What if the philosophical life really is the only one worth living?

In "Open Socrates," Agnes Callard argues for a way of being that sounds a lot like her own.

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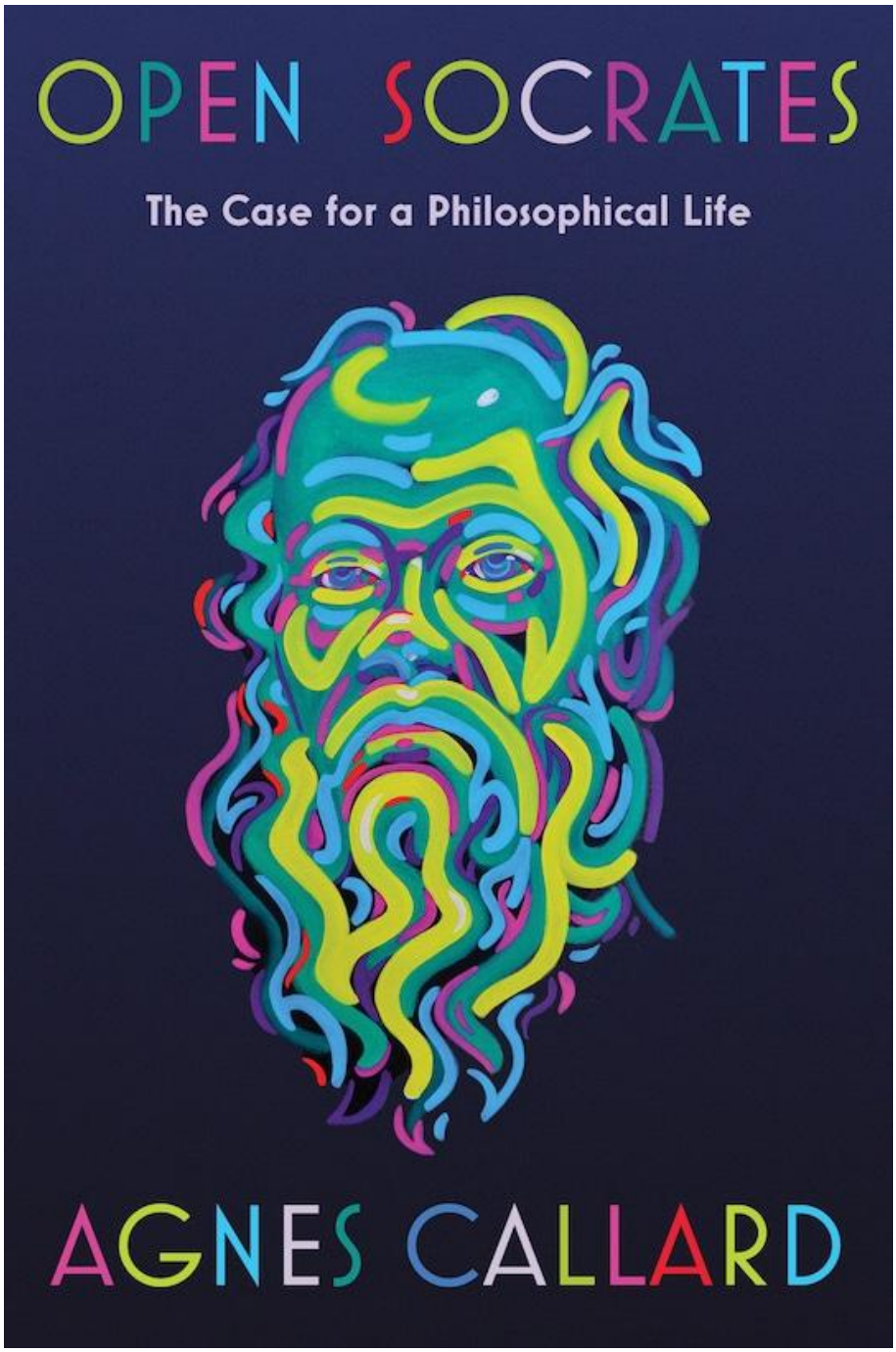
Contractors give a spring cleaning to Robert Aitken's 1935 statue of Socrates, near the National Archives, in 2017. (Bill O'Leary/The Washington Post)

Philosopher Agnes Callard revels in contrarianism. She has defended union busting and marital infidelity; denied the appeal of travel; and stood up for throwing out children's Halloween candy behind their backs. Fans of her pointed iconoclasm will enjoy her new book, "Open Socrates: The Case for a Philosophical Life." The book fleshes out the character and thought of Socrates to mount a full-throated defense of his claim that "the unexamined life is not worth living."

