Agnes Callard on Lessons from Socrates

Philosophy Bites

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Does Socrates still have something to teach us? Agnes Callard thinks he has. Here she discusses the great Athenian and his continuing relevance with David Edmonds.

David Edmonds: This is Philosophy Bites with me, David Edmonds.

Nigel Warburton: And me, Nigel Warburton.

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Nigel Warburton: Socrates is famous for his challenging philosophical conversations with his Athenian contemporaries. But can we learn anything from his way of doing philosophy today? Agnes Callard thinks we can and should.

David Edmonds: Agnes Callard, welcome to Philosophy Bites.

Agnes Callard: Thank you. It's great to be back.

David Edmonds: We're talking today about lessons from Socrates. Perhaps you can begin by telling us who Socrates was.

Agnes Callard: Socrates is an ancient Athenian. He lived from around four sixty nine to three ninety nine BC, and he is famous for walking up to people and asking them foundational questions about their lives. And the ensuing inquiry is one that people found either thrilling or annoying, maybe sometimes both. Eventually, he got killed for it.

David Edmonds: He never wrote anything down. What are our sources for the type of person he was, the kind of life he lived?

Agnes Callard: So we have our first source chronologically is Aristophanes' Clouds which is a comic play that makes fun of Socrates and Socrates in fact thinks that when he's put to death it's partly because of the reputation he got as a result of Aristophanes' Clouds. He mentions in his speech in the apology. Our second source well, our next two sources really are Plato and Xenophon who both wrote Socratic dialogues, which is to say things that are like plays, though sometimes they're narrated in the third person, and they are stories of Socrates in conversation with someone else or with more than one other person.

David Edmonds: You mentioned he was put to death. That was for what? For being this annoying person who went around asking irritating questions?

Agnes Callard: So the charges were impiety, which is to say not believing in the gods of the state and also sort of promoting his irreligiosity to others, and corrupting the youth. So those were official charges. Socrates himself thinks, yeah, but the real thing is the reputation that I got partly as a result of Aristophanes's clouds.

David Edmonds: And he goes around asking these questions, and he'll say something like, what is beauty? And people will assume they know what the answer to that is, and then Socrates will ask them some more questions, and it turns out they don't

know or didn't know as much as they thought they did. What's the purpose of this? What's he trying to achieve?

Agnes Callard: So you have to start with how he selects his questions. If he's talking to a child or like a young person as he is in the lysis, he'll ask them, do your parents love you? If he's talking to a general, he might say, what's courage? If he's talking to an orator, he might ask them, what is oratory and what is the point of it? He's always asking the question where the answer to that question is what his interlocutor's life rests on in some way or other.

So he's examining the person and the foundations of their life by means of his questions.

David Edmonds: But is he trying to undermine them?

Agnes Callard: I think that that is a side effect of what he's doing in that their life in general was resting on the conceit of knowledge. That is, they thought they had a really good account of why they're doing what they're doing. And what he ends up doing in trying to elicit that account is showing them that it was not as good as they thought it was. That's not his primary goal though. His primary goal is actually just to get the answer to the question.

He wants to know what courage is.

David Edmonds: So he doesn't know the answer before he begins. He thinks that in the process of this interaction, he can learn something.

Agnes Callard: Right. I think it's right to say he doesn't know the answer. That's not the same as saying he doesn't have an answer. So he thinks the kinds of questions that he's asking people, I call them untimely questions, they're questions where the question shows up at the wrong time, which is to say it shows up after the answer. Usually, questions are supposed to show up before the answer, but these are questions where because we have to act on the answer, because our lives are driven by the answer, we kinda start with answers.

And that's true of Socrates too, but as he engages in these inquiries and talks to people, the answers that he has improve over time. And so his answers, the ones that he's working with and the ones that he's using to examine his interlocutor are often better than those of his interlocutor. And the inquiry, one way to think about the inquiry is you're sort of pitting the answers of Socrates against the answer of another person. So for instance, in the Gorgias, when his interlocutor thinks that obviously it's better to do bad things and then be able to get away with it, to be a tyrant. The life of a tyrant would be a wonderful life.

Socrates has a different view. He thinks it's actually better to have injustice done to you than to be an unjust person. So you have, in a way, two different answers, and they get pitted against each other. And in the end, his interlocutor is forced to actually agree with Socrates' point of view.

David Edmonds: So Socrates wins that particular conversation. Does it make sense to talk about victories?

Agnes Callard: Socrates thinks that you win when you're refuted because that's when you learn something. So a lot of us, I think, take a conversation or an inquiry and we project it onto a contest. It's like we imagine that at the same time as we're having the conversation, we're also playing a game. And in that game, there's winners and losers and then we care a lot about who wins. And Socrates says, in that same dialogue, he says, that's not the kind of person I am.

