Why Socrates was right about free speech

Agnes Callard's fascinating study of the Greek philosopher, Open Socrates, unpacks what Socratic ethics can teach us in the 21st century

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04 January 2025

The Death of Socrates (detail, 1787), Jacques-Louis David Credit: Getty

Philosophers are constitutively irritating: this is both their great power and their greatest weakness. Imagine the kind of person that gets stuck, for decades, in the "why?" phase through which children are meant to pass: as ordinary people bustle around, acting in the world, the philosopher is to be found pondering the meaning of justice, love and death. Pondering in this way doesn't necessarily preclude what we sometimes call "having a life", but the tendency can induce bouts of sighing in more pragmatic people.

Socrates was famously so annoying that an Athenian jury ordered him to drink deathly hemlock. He stood accused of, among other things, corrupting the youth and making the weaker argument defeat the stronger. Not so fast! says Socrates, in Plato's account of the trial, you don't escape philosophy so easily: "You did this thinking that you would avoid giving an account of your life, but I maintain that quite the opposite will happenu. There'll be more people to test you, whom I'd once been holding back – though you didn't notice."

Agnes Callard, who teaches philosophy at the University of Chicago, has previously written about aspiration and anger, though she's better known for a 2023 New Yorker profile that explains how she lives with both her ex-husband and current one, a scenario which presumably involves lots of "why" questions. In her new book, Open Socrates: The Case for a Philosophical Life, she takes up where Socrates left off. Describing her

own high-school encounter with him, Callard writes: "I didn't just want to interpret Socrates, I wanted to be Socrates." To this end, a few years later she accosted strangers outside the Chicago Art Institute, and asked them questions about art and courage, though the conversations "never really got off the ground".

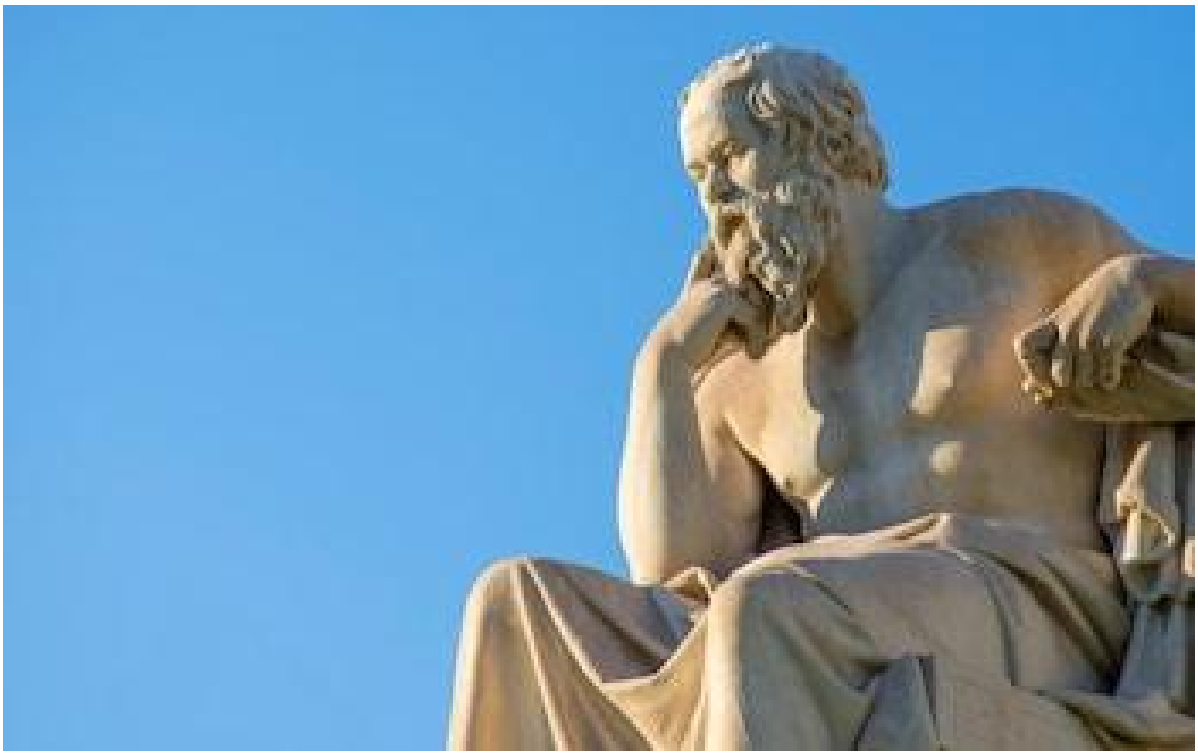
Still, what Callard calls "untimely questions" persist, for her and for us. There is never a "good" time to ask about the deeper meaning of why we're here, or what the meaning of life, love and death might be – but we should. To that end, Callard begins, rather flat-footedly, with a criticism of Tolstoy, who in his 1882 A Confession outlined his struggles with the meaning of life and his embrace of an idiosyncratic faith. Callard claims that Tolstoy "never succeeds" in asking himself fundamental questions and that "taking life 15 minutes at a time is a Tolstoyan strategy", insofar as we simply deal with what's in front of us, and philosophise no further.

