Agnes Callard on Complaint

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We all do it. But is there anything philosophically interesting about complaining? Agnes Callard thinks there is. In this episode of the Philosophy Bites podcast she discusses complaint with Nigel Warburton.

Nigel Warburton: This is Philosophy Bites with me, Nigel Warburton.

David Edmonds: And me, David Edmonds.

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David Edmonds: I'm fed up with Philosophy Bites. It's been going on for so many years, and frankly, it's becoming tiresome. The philosophers have nothing original to say, and I have to spend hours editing them to make them sound halfway coherent. But anyway, enough whinging. Here's Agnes Callard.

Nigel Warburton: Agnes Callard, welcome to Philosophy Bites.

Agnes Callard: Thanks so much, Nigel.

Nigel Warburton: The topic we're going to discuss today is complaint. Now that's not obviously a philosophical topic. Could you perhaps say why you've chosen that topic?

Agnes Callard: There isn't too much philosophical work on it, though. There is a bit. I mean, I find it actually strange that philosophers aren't more interested in it. I think it's a huge part of our lives. We spend a lot of time complaining.

As a parent, I spend a lot of my time listening to complaining. And just something that fascinates me about complaint is that we tend to like to produce it more than to receive it. I'm interested in forms of speech that are like that. It's also true, I think, of advice. I think people tend to like giving advice more than getting it, and I find that to be interesting that there are communicative phenomena that are asymmetric in that way.

But I also I just think complaint properly understood expresses something very deep about the human soul. So it gives us access to something about ourselves if properly understood.

Nigel Warburton: I can see that very good advice could be well received. I can't really think of a situation where I'd be delighted that somebody complained. Complain seems to have built into it something negative. There's something wrong that I've done.

Agnes Callard: Yeah. So I think that we often enjoy complaint. There are many contexts in which we do. So a lot of stand up comedy is complaint. A lot of Greek tragedy, especially the chorus, is complaint.

A lot of Shakespearean monologues are complaints. So I think you're really thinking about a a species of complaint that I think is very salient for us, which I call protest. When I protest to you, I'm complaining in a specific way, which is I have a grievance. I

think you've done something wrong, or maybe you're part of a group that's done something wrong. And we are somehow bound in a shared normative system where I think you, according to the rules of that system, ought to recognize that you have done that wrong thing, and I demand some kind of repair or at the very least acknowledgement of the wrong that you've done.

I don't think people like to receive that sort of

Nigel Warburton: That's really useful as a clarification. I was thinking of the situation where as I'm the waiter and I your food's cold and you complain to me. I'm not overjoyed to get the complaint even though it's accurate, but that's a protest. The complaints that you were describing sounded very literary and much more interesting than that.

Agnes Callard: Yeah. So I think that there's a weird thing about complaints, like a little bit repressed. There's something so intense and emotional about complaint that we don't permit complaint to come forward directly. We we kinda straight jacket it into these forms that are then, like, socially acceptable forms of complaint. We don't tend to hear a lot of pure complaint.

So let me say what what I think of the two primary socially acceptable forms of complaint are. They are protests that we've already discussed, and venting is the other one. So venting is where I express my distress about something to a receptive audience, where what I'm looking for is empathy, fellow feeling, recognition or acknowledgment, but I am not blaming them in the way that I am when I'm protesting. I'm not asking for any kind of change. So I think protest and venting are the two officially recognized forms of complaint.

But what strikes me about those is they're extremely different from one another. Right? You might be like, why do we even call these two things by the same name? You could imagine an iceberg with two projections on top, and the protest and the venting are those two projections, and you have to ask yourself, what is underneath? What's the iceberg that's being in some way straight jacketed or pressed into these two forms?

Nigel Warburton: So as you were talking, a helicopter started buzzing overhead. And if I said, oh, no. A helicopter that's gonna ruin the recording, is that venting?

Agnes Callard: It could be. It depends on how you do it. We typically vent to people to whom we have some kind of tie, your friends, your family members, or to people who are in a similar situation as you. So imagine saying that to, like, another podcast host. I was doing this podcast, and then there was a helicopter in the background.

The guy would be like, yeah, I know that happened to me too. You know? Right? So that then would be venting. But I think it's, of course, possible to simply observe that a helicopter flew by and to inform me about that, right, without venting.

