the limits of that development. How high up can one go with eating?

COWEN: Won't hunger always be the best sauce?

CALLARD: I think that hunger will always make you want to eat, but is hunger enough to make eating meaningful to you and deserving of your attention in that way? I think it isn't.

COWEN: Let's say we felt the world had 30 days left. An asteroid was coming, a supernova, whatever. How would or should we behave then? Are the people who are good — do they have a better time than the people who are not good?

CALLARD: Yes, for slightly different reasons, I think. Virtue — the more virtue you have, the more difficult the circumstances can be in which you still act and live well. If you're in relatively easy circumstances, even just being an OK person is enough.

But when you start being in a position . . . Let's say it's similar to being in a position of power. I think having power of any kind — wealth, political power — makes life more difficult in the sense that you need more virtue to live well.

I think in the case where there's 30 days left, you would need to be a good person to not give in to very human and very understandable panic in order to live well for the remaining 30 days. It's different but not *that* different from the case in which you find that there's 30 days left of your life. Similar issues are going to arise.

I think it's *worse* in the case where there's 30 days left for everybody. We often describe people in those situations as having courage or being admirable, and it's because the situation calls up the virtue that's in them.

COWEN: I have an acquaintance who does high-energy physics, and he told me just about a week ago, "There's a 98 percent chance the universe is infinite, and there are an infinite number of near copies of me." I don't believe that, actually, but he knows more about physics than I do.

Let's say that were true. Does that, or should that, in some way change the kind of meaning I give my life? In the background here, I have Samuel Scheffler's argument, which you know very well. You studied with him. That for our individual lives, the notion that civilization continues after us has a truly major significant impact on what we do now, even though we're gone. If future civilization matters that much, these near copies of me out there — I'll never be in their light cone. Does or should that matter at all?

CALLARD: I don't think Scheffler would say it does or should matter because his thought is that the valuing that I do now is actually predicated on certain assumptions that I make about future generations.

COWEN: Yes.

CALLARD: And these other copies — my valuing isn't predicated on them because I didn't even know about them until a couple of minutes ago, so I couldn't have been. But you can still ask, *should* they matter?

I hadn't thought about that, but I thought about a related question that comes up with David Lewis's philosophy. David Lewis makes a similar point in the field of metaphysics as opposed to physics, saying that there are these possible worlds that are real, though they're not actual. We live in the actual world. And I have these counterparts in the other possible worlds.

The part of his theory that I always had the hardest time with is the ethical part because it looks like, if I do a good thing, then in a sense, I know my counterparts — because all the other possibilities have to be, so to speak, saturated — my counterparts are going to do the bad things. So am I just keeping my corner of the possible world space clean?

How could that be? How could you make sense of the motivation if those worlds are real? There, far from thinking that I ought to take my counterparts into account, I kind of think I'm actually morally obligated *not* to because I go down a chain of

thought that says it doesn't matter what I do because all the possibilities will be real in any case.

COWEN: The late Derek Parfit, or at least some time slice of the late Derek Parfit, toyed with the hypothesis that if we had a weaker belief in the continuity of self, we would fear death less.

There's a paper I read recently that suggests, at least based on poll evidence, that Tibetan Buddhist monks — who have a pretty weak degree of belief in the continuity of the self and poll as such — that they fear death *more* than people from other religions. What's the best philosophical way to think about this question?

CALLARD: It seems to me the first question is, ought we to fear death? Because then we can ask, under what system will we fear it less? I think it's rational to fear death, but I also think that the rationality of that is bound up with the demand for courage in the face of death.

We ought to fear death, and we ought to, in some sense, fight that fear. One thing that the fear of death can lead you to is to thinking that dying is the worst thing that can happen to you, and that there's no fate worse than death.

People can do terrible things if they think that. So it's important to see that one's life is valuable and has meaning, and therefore to fear death, but it isn't the most important thing that there is.

We ought to fear death and we ought to fight that fear. One thing that the fear of death can lead you to is to thinking that dying is the worst thing that can happen to you.

People can do terrible things if they think that. So it's important to see that one's life is valuable and has meaning, and therefore to fear death, but it isn't the most important thing that there is.

In terms of which metaphysics of personal identity we adopt, I don't know. But if we were just going to let our ethics drive our metaphysics, I would say we should adopt the one that would make death worthy of fear on the one hand, but on the other hand, also make people see that there's more to the value of their lives than, so to speak, just biological life.