Yes. I am pleased if I refute someone and I show them to be wrong, but I'm even more pleased if I'm refuted because then I get to learn something. The refugee is the beneficiary.

David Edmonds: Is this something that can only emerge in conversation what we call Socratic dialogue or are there other routes to this kind of informed knowledge?

Agnes Callard: The first thing I wanna say is it's gotta be conversation. That's my first pass at an answer and the reason for that is that these answers that we have that come to us before we raise the question close the question for us in such a way that we end up with blind spots. We end up with questions that we don't know how to raise for ourselves. And so if another person weren't there, we could go through a certain pantomime of inquiry. We could pretend to ourselves that we were inquiring but it wouldn't be a real inquiry because we wouldn't be challenging ourselves on the most important points and so you need another person to challenge yourself on the most important points.

Now I said that's a first pass at an answer. I think that philosophical training like the kind of training that you get when you go to philosophy grad school but also that you get when you give philosophy talks is actually a training in simulating these conversations. It's like trying to have a conversation with yourself as though you yourself were another person who could challenge you. And philosophers I think are better at this, are better at having conversations with themselves than anybody else but even we are not that good and the proof that we're not that good is that when I go and give a talk somewhere and I've prepared this talk, okay, for a long time. I've spent months writing this talk and all I did when I prepared it was I tried to channel my audience.

I imagined, what are they gonna ask me, where are they gonna challenge me, let me diffuse their objections in the talk itself and I give the talk and I'm a professional philosopher and I've been trained to do this. The first person raises their hand and they ask the question I didn't think of. Every time it happens, I'm shocked, I'm like, how did I not think of it? All I was doing the whole time I was writing and I'm a professional trained in this is anticipating what someone might object. And so that shows you the limits to the possibility of simulating someone else challenging you even when you're a professional.

David Edmonds: I can see how that would be true of lots of domains. What about other domains like science or mathematics? You would think that actually sitting in a room on your own would be just as productive, if not more productive than actually engaging a conversation about quantum mechanics or

Agnes Callard: I mean, I think a lot of scientists find that a really important part of the scientific process is having other scientists challenge their work. So that's gonna be a more general phenomenon. But I do think that the claims that I'm making are grounded in a specific set of questions, the ones that I call untimely. And there's a reason why you have trouble inquiring into them. It's because you have these blind spots.

Now I think the reason why scientists often find that they kind of need a second point of view is because their answer to some scientific question becomes in a way untimely for them. They become invested in it. They no longer hold the question open because they feel like their theory has to be right or something and they need a second set of eyes for exactly the same reason.

David Edmonds: I'm thinking in part of perhaps the greatest philosopher of the twentieth century, Ludwig Wittgenstein, who famously in nineteen thirteen decides that he's gonna go off to Norway and live entirely alone until he's solved all the problems of logic and doesn't want any interactions with anybody.

Agnes Callard: I think one way to understand my book is, like, it's the anti Wittgenstein philosophy book. So there are a lot of readings of Wittgenstein, but on at least one reading, he sort of thought philosophy was a mistake and that what one really needed was a kind of therapy to get you out of the problem of being engaged philosophically in the first place and that that's really the only job for philosophy is to cure you of the disease of philosophy. In a way, Wittgenstein's point of view on philosophy is actually not that different from Tolstoy's where it's the having asked the question that is the mistake. And I think, okay, that's one point of view, but what if you could get the answers? I mean, what if there really were answers and you really could have them?

Immediately, you would drop Wickenschein and you would go and you would look for the answers. And that's what I'm saying is there actually are answers. We actually can find them. It's really important to have them. It's knowledge of the most fundamental things in life and pursuing those answers that is engaging with other people in an inquiry to get the answers is the best possible way you could live your life.

David Edmonds: That's interesting because Wittgenstein, like Tolstoy, had these suicidal thoughts precisely because he was faced with these questions which he felt he couldn't answer.

Agnes Callard: Right. There's something very striking about the kind of cheer and optimism of Socrates sort of at every point in his life, including when he's facing death. I think Plato makes a lot of effort to put Socrates forward as a happy person. Here's a happy life. You know, a lot of discussions of Socrates will say, well, but it didn't work out for him.

He was put to death. But those people are not reading the Phoedo carefully because the Phoedo, which is about the Socrates' death, says, no, it worked out. That is Socrates' life worked out. It was a happy life. He lived well.

And I think one of the things Plato was sort of keen to show us was that you can do this, that is you can sort of devote your life to philosophy and that can be like a happy successful life.