The venting seeks an empathetic reaction in the listener.

Nigel Warburton: So we've got protest, we've got venting, and there's something lurking underneath these two, which may be the same thing. What is it?

Agnes Callard: I find it helpful to think about, like, how people speak when they protest and when they vent. Quite often, what happens is there'll be some question, like, why did you do that to me? If I'm protesting, I'm like, why did you bring me bad food? Or if I'm venting, I might say, why did he bring me bad food? But the protester and the venter are asking that question rhetorically.

They're not actually waiting for an answer. They want, I want you to bring me better food, or I want you to empathize with the fact that he brought me bad food. So I think the thing underneath is the same question, but non-rhetorically. A complaint, I think, is a question. And the question can take a bunch of different forms, but maybe the closest we can get to a common denominator of all those forms is why am I being hurt?

Why is this bad thing happening to me? Or it could be to us. That's what I think a complaint is. A complaint is a question.

Nigel Warburton: But that why sounds more like the emotive boo or yuck or it's not a real request for a causal explanation of how this end result came in front of me, which I'm unhappy with.

Agnes Callard: So I don't think it's a request for a causal explanation. That's for sure. I think it is the equivalent of the boo and yuck in the case of venting. That's what exactly what it is in the case of venting. But I think the complaint itself, the part that you're not allowed to voice, is actually just the question.

Why did I get that to you? Why am I being hurt? The person whose work I really draw on in trying to understand complaint, because as I said, there isn't a lot of philosophical work on complaint and there isn't a tradition of thinking about it, is Simone Wei, who herself does not use or talk about the complaint, but she talks about some other stuff that I think is in the vicinity. So the distinction that I find to be very important from Wei is between suffering and affliction. So suffering is when, like, I feel bad because bad stuff is happening to me.

But there's a lot of bad stuff that happens to you every day that sort of you just don't care about or don't mind or you might even choose it, you know, like exercise or unmedicated childbirth. People choose all kinds of suffering all the time. Affliction is unintelligible suffering. It's suffering that does not make sense to the person who is undergoing it. I think of a paradigmatic example is like being sort of like robbed and beaten up.

That very naturally generates this question, like, why did that happen to me? There are a lot of wrong ways to hear that question. It's almost impossible to hear it in the right way. You know, like, they saying why did I deserve it? A second question is like, how do we hear it?

But I think that there's just the question almost issues from the event itself in a really natural way. And that's precisely because it's a case of affliction and the person doesn't understand.

Nigel Warburton: That's interesting. I can see that with venting, but with protesting, it's really such an existential feeling of, oh, why me when the food's cold? No. I'm just think you're not a very good restaurant. Why are you serving me cold food?

Agnes Callard: I think that both in the case of protests and in the case of venting, there's like a spectrum of how severe. But if you think of the civil rights protests, Black Lives Matter, people watching George Floyd be suffocated to death. When I watch those protests, it's like, why are we being hurt? To me, that was like screaming at that question. Why are we being hurt?

So I think that one dimension along which we can assess both venting and protest is degree of severity. And I think people can protest about very small things and very large things, and I think they can vent about very small things and very large things. We often find it much more easy to deal with venting about small things, actually. So we vent to our friends about small things, but we only vent to our really close friends about big things. So if you think about what protest is, it's predicated on the idea that we stand in certain relations to other people, certain kinds of sort of, like, Kantian or normative moral relations of duty and right and promising and obligation and recognition.

That's the space of protest. Right? And if you think about what venting is, it's predicated on the idea that we stand in certain kinds of affective or emotive or sympathetic or kinship bonds to other people. Right? Those are two fundamental ways in which we relate to the people around us, normatively and affectively, emotionally.

What complaint, in a way, illustrates is there's another way that we relate to one another besides those two ways. In fact, it's prior to them and more fundamental, and that is interrogatively. You are to me not only someone to whom I have obligations and who has obligations to me and someone to whom I might have effective ties, but you're someone to whom I can pose a question. You're an answer haver is another thing that a human being is to me. And I think that we are comfortable with the thought that one thing other human beings are to us is answer havers in the context of the theoretical, in the context of scientific and theoretical inquiry.

But what complaint illustrates is that there's an ethical side to the fact that another thing that a human being can be for you is an answer haver.