On aspiration and proleptic reasons

COWEN: Let's turn now to your new book, *Aspiration: The Agency of Becoming*. There's a sentence from the book. Let me read it, and maybe you can explain it. "Proleptic reasons allow you to be rational even when you know that your reasons aren't exactly the right ones." What's a proleptic reason?

CALLARD: What I'm trying to explain is, how do people get themselves to care about things that they don't yet care about? Suppose that you want to come to appreciate a certain kind of music — that's the example I use in the book — more than you do.

Then there's the question, why should you do that? Why should you take the music appreciation class? You might say, well, the value of music. Classical music is this great

thing, but you don't see it as valuable, presumably. That's why you have to take a class.

So there's a kind of paradox that would suggest we should never try to get ourselves interested or into new things because, in order to have a reason to do that, we'd already have to have the interest.

Proleptic reasons are supposed to solve this problem. They are the reasons that you act on when you are working your way into a new domain of value. What I say characterizes these reasons is that they have two faces. They're kind of divided. They have two parts.

The one part is like if you were to say, "What's your reason? Why are you taking this class?" You might say, "Well, the intrinsic value of classical music is one of the great goods that our civilization has produced." Something like that.

But when you say that, your words are going to be a little bit hollow. If they ask you to say more, you won't be able to say much. That's not all of your reason. That's what I call the distal face of your reason, the face that looks away to the person you're going to become.

But then there are also going to be bits of your motivation that are a little more embarrassing, like, "A bunch of people I admire are in the class." Or "I think that people will like me more." "I have some ideal of, or some image or some fantasy of, a kind of enriched life, and I see classical music as part of that." I think those are also parts. That's the proximate face of the proleptic reason, the part that you can *now* grasp. But you can see that that's not all of it.

COWEN: You're still working on the classics and Socratic problems, like how is change possible?

CALLARD: Yes, absolutely.

COWEN: You give an example of a parent maybe having an aspiration in a particular way, but a gangster cannot have an aspiration in a similar way?

CALLARD: Correct.

COWEN: Would you explain that briefly?

CALLARD: Yes. I didn't think this when I started writing the book, actually. I thought you could aspire to anything that you could value. Sometimes people value things that aren't valuable. People make mistakes in valuing.

I thought if aspiration is the acquisition of value, you could acquire false values as well as true ones, and we want to tell the story of how you do that. But as I was writing the book and I tried to tell that story, I kept on not being able to tell it.

I tried to use the example of the gangster, someone who aspires to become a gangster. And the problem that I ran into was that when I would describe the process of the person becoming a gangster, I couldn't find a way to specify that what was going on there was aspiration as opposed to a phenomenon I wanted to distinguish from aspiration called ambition.

COWEN: OK.

CALLARD: When you're ambitious, you're not trying to come to value something new. You're just trying to satisfy desires or values you already have but that are maybe large in scale. Every time I'd tell the story of the aspiring gangster, I found that it could equally well be read as the story of the ambitious gangster, and there was no way to specify the difference, whereas I didn't have that kind of problem when I talked about the aspiring student.

So what I came to conclude was that the reason I was running into this roadblock is that you can only aspire . . . Let me put it this way: If we see someone, we only count them as aspiring if we think that the thing they're moving towards is, in fact, good. We wouldn't call it aspiration otherwise.

COWEN: If I think of Stephen Dedalus, the main character in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, that's often considered a classic novel of aspiration. He seems to me like a jerk.

He's visiting all these prostitutes. He's misogynistic toward women, somewhat uncaring toward his family, wallowing in a kind of Irish misery. In a way, he's maturing, but it seems to me, he's moving from being one kind of jerk to another kind of jerk. Can aspiration be the province of jerks, even if it cannot be of gangsters?

CALLARD: I think that, actually, all aspirants are going to be a little bit jerky. It'll be characteristic of an aspirant that they're defective, and so the fact that Stephen Dedalus doesn't instantiate his own ideals is a sign that he *is* an aspirant.

The thing is that Stephen's aspirations pull him away from other people, rather than towards them, and so it's not actually that clear to me that his jerkiness gets sort of ameliorated over the course of the novel. His aspirations are aesthetic, but I think that . . .

COWEN: He *says*.