David Edmonds: Socrates claims to be an expert in three particular areas, politics, love and the one you just mentioned, death. Can we briefly go through each of those three and you can tell me what we can learn from Socrates in those various different areas? So let's start with politics.

Agnes Callard: Yeah. So here what I do is I try to think about what we can learn given where we stand in relation to these things. So in politics, I focus on the sort of liberalism triad, justice, equality, and freedom. And what I say is we can learn something about each of those values and what they really are from Socrates which is that they are intellectual values in disguise. That is when we want equality, our desire for equality, if you keep in mind the ways in which it is systematically paired with desire for status, because we don't just want equality, we also want status, we all want to be elevated, the way to understand that is that we want to be engaged with other human beings in a condition where we can give each other the highest kind of respect.

That's the respect of being treated as a mind and as a guide for the most important questions and that's philosophical respect. For justice, what I argue is that Socrates shows you why you can't fight injustice because fighting is pretend arguing and what you really wanna do with injustice is to give the unjust person knowledge of why they're wrong. Freedom. I say the fundamental freedom is freedom of speech and there's a question, what is freedom of speech? And I think in a lot of corners of our society, for a lot of different reasons, we puzzle over.

Is freedom of speech debate? Is freedom of speech persuasion? Is it the marketplace of ideas? Is it And I argue against all of those conceptions of freedom of speech. And what I say is that really what it is for speech to be free is for it to be inquisitive.

That is for it to be possible to move forward in an inquiry into the truth without obstacles being thrown in your way by, let's say, politicization. That's politics.

David Edmonds: One thing that puzzles me in this is whether the Socratic project is descriptive or prescriptive. When he's talking about freedom of speech or equality or justice, is he saying this is how it is or this is how it should be?

Agnes Callard: That's a great question. So I introduced something that I call the Socratizing move, which is x is really y. That's the formula of it. Now there's a version of x is really y that is reductive like human interactions are nothing but power relations, say Foucault or everything that doesn't seem to be about sex is really about sex, Freud. You know, morality is really about Roussaint Monteneut Nietzsche.

There's a set of thinkers who wanna show us that the phenomena in our everyday life are rooted in things that are more base than we would like to recognize. Socrates just makes the opposite move. He says, the phenomena in our everyday life are rooted in things that are more noble than we recognize. That when we are interacting with each other politically, we have a higher calling, and that higher calling is manifest in the

kinds of demands we already make on our political interactions. And those demands will be, in a way, contradictory until we relocate them in their proper home.

David Edmonds: Is the desire for status a higher calling?

Agnes Callard: Yes. Absolutely. So status, as I understand it, is the worth that other people accord you. That is the value that other people take you to have and as much as we espouse a rhetoric of you shouldn't care what other people think about you, everybody cares what other people think about them and most of what gets called like self respect or self worth or whatever is just a function of what other people think about you. So it matters, it really matters what other people think about you and that's because other people really matter.

That's because the most important human projects involve other human beings whose estimation of whether or not you can be a partner in that project is what determines how well your life goes. And so what I say is the desire for status isn't a bad thing, it's just that we've put it in the wrong place.

David Edmonds: Okay. So that's politics. Now, love, you mentioned sex. Sex presumably is part of love?

Agnes Callard: Right. There's a lot of different kinds of love, but I'm specifically interested in romantic love. And I'm interested in this fact that we have a kind of like romantic ideal, like a story, a romance story of like the perfect romance. And then often our lives don't fit that. Often like dating is horrible or marriage gets boring or people are in toxic relationships, like love just routinely doesn't work out, which is to say we have expectations for it that don't meet the reality and the question is where do those expectations come from?

Why did we think it was this magical thing? One way I think to make this really vivid is just to think about areas of life when we don't have these expectations. So an example I give is like imagine you had a friend and you found them banging on the door of a restaurant. They're saying, let me in. Let me in.

But the restaurant is closed. And you say, oh, like, is this restaurant so amazing? And they're like, no. Actually, the food here is terrible. And you're like, but there are these other restaurants on the street that are open.

And they're like, no. I can only go to this one. At a certain point, you would think there was something deeply wrong with your friend. You would think that they had some were suffering some kind of mental breakdown, but that is just what people do when they're, like, texting their ex who they deeply resent late at night, trying to get back together with someone who they said they would never get back together with and who's only treated them terribly. And when that happens in the context of romance, we're like, oh, yeah, of course.

David Edmonds: So that's a Socratic insight into the nature of love. Does it also assist us in some way in overcoming what is that destructive behavior?

Agnes Callard: Absolutely. So what Socrates does is explain why you ended up in that situation which is that you have two standards for romance that are hard to fit together. One of them is you want the person that you love to be somehow good

or perfect. You wanna have like a reason for choosing them and the other thing is you want them to stick with you. And there's a kind of tension between these two things because if I'm choosing people for having the best possible qualities, if I meet someone who has better qualities, should dump the first person for the next person.