Nigel Warburton: So if somebody's protesting about some terrible inequality in society, They're complaining about it. They may be both protesting in the technical sense and venting. So they're looking for an explanation. They want redress, but they also want to bring people along with them. But the interrogative aspect, I'm struggling more with trying to understand what the answer that they want is and who they want it from.

Agnes Callard: Both protests and venting are like translations. So they're translations of an original question into another disc ourse. And so in the case of protest, you've translated this question, why are we being hurt, into why are these specific unjust actions being performed? Asking about the question at that point is almost like asking a little bit too late. What you have to do is imagine, what about before there

was some kind of recognition of, like, equal rights for white people and black people or for men and women, and people were just suffering in a certain way, and they didn't have maybe a name for it?

There wasn't a recognized system within which they could just claim. You can imagine even with the waiter case. Right? Like, suppose that they brought you very bad food, but it wasn't a system where it was just acknowledged that that meant that the waiter was supposed to do anything. You know?

You could just be like, why did you bring me this bad food? Right? It's a different kind of why. The protest represents a kind of translation of the complaint, but my thought is, like, there's sort of always something left over that is untranslated. Like, if you think about what happened after the cop chauvinced so this is the cop who suffocated Floyd, and he was convicted of murder.

And there were a lot of people who said this was not justice. You shouldn't think that we're somehow this has somehow been, like, rectified. You might have thought back when people were protesting and they had signs that said justice for George Floyd or something like that, that that's exactly what they were asking for, like a fair trial and for the person guilty to be held responsible. The way that I think about that is, like, yeah, that kind of was what they were asking for. That was the translation of the complaint into a certain kind of normative language, but it didn't capture everything about the complaint.

And maybe not everything about it has yet been translated. And so I think there's, like, an untranslated residue of the complaint that is visible when sort of what's officially been asked for maybe has been met, but there's still this feeling that there's more. That's sort of one way to answer your question. The other one is just from the thing I said earlier, which is that you can imagine a time when the complaint couldn't even yet have been translated that far because there wasn't a recognition that you could demand something of that kind.

Nigel Warburton: And this bit that's left over is the kind of question at the heart of everything here. Does it always come back to why me? Why me?

Agnes Callard: I don't think it's why me as opposed to someone else. What the me, I think, is supposed to bring out is, like, the fact that there's a kind of source of subjectivity there that is experiencing the suffering. So it's not just like, why is there suffering? It's like, why is there this thing that I'm experiencing? Has a theory.

I think what she thinks is that each of us has in ourselves an expectation of goodness. She calls it the profound and unchanging expectation of goodness. And she says something like, I wish I could quote it exactly. In the face of all of the wrongness and suffering and mistreatment and pain that life throws at a person, there remains underneath this unchanging expectation of goodness that is the source of the question, why am I being hurt? And she says it's that that is holy in every person, h o l y, holy, like sacred in every person.

So the question comes from something. It comes from an expectation. That is, I'm surprised that something bad is happening to me. Why am I surprised? Well, I expected something good.

Right? If I had expected a bad thing, I would have no question. And so her thought is, like, we all just expect good things. On her view, it's because there's something divine about us. We weren't made in this world.

We were made in this other world. And in that other world, like, everything was awesome. And then we were brought into this world, and now sucky stuff keeps happening to us. And we're, like, used to that other world. And so we keep responding as though we were still in that other world.

So that's the profound and unchanging expectation of goodness. And so I think she thinks the question is a product of that expectation.

Nigel Warburton: And do you buy that religious source of this questioning, or or would you give a secular account?

Agnes Callard: I am a religious person, and I believe in God, so that part of it is not distasteful to me. One thing that is really striking or to me somewhat revolutionary about is that there's a kind of normal place to locate religion in this story, which is as the source of something like human rights or dignity or autonomy, basically, all this stuff that's being protested about. What Vey says is like, no. None of that stuff is divine. Human rights, that's totally superficial.

She thinks of it as this fear of contention. She's not such a fan of protest. Right? Because she thinks that protest always involves sort of trying to make case for why you should redress my wrongs instead of somebody else. It involves a kind of attention seeking.

Actually, the complaint itself is, like, from her point of view, basically ineffable and inarticulate except by, like, great geniuses of Shakespeare and and Homer and Sophocles and stuff. I had always thought, okay. Religion helps us understand the idea that there's something divine in every human being, and that is why you have to treat them with respect, respect their rights, etcetera. Right? And Bay is like, no.