Socrates, then, is the anti-Tolstoy. Callard argues that Socrates has been less popular as an intellectual role-model than more systematic philosophers, because he has been reduced to merely suggesting that you should be "open-minded, and willing to admit when you are wrong, and unafraid to ask challenging questions". Unlike Kantianism, utilitarianism and virtue ethics, our dominant ethical paradigms – all of which Callard somewhat flattens – a Socratic ethics, on the commonly-accepted account, has been largely understood as a classical version of critical thinking: "question everything!"

On the contrary, Callard suggests, what Socrates proposes is the overcoming of ignorance through the right kind of conversations. Here she's at her strongest: we're accustomed to imagining that thought is a private process, perhaps even a little shameful. But as Socrates pokes people into thought, he both irritates them and helps them to give birth to ideas – things they may have known all along but, until dialogue, been unable to articulate. (Socrates is described in Plato's texts, the primary source for his life and thought, as both a gadfly and a midwife: for Callard, he's both at once.) The point is this: thinking with others is central to our fight both to reason and to know. The Socratic method, Callard writes, "is how you think about things that you couldn't think about if it were not for the presence of other people".

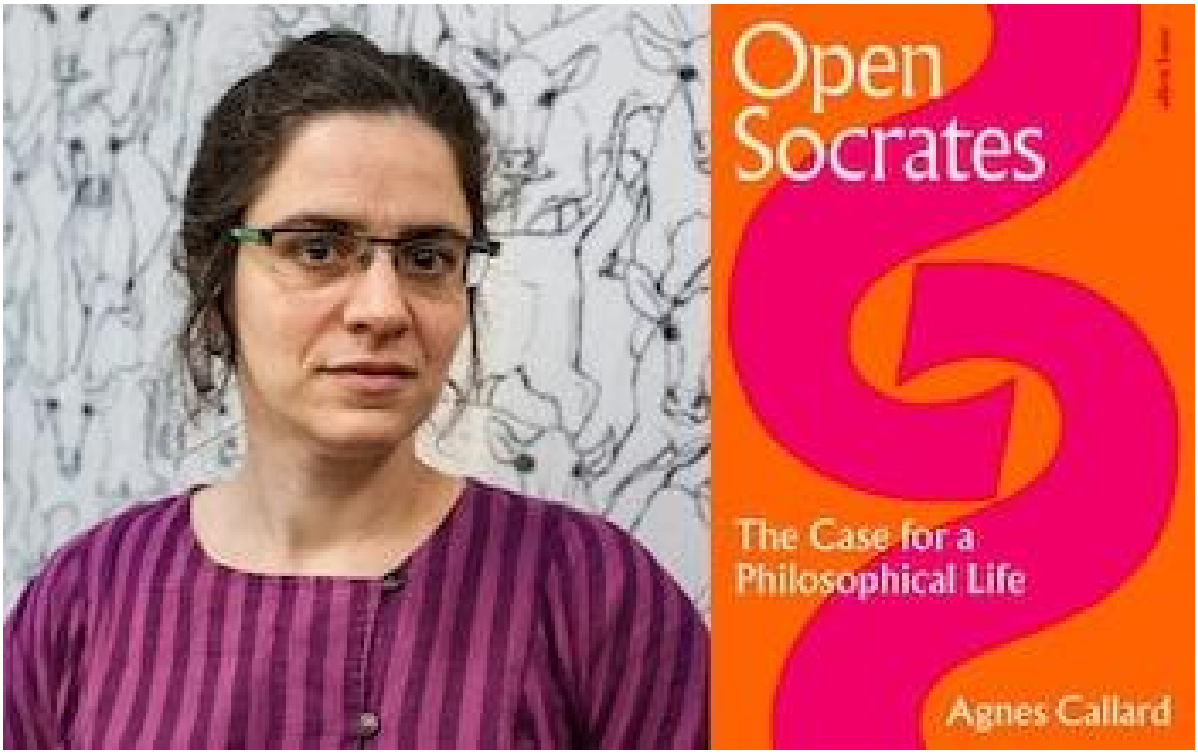
Socrates, far from being a mere irritant, is the most honest man around: as the Delphic oracle suggested, what makes him wise is his awareness of his own ignorance. He is, Callard writes, "ever hopeful that the next intellectual encounter will be the one that enlightens him". True, but what's slightly baffling here is Callard's neglect of other thinkers who have consciously walked Socrates's path: Soren Kierkegaard, for instance, or his heirs the existentialists, who were very much engaged in "Socratising". Perhaps, from Callard's point of view, they lack a certain analytic rigour; still, it seems unfair to downplay the importance they've had. Indeed, we might look at post-war liberal individualism – hardly a niche approach – and also claim that its questioning of inherited truths and traditions is Socratic through and through: there's less radicalism in Callard's constructive corrosion than might at first appear.

Running through a series of paradoxes, Callard points out how difficult it is, for example, not just to admit that we've been wrong in the past – which we're generally