CALLARD: Yeah, he says. But it's part of my view that people can't aspire to something without knowing that they aspire to it. Aspiration has to be as transparent as it can be, given that you only have a partial grasp, right? So he couldn't be aspiring to something else that he is unaware of.

Stephen — from the very beginning of the novel, he hears the sounds of words, and he's interested in their sounds and in the way that they connect up to one another, and he's asking himself questions about his place in the universe.

What we see over the course of that is him working towards a kind of self-understanding as an artist, and I think he makes genuine progress *there*. But you're right. He doesn't make a lot of progress with respect to how he treats other people, and that seems to be something that he doesn't care about that much.

And that's consistent with my view. My view is *only* that when you aspire to something, that thing has to actually be good. You don't have to be good in other respects.

COWEN: How much is aspiration the result of a kind of crude mimetic desire as evidenced, say, by Elena and Lila in Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend*? It seems to me,

for instance, Lila marries Stefano as part of a somewhat misguided aspiration to be successful and accepted in mainstream.

Pretty early on in the marriage, he's basically beating her and raping her. Isn't this something unhealthy about aspiration? It doesn't seem there she had ambition. It seems it was aspiration, and she went down this unknown path and did something actually quite desperate.

CALLARD: Yes. I think that aspirants don't really know what they're doing, and so they're going to make a lot of mistakes, and she definitely makes a mistake with Stefano. I think she's trying to get out of marrying — which one is it? Marcello or Michele? One of the Solara brothers, right?

[laughter]

CALLARD: She becomes very enamored with this thought, both her and Elena do, of becoming the kind of machinatrix behind her life, like she's going to take control of her life. They think — her and Elena — that they have found a way to be real agents in this world that is pushing them around with respect to marriage.

Now they're totally wrong about that, and even there's foreshadowing, even as that's being told. It turned out only Stefano was the one who was really in charge. At some point Elena says this.

So I think you're right that this was a misstep for Lila, and I also think it was aspiration. I think that aspiration is mimetic, but I don't think it's crudely. I just think it *is* mimetic.

[laughter]

CALLARD: It's imitative, and when we imitate, we often go wrong and make missteps, but I don't think there's any other way to learn.

COWEN: One of my favorite sayings is that all thinkers are regional thinkers. When you come to mind, one thing I know about you is you were born in Hungary.

You come from Central European Jewish culture, which has this fantastic 20th century tradition. And there's a kind of stereotype of Hungarian Central European/ East European families as being pushing in a certain way, or encouraging their children to aspire, and this being much more central to that culture than it would be to a lot of other regions.

How has your personal background in that regard fed into this book? And is this a regional book in that sense?

CALLARD: I'll tell you one story that I haven't thought of for at least a decade, that that called to mind.

When I was little, I remember this thing that my mother — I have a terrible memory, so I remember very few things from my childhood — but I remember my mom. My mom is extremely into classical music. I'm not at all.

She was telling me about there are two kinds of people. There's the Mozart kind and the Beethoven kind. Mozart, when he thought of some music, it was just perfect. He could just write it down, and it was like he was listening to God. Beethoven would write it and rewrite it and rewrite it and cross it out.

I don't remember that she ever said this, but I remember coming away from that thinking, "Oh, I guess I'm the Beethoven kind." I never had the thought that there was any third choice. I had to be one of those. Those are the options. Either you're like Mozart, or you're like Beethoven.

I do think I sort of came away from my childhood with the expectation like, "You'd better be someone. You'd better be someone great. Here are the choices for you. Those are the only choices that there are."

COWEN: On aspiration, what do you think of Jordan Peterson?

CALLARD: I had this odd feeling. He only became known to me quite recently, in the past couple of weeks. I was listening to him talk, and I was thinking he sounds a little bit like Socrates, but not Socrates. I was like, "Who is that? Who is he reminding me of?" And it's Xenophon's Socrates.

I think he's the best instance of the self-help genre that I've ever encountered, in the sense that he has these morals that he puts forward, like tell the truth, keep your room clean, pull yourself together, go for the highest good. Those are good morals.

My 14-year-old knew about Jordan Peterson before I did and listens to him. Listening to him, I was like, "I'm very happy my son is listening to this. This is good for him. This is at least a little bit of the internet that I don't have to try to pull him away from."

I think it's characteristic, something like that genre of self-help, that it is part of a larger story and isn't the whole story in the way that philosophy aims to be.