The space of human rights is like the space of a certain kind of public language for poorly attempting to acknowledge this other thing, which is the expectation of goodness. I do find it pretty compelling. In a way, it makes more sense to me that the divine is this simple expectation, not a normative expectation, not an entitlement, not a demand, not a feeling this is what I'm owed, simply expecting that good things are gonna happen. Like a prediction is all it is. I do find that pretty compelling.

Nigel Warburton: Listening to you talking, was kept thinking of Job. Job seems to have a rough deal. You know, he gets boiled and horrendous stuff happens to him for no apparent reason, and he complains. God just says something like, well, you just have to trust me. Is that what we're like?

Agnes Callard: Yeah. I mean, one thing that's very striking about Job's complaints is they're filled with questions, which supports the question theory of complaint. Right? Why was I born? That's, like, his first question.

And I think one thing that's interesting, right, is that in a way, God is the kind of appropriate target of these questions. God is the one who could potentially answer them, I think. To have this question posed to you, I think, is so uncomfortable, maybe partly because you're then being asked to play god. Right? In terms of how the question is answered, maybe god is the one who can say.

It's not for you to understand. It's for me to understand. But for anyone else, it's very hard to say that. Suppose I say, why am I being hurt? Here's some things you might say.

Suppose you're religious and you believe in original sin, and you think my suffering is a punishment for original sin. That's one thing you might believe. That would be an answer. Right? It's at least an answer.

I think you could say that to me. No matter how religious you were, it'd just be imagine actually saying it to my face. Right? Or suppose you think that there's, like, afterlife rewards. And so, like, yeah, I'm suffering now, but if I'm virtuous and I deal with it well, then, like, the amount of happiness I'm gonna have in my afterlife is just gonna so outweigh this.

Then, like, you could give that as your answer. You might believe in the afterlife. I mean, what we're talking about here is theodicy. Right? How do we explain existence of evil?

Right? And so that's, like, an answer you might give. But could you give it to me in the moment of my suffering? Even if you believe that, I think you couldn't say it to me. And now let's suppose, like, you're a modern atheist, and you think, look, there's no explanation.

Like, there's just suffering sometimes, but there's no justification. There's no bigger story. Sometimes people just suffer, you happen to be the one suffering right now. You won't believe that. I think it's very hard to say that to someone when they're in the throes of terrible suffering.

And the reason why it's very hard, it feels like it trivializes their suffering, it feels like it dismisses their question as though the question were illegitimate. There's no such question as like, why am I suffering? Right? And the person's like, look, I have the question. So I find actually all the standard modes of theodicy are kind of impotent in response to the question.

Nigel Warburton: I'm not sure with the humanist's answer. I think if someone's suffering, you say, well, look. It's terrible that you're suffering, you know, and we'll do everything we can to stop your suffering. But sometimes with disease or whatever, there's just no particular reason why you. You're just unlucky.

Why am I suffering? Well, some people suffer. That's just how it turns out.

Agnes Callard: So notice in your answer, you first gave the venting answer. You said, it's terrible. I empathize with you. Then you gave the protest answer. We'll do everything we can.

Right? And then you were like, wait. There's something left over. I gotta say another thing. And so then you're like, you're just unlucky.

That might well be true. The question is how assertable is it? How about they're forty years old and they're dying of cancer and they're not gonna see their children grow up? Do you say the words to them, you're just unlucky? And there's different ways you might interpret fact that we can't give that answer.

One way you might interpret it is like, well, it's the correct answer, but it's somehow, like, rude to say it. It's interesting, right, that people who have different kinds of correct answers all find their answers to be, like, rude to say. Right? Another possibility is, like, our answer, which is, like, it's just chance or whatever, it's actually a terrible answer. It doesn't work in answer to the question.

Nigel Warburton: So if I rage against that, rage against the dying of the light, it's inevitable we're all gonna die, but people don't like it that they're gonna die mostly. Complaining about it surely is just sort of complaining about the state of things. It's just because we'd like to be God. It's not because there's something divine about us that tells us we are due this thing.