And if I'm gonna stick with you through thick and thin, even if you turn out to suck, then I'm giving up on the goodness requirement. So there's a goodness requirement and attachment requirement. And what Socrates does is he shows you and I wanna sort of preface this by saying, okay, this is pretty counterintuitive and it's probably the most counterintuitive thing that Socrates says but it does solve this problem that what you really love isn't people. What you really love is something like an ideal and it's an ideal that you yourself could instantiate and what other people are are a necessary route to your getting to that conclusion. And so you shouldn't blame other people for not being perfect.

What you should do is figure out how the two of you can pursue a kind of perfection together.

David Edmonds: You have this wow with your partner and then you're at the end, you say, I still do love you or rather I don't love you. I love an ideal, not a view of what, an ideal of love. I'm just wondering how one expresses this after this domestic.

Agnes Callard: Yeah. I think that what Socrates would say is that the proper interpretation of the sentence, I love you, is that you are an integral part of my pursuit of a certain ideal. That's what love is.

David Edmonds: Okay. We've done politics, we've done love, death.

Agnes Callard: Right. So one thing I do is identify two fears of death. One fear of death is what I call fear of missing out, which is to say, there are all these great things in life, you know, yummy food and hugs and good movies and all these good things I've experienced and I want to keep experiencing them. That's fear of missing out on more of the same. And Socrates thinks the philosopher is in a way gonna set that fear aside.

It's rooted in sort of your bodily attachment to pleasure. The philosopher is gonna set it aside because philosophically speaking, they're focused on a different fear. I call it Fona, the fear of never arriving. The problem with philosophy, the difficulty with philosophy, and this is the difficulty that kind of stymied Tolstoy and I think also Wittgenstein, is that you're asking these questions and you just don't know whether you'll get answers. In fact, you don't know whether anyone will ever get answers.

And you enter into conversation. Socrates enters into a conversation with, say, someone like Euthyphro, just on the steps of the courtroom, right, where he's going in and he's about to hear the charges against him. He knows this conversation is not gonna go on for, like, three days. It's not even gonna go on for an hour. And he asks him, what is piety?

I'm being charged with impiety. What is piety? And he has to kinda sustain this hope in the conversation and that the conversation can make progress in the face of the realization that we're probably not gonna get there in this conversation, yet I still

move forward. And in a way, the philosopher has this fear about their own life, but they have it in every conversation. They have it all day they're facing this fear, and he thinks that part of what it is to be a philosopher is to learn to manage that fear.

David Edmonds: It's the implication of Socrates that we can all be philosophers. And if that is the implication, I wonder if that's true.

Agnes Callard: It's stronger than that. It's that we all have to be philosophers. And it's something like the project of philosophy is inscribed in the living of our everyday life in the sense that there are a bunch of incoherences in our lives that point in the direction of philosophy. I've given you some of them about love, death, and politics. Two other ones that I talk about are weakness of will and our tendency to revenge.

So he thinks that it's a fact of life for most people that they sometimes don't do what they think they should do, like they eat an extra cookie or they spend too long on social media or whatever. And they're like, I knew that I shouldn't do that, but I did it anyway. And Socrates thinks that's nonsense. That's just a demonstration that what you had wasn't knowledge.

David Edmonds: You say we have to do that. It's an imperative. Yeah. What would happen if we don't? I mean, plenty of people don't.

What are they missing out on?

Agnes Callard: Right. Well, what happens is you're weak willed and your love life goes terribly and you're terrified of death. And in politics, all you ever do is fight. What happens is what happens, actually. Right?

So Socrates thinks there's only one problem that you can have in life and that is ignorance. And what you see all around you, all the problems you see around you are products of ignorance. So if you want your life to go better, if you want it to be a successful, happy life, what you're gonna want to do is try to be less ignorant by inquiring.

David Edmonds: We have been having an interview. I guess this is how you would define our interaction, an interview, not a conversation. What would Socrates have made of it?

Agnes Callard: I think he would have been frustrated by all the changes in topic. You just asked me a question, is philosophy really for everyone? And I said, yeah, everyone has to do it. And you're like, well, what happens if they don't? And I said, well, then they're ignorant.

And, you know, you could have said something like, well, what if they just don't have willpower or what if knowledge just isn't possible? Where have you proved that it's possible? There's so many different follow-up points and I think you would have been so frustrated that you didn't follow-up on all those points.

David Edmonds: We shouldn't have called it Philosophy Bites. Agnes Callard, thank you very much indeed.

Agnes Callard: Thank you.

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