Peterson is pulling against certain cultural trends, and his morals are very good in that context. They pull you away when the culture is pulling you too much in one direction. He pulls you in the other direction. That's sort of the work that he's doing. That's really valuable, but in another culture, it would be really pernicious because he's not giving you the whole story. He's only giving a part of the story, so that's how I experience him.

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COWEN: Given what you understand about aspiration, why are so many young American men apparently not even interested in looking for work?

CALLARD: [pause] I don't know. I just don't know.

COWEN: OK. What's the worst thing to say to infertile couples?

CALLARD: [laughs] I think there are so many bad things to say, it's actually kind of hard to come out with a good thing to say. Maybe the best thing to say is to listen and not to say anything because the idea of saying anything at all suggests that you're giving advice, and that suggests that you're in a position of knowledge, which you're probably not until you've spent a lot of time listening to them.

COWEN: I've read your book, which I liked and also enjoyed very much, and I have two Straussian readings of your book. I'll present you with each of them. Just to be clear to the reader or listener, these are either things you never say, or perhaps even disavow explicitly. So when I say this, reader or listener, don't think this is what the book is. It's not. It's my Straussian take on it.

The first take is that within the book, you have this big integrated account of much more than just aspiration. You talk about weakness of will, and you think of that as a way of being able to do *something* when you don't really have good enough reasons to do what you ought to do. There's this kind of incompleteness in how you get to the other side.

So you're tying together what you call proleptic desire — *akrasia* or weakness of the will. You have this hybrid theory of value about both doing and valuing something, and how both are needed, and how intrinsic conflict ties into that.

So the Straussian reading is, you've produced this whole big theory of value and decision and choice. You know you can't get away with claiming that, so you put out this small piece of it.

But in fact, since aspiration is a matter of degree, and even small events can trigger big changes, if you have a good theory of aspiration — consumption is aspirational — in a sense you have a theory of everything. So this book is like stage one of your theory of everything, but you can't say it.

That's Straussian reading number one. What's your response?

CALLARD: I think it's true that aspiration is step one of the theory of everything, but it isn't true that the reason . . . I *can't* say what the theory is, but that's because I don't have it, not because I'm hiding it.

What you've come away with makes sense to me because essentially what I'm doing is . . . The parts of the book are in different areas of philosophy, in the three major areas of ethics — in decision theory or theory of rationality, in moral psychology, and in moral responsibility.

What I'm doing is saying, "Look, if you want to give a theory of aspiration, you have to kind of break the central apparatus that philosophers have been working with in each of these three areas." If we don't do that, then aspiration becomes impossible. Clearly, it's possible.

But if you do that, if you give up on saying the first part of the book — the idea that all reasons are internal, that all of our motivations can be explained in terms of antecedent desires — you get rid of that, then you're left thinking, "Well, how do we explain decision and choice?"

We're going to need another new theory. Your thought is I have it, and I haven't given it, but the truth is . . .

COWEN: No, you have given it, at least part of it.

[laughter]

CALLARD: I've given the part of it that says that it's going to have to accommodate this phenomenon, but I don't actually think that you can extrapolate from that

the whole theory. And the reason is because aspiration is *itself* a theory of change, and of how we become someone.

But that theory is in a way secondary. The primary theory is going to have to be like, "What's it like to be someone? What's the theory of the endpoint of aspiration?" That's what I haven't given, though there are many theories of that that are incompatible with aspiration.

Those theories, I've refuted, I think. That's not to say that you can use the theory I've given of aspiration to generate a theory of, say, what kind of end states are worthwhile to aspire to? And what is it to be in those states?

COWEN: Here's my second Straussian reading. When I read Plato, it seems obvious to me that one of the most striking features of Socrates is that he has never raised a child. Under the second Straussian reading of your book, you're saying parenting needs to be much more central to ethics and decision theory, and that there's something badly wrong with philosophy that it isn't.

Again, you can't quite come out and say that, but in various indirect ways you say it, or at least you show it. This is, in part, a theory of how so many things in our life are more like parenting than we realize, and if you don't have the parenting experience, there's something deficient in your understanding of the world.

What says you?

CALLARD: I think that Socrates had a very parental relationship — it comes out in *Phaedo*. That's the best place for it — to the young men who were his followers.