Agnes Callard: There's a long tradition in the history of philosophy of dismissing complaint. Aristotle says that complaining is the sort of thing women do or effeminate men. Kant says something like complaining and whimpering are like they're unworthy of you. It's a lowly activity. Nietzsche says that you can imagine Nietzsche being not a fan of complaint even though he basically does nothing but complain.

Right? He says it's like a a waste of time. But the question, is this question a mistake born of, say, a false belief about that I'm God or something like that or that I'm divine? Or is it correct? One way to think about it is, like, the proof is in the pudding, which is to say in the interaction.

In a way, it's like saying, look. Let's wait till you're faced with a dying person. Let's see what you say and see whether you have, you know, foxhole religion. Like, that's the context for the religion, right, is how you're gonna respond to that person. Are you gonna tell them that they're making a mistake?

Do you really think they're making a mistake in that moment when you're looking them in the eye? Or does your view that they're making a mistake only exist, like, now when we're safely talking about it outside of the context where you're facing the person's actual suffering. And so I think what this gets at is sort of why Christianity has an obsession with suffering. I'm not a Christian myself, but I have a lot of sympathies with Christianity. Jesus washed the feet of the poor wasn't, to make them not poor.

He venerated the poor and the suffering. Like, he venerated them as almost divine. And you might think there's a kind of apprehension of the divine in the sufferer that comes from the fact that the suffering exposes, brings to light this expectation that we simply don't feel like we can dismiss as an illusion.

Nigel Warburton: I'm trying to get a sense of how this fits on the spectrum. And we're talking about complaining about the most difficult to explain things that happen to human beings, but some of the examples of complaint that we began with are trivial things. Is it all the same kind of stuff going on, do you think?

Agnes Callard: No. So we can go back to Wei for a minute. It all depends on the borderline between suffering and affliction. One thing that might characterize someone who's, like, saint like or very stoic is that it's incredibly hard for suffering to transition into affliction for them. They kind of understand.

And then at the other extreme is young children who understand no forms of suffering. If they have to, like, be bored for one minute, the world is ending. So they expect life to be continual engagement and then enjoying somehow uninterrupted even for one second. To move the border such as to include too much in the space of affliction, we call that childishness in adults. There's a certain amount of suffering that you ought to understand is simply a part of a human life.

And so I think it is right that we sometimes are, like, impatient with complaints for that reason. But I think every human life contains in it more suffering than that. At some point in your life, no matter how well you think you've prepared yourself, you face something, at the very least your own death, that exceeds your, like, cognitive prowess over your own life.

Nigel Warburton: And so I should complain. I should protest and vent about those big things.

Agnes Callard: I mean, I generally think complaining is good. I just think Aristotle and Kant and nature are just all wrong. There's a reason everybody does it and that it's this huge part of literature and comedy and how we deal with our friends and it's a good thing. It's why we do it. People don't tend to, like, all do something for many millennia that is, like, not a good thing to do.

I mean, like anything, there's contacts and there's, like, ways of doing it. The question is more like, not just how should I complain, it's also how should I respond to complaint, and how do I complain well? And I think what this theory suggests is one way to complain well and to be complained too well is to really learn how to attend to the question. It's like a standing trope in heterosexual relationships that women complain and then men want to fix the problem. Right?

They're like, oh, why don't you just do They offer some helpful suggestion, and then the woman gets annoyed. And the man gets annoyed, like, are you just griping for no reason? Like, why don't we fix the problem? Right? If you understand complaining more in the Simone Weil line, you can see that what women are doing is they're trying to translate something, something that's making them unhappy into a particular language and context.

Say I'm complaining to my best friend that my husband never does the laundry. Here's what my best friend is not gonna say. She's not gonna say, oh, have you thought of giving him, like, a reminder every morning? Or have you thought of doing it yourself? Whatever.

Those would be super annoying helpful suggestions that I do not wanna hear. She understands that my complaint either is or could be kind of the tip of an iceberg where there's a deeper question about my marriage and some kind of dissatisfaction I have that I'm sort of yearning to articulate, and she helps me try to articulate that. So

that there's a kind of space of being receptive to the question and helping the person articulate the question where that gives you a really like substantive sense of what it means to be a good listener.

To be a good listener is not just to sit there while someone talks at you. It's to help them talk out the thing in the right way.

I think the good listener listens for the question.

Nigel Warburton: Agnes Keller, thank you very much.

Agnes Callard: Thanks.

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