Constitutively annoying: the statue of Socrates outside the National Academy of Athens Credit: iStockphoto

happy to do – but that we're also sometimes wrong in the present. Callard also usefully describes Meno's paradox, which calls into question the possibility of searching for an answer to an inquiry (and also helps us to understand the irritating quality of philosophers): "either the search is unnecessary, because you already have what you're looking for, or it is impossible, because you don't know what you're looking for, and so wouldn't know it if you found it." In untangling questions and problems, we're painfully confronted with our own intellectual limitations: yet progress, through dialogue, is possible.



Open Socrates is published by Allen Lane Credit: Jean Lachat

Yet we live in an age of "politicisation" where that dialogue is more fraught, and philosophical questions are mutated into zero sum games. Callard is quite right, and her Socratic conclusion is worth internalising: "What you are really doing when you say you are fighting injustice is inflicting harms on people and imagining that those harms somehow transfer to the ideas that are your real enemies". Socratic equality, on the other hand, is "to engage with a point of view that conflicts with your own, but to continue to engage with it as a point of view on the truth".

As for love, Socrates, is, according to Callard, polyamorous, insofar as he's "non-exclusive" in his dialogic encounters. She states that he merges eros and philia, which we might roughly gloss as erotic and non-erotic love, such that "Socratic polyamory is that kind of polyamory that doesn't distinguish between having many lovers, and

having many friends". Death is to be confronted not by myth but by the kind of inquiry which never ends.

It seems rather neat that Socrates would reach the same conclusions as rationalist, atheistic, elite-educated philosophers with bohemian lifestyles. One would be forgiven for perhaps finding these conclusions a little self-serving, although, to her credit, Callard is very keen to be questioned and is clearly joyfully up for disagreeing with you: while we might struggle to emulate Socrates all the time, Callard's book reminds us that we need more philosophy than ever. The freedom to disagree as equal partners in an on-going collective effort to understand untimely questions must be defended: there are few higher things.

Open Socrates is published by Allen Lane at £25. To order your copy for £22, call 0330 173 0523 or visit Telegraph Books

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