You're right, that's not the same thing as raising a young child. He did have children but who knows how much . . . Again, from the *Phaedo* it suggests . . .

COWEN: Exactly. [laughs]

CALLARD: I *don't* believe that if you haven't had the experience of parenting yourself, that means you're necessarily missing something. I can't know that, but I do think that philosophy has . . . There are many aspects of the human experience that are undertheorized by philosophers — parenting, but not just parenting, but a whole range of phenomena that go with it.

Basically, a lot of the ethics of sexuality or something — there are bits of that that have been addressed, but there's a lot of it that hasn't.

I don't know that any philosopher before me has ever asked that question that you asked me. I asked in my book, "What does one say to infertile couples?" "What is the ethics of how you deal with people who are infertile?"

That's an important ethical question. I think that, as far as I can tell, it isn't a question people have asked before. I *do* think it's an important area of human life that hasn't been sufficiently theorized. Maybe you're right that, were we to do so better, that would affect our theory in other areas.

COWEN: Shakespeare's Hamlet. Is he a philosopher? If so, is he a Cartesian?

CALLARD: He definitely reminds me a bit of Descartes. Not just he, but the whole play is trapped a bit in Hamlet's head. I don't know of any other play where you get this. It's so relentless because he's in so many scenes.

The other characters, as I see them, aren't very well-developed or well-drawn characters. And Hamlet — his monologues are meditations on the nature of life and emotion. They're not really speeches about the action or people around him. He seems, in this weird way, apart from the world. He seems trapped inside his own head.

Descartes has this thought experiment that he engages in in the *Meditations*, right? Systematically doubt everything that you believe, and see what you come to. What Descartes comes to is a kind of real truth that he can build upon inside of his own mind.

Something my students often ask me about that is, "What would happen if you doubted, and you doubted, and you doubted, and you never came to anything?" There wasn't a stop. What guarantee did Descartes have that it would stop ever, anywhere? That you wouldn't become despondent and have nothing you could trust anymore?

I think that Hamlet, at least in the early part of the play, that he's a bit like that. He's a bit the character of Descartes if he hadn't found anything like the "I think."

COWEN: Did Descartes find something? Is Descartes an earlier version of the contemporary argument that we're living in a simulation, where the evil demon is the simulation rather than Bayesian reasoning?

CALLARD: That argument certainly traces to Descartes, but *he* thought one could get out of it. He thought he had refuted that.

COWEN: He says.

CALLARD: Right. He says he's refuted it. Let's put it that way. You can trace it to him.

COWEN: But you end up back in the mind of God in a way. It's not an evil demon, but you're living in a universe God has created.

CALLARD: Sure, but that's the real world. The whole question is about being connected to reality as opposed to being a figment. If you're living in the world God created, God can create real things. So you're living in a real world.

COWEN: Why did Shakespeare tell the story about a royal family that doesn't matter historically because they all killed each other? Why not tell the story of Fortinbras?

CALLARD: I think one of the things that makes *Hamlet* so powerful is that it's about how the inside of an experience — or the first-personal point of view on it — is significant. People are significant not only for what they do but for how they live inside of their skin or something like that.

In Hamlet's first speech . . . Sorry, it's not first. I think it's the beginning of Act II. He says something like — he's being criticized for mourning his father too much — "Those are but the trappings and the suits of woe, and I have that within which passes show."

So Hamlet is, from the very beginning, pointing to his inner life. The *play* points us to that, to the reality of the inner life of people, where their royal status and their large actions and their fighting in wars and all that becomes irrelevant, becomes the background.

COWEN: Why, as a philosopher and also a classicist, are you more interested in reading works of fiction now in some ways? That's what I take away from what I know about what you're doing.

CALLARD: Am more interested in reading works of fiction now, you mean, than at other times?

COWEN: Than might be many other philosophers.

CALLARD: I think many reasons, but one of them that pops to my head is that often in philosophy, we're trying to theorize some phenomenon. Say we're trying to theorize aspiration, trying to give a theory of it, or weakness of will. The way we do it as philosophers is, we often use example at least to lay out the problem: "Here's an example of such and such."

The problem with examples, though, is that they can collapse under theoretical pressure. There's a constant impulse to rewrite the example and to say, "Oh, well, what was really going on was . . ." Essentially that impulse comes from the fact that there are certain changes you could make to the example that would make it theoretically easier to analyze.

There's a need, I think, for examples that are going to be a bit tough in response to that kind of pressure. One, it helps if you *didn't* make the example, and two, it helps if the person who *did* really understood the thing that they're talking about. I think literature gives us that.

COWEN: Maybe the third most common question I receive is, what is my — Tyler's — best defense for reading, and indeed rereading, classic works rather than the latest book that just came out, some kind of smart nonfiction? What would you say is *your* best defense of reading and rereading the classics? Apart from your own professional reasons.

CALLARD: I read new fiction too, so I believe in both.

One thing that I've noticed is that I read the thing differently, having read it multiple times. For me, I'm a person who is very naturally pulled along by plot. The first time I read something, I'm very invested in the characters, and I feel bad when things go badly for them.

A lot of my attention is drawn to that kind of just wanting them to be happy and make money and live well and get married. It actually often will take me a couple readings before I can set that aside and, in a way, read the work a little bit less diachronically.

On the Agnes Callard production function

COWEN: For our final segment, are you up for a few questions about the Agnes Callard production function?

CALLARD: I don't know what that is.

COWEN: Well, you'll hear the questions.

CALLARD: OK.

COWEN: As I understand your career — you started actually with physics, moved to classics, and then philosophy. How would you describe that process?

CALLARD: In high school, I was very interested in math and physics. I think it was because there seemed to be truths there. I got to college, and two things happened.

First is that the way that my high school offered physics, they offered up through AP a mechanics but not electricity and magnetism, which was not where you usually start at Chicago. So I had to start with electricity and magnetism in the fall of my first year.

The thing with magnetism is that the force goes in the opposite direction. It goes at a right angle to what you'd expect, and that didn't make any sense to me. I remember asking the teacher, "How could the force go that way?" That was *not* the question you were supposed to be asking. You were supposed to just follow the formulas.

I was getting that in my physics class, and at the same time, I took a class called Human Being and Citizen in which we read the *Odyssey* and Genesis and Plato. The teacher of that class got me to see that questions like "Should you be a vegetarian?" — those could be about truths, too. It hadn't really occurred to me that there were truths there.

That's how I made the transition to, let's say, the humanities from physics.

I went to classics grad school because I wanted to read more Greek and Latin. I loved doing that. But at a certain point as you progress, you start to move towards a dissertation. The closer I got, the clearer it was to me that I did not want to write a dissertation in classics. So I had to get out, get off that train. I went up through taking all the exams, basically, and then I left.

The questions that interested me were more like the substantive questions that the writers were talking about rather than something more like a literary question.

COWEN: You belong to this discipline called philosophy. It puts out a bunch of outputs. There are many journals. People come give talks at your school. There are working papers. What's your method for sampling the output of philosophy as a discipline? What's your strategy for reading or not reading what comes out? How would you describe that to us?

CALLARD: Mostly my response to your question is guilt. I don't feel I do it very well. I feel like a lot of what I end up doing is reading new things because my grad students are working on them. My grad students will be working on a certain topic, and then there'll be literature that they're using, and so I'll think I better read that. I better get to know it. That's one way that I come to read things.

Yeah, I go to talks, and I go to conferences. But I rarely will just read around in journals. I will do that if there's something I'm working on. I'll read what's most recently been written on the things I'm working on.

This is why it makes me feel guilty is, I know there's really good stuff that I'm missing because I happen not to be working on it, not to have any students who're working on it, and not to go to any conferences.

Occasionally, I'll hit it anyway, like there's been a big, recent upswell in literature on grounding, Kit Fine at NYU and a bunch of other people and that. At a certain point, it seemed to me like it might relate, so I read a bunch of that and learned *that*

literature was very interesting. Again, that was an accident of thinking that I could connect up. So that's what I do.

COWEN: You have a professional reputation for being willing to change your mind, not because someone has refuted you, or maybe you feel you've refuted yourself in some way. How exactly does that process happen? And how rational do you think it is?

CALLARD: Oh, it's pretty much always because someone has refuted me.

COWEN: You think so?

CALLARD: Yes. I've just been refuted many times. When I was in the job market, I'd just gotten my PhD, and I was giving talks. My entire dissertation was refuted by one of my now colleagues who asked me a question in the job interview that showed me that the central distinction I was using in my dissertation didn't work.

I then tried to rehabilitate a part of it. This is just to give you some example. I had been working on it for about a year. I gave it as a talk at MIT, and a graduate student there refuted it.

This has happened to me a number of times. I would say, most of the time, I change my mind because people show me that I'm wrong.

COWEN: Does having studied weakness of will help you better deal with it?

CALLARD: No, I don't think so.

COWEN: Final question of our conversation. What are your own aspirational beliefs?

CALLARD: Is the question what are my aspirations, that is, to what do I aspire?

COWEN: Yes.

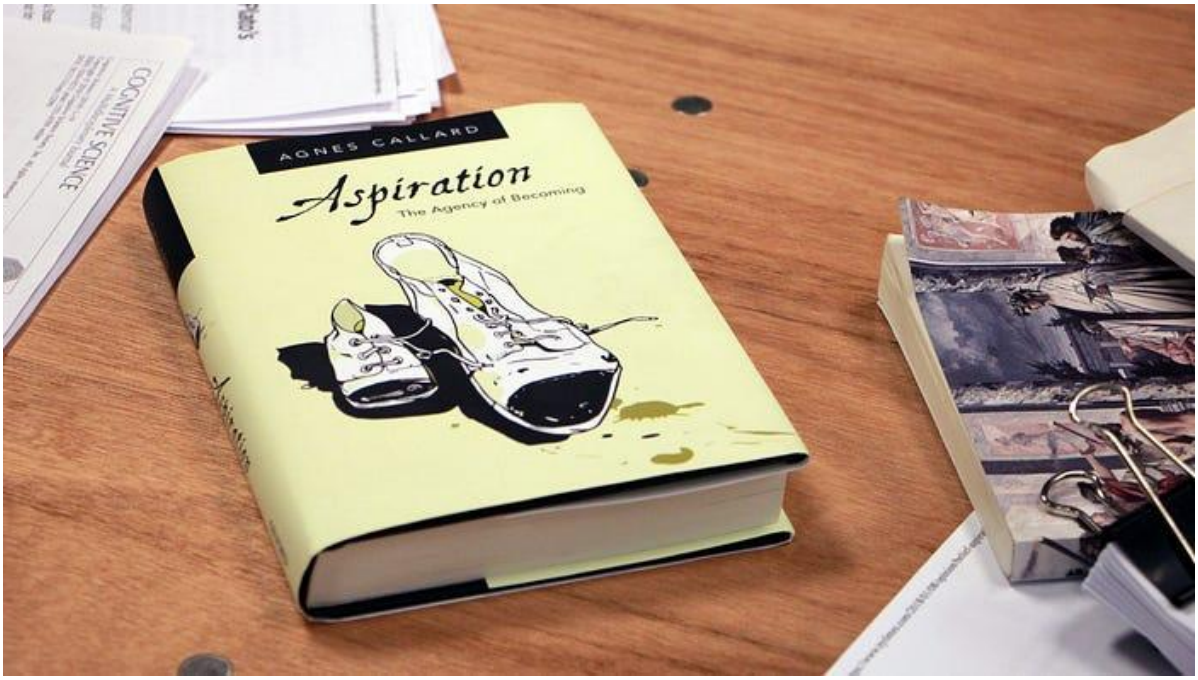
CALLARD: That's constantly changing, of course, the answer to that question. At the moment, I would say I have three areas of aspiration that I'm working on right now.

One is fashion. Over the past couple of years, for the first time, I became interested in what I wore. I just had been indifferent to it for the first 39 years of my life, and then somehow, I became non-indifferent, and I started to care about it. That's area number one.

Area number two is religion. I struggle a lot with my belief in God and with giving that a place in my life, and also with my relation to my religious texts. This past summer, I went to a conference on Spinoza and Maimonides that had a big effect on me. It pushed me to think more in that direction. That's another direction in which I consider myself to be aspiring.

Then the third one is teaching. There's a particular context. I think I'm a good lecturer, but I struggle in discussion classes to not lecture, to listen to people. Over the past year, really, I've been experimenting with how to do that better, how to listen, how to teach people who are very new to the kind of talking and thinking that I'm doing with them.

COWEN: Agnes Callard, thank you very much. Again, her new book is *Aspiration: The Agency of Becoming.*



CALLARD: Thank you.

Tyler Cowen
Agnes Callard on the Theory of Everything (Ep. 38)
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