Callard argues that the relentless intellectual pursuit of knowledge and meaning is "the best thing one can do with one's life." We should all be "preparing for death," as Socrates says, by devoting ourselves to philosophizing about the purpose of our lives. She unapologetically values the lives of philosophers — specifically, philosophers like Socrates and herself who do not care for work-life balance — over others. Indeed, she goes so far as to say that while all early deaths are premature in a biological and relatively uninteresting sense, there is a distinctive and important way in which only the deaths of those who devote themselves to intellectually questioning their purpose,

such as a philosopher friend of hers who passed away while young, can be premature. It takes guts to write a book arguing that one's own choices about how to live are the only truly worthy ones, but that is exactly what Callard has done.



(W.W. Norton)

Those who do not ceaselessly interrogate the overall purpose of their life, according to Callard, are reduced to living through "fifteen-minute periods" driven by immediate needs and social demands. I am not sure why we have to buy that these are the only options. It is possible to care deeply about conceptual and existential questions and extended projects without feeling the need to determine the single, total purpose of one's life. I am also not convinced that a life should have a unified purpose toward which we strive. Some schools of Buddhist thought, for example, argue for being able to live in the moment. Philosopher L.A. Paul has argued that our identities and basic values lie open to fundamental transformation and are unpredictable in the long term. It would be interesting to hear Callard's responses to these alternative pictures.

"Open Socrates" is lively and clever. It brings the persona of Socrates to life, painting a vivid picture of a gripping character with friendships, values and passions. Callard makes the case that Socrates was not just a gadfly who badgered people with questions, but rather someone who lived by a specific set of values and gave us tools for finding answers to basic ethical questions. Along the way, Callard offers an excellent account of politicization, which she defines as the gamification of social disagreement, wherein we replace debates over ideas and values with contests to be won or lost in the public arena.

Callard stresses the importance of questioning presuppositions about how we should live. But doing so is no straightforward task, she claims, because such questions are often "untimely": We cannot ask them because we are already in the middle of acting on answers to them. Although you can realize that you *were* wrong when looking back on a belief, Callard says, you cannot take yourself as *currently* wrong without paradox; you would have to believe something and believe that it is wrong simultaneously. This makes it hard to ask if you should revise your current values and lifestyle choices. As she puts it: "It is not clear how someone is supposed to ask a question to which she thinks she has an answer, when she is currently using that answer to guide her life. She is not going to saw off the branch she is standing on."

Callard maintains that while this and other such paradoxes plague individual thought, we can solve them through conversation. Our interlocutors can give us an outside perspective on how our assumptions and commitments might be unsupported. Thinking at its best, according to Callard, is social and collaborative. She presents this as a surprising revelation, although she may be pushing against her own presuppositions rather than those of most of her readers. She announces that "each of us" ordinarily envisions thinking as a solitary, private activity, but I suspect that this understanding is mostly a philosophers' conceit. Scientists typically work and publish in large teams, while people in jobs outside academia routinely use collaborative thinking techniques: color teaming, whiteboarding and so on.

Callard has a habit of universalizing her psychological quirks, making large claims about the human condition that seem rooted in her specific perspective. She announces that it is "our most fundamental wish" to be treated as an intellectual thing, not a physical or social thing, and that we feel most respected when we are able to "help oth-

Socrates in prison before being sentenced to death. (Prisma/Universal Images Group/Getty Images)

ers figure out how to live" through our ideas. Is she sure this is the most fundamental wish of all supermodels and Olympic athletes? She declares that anger and the desire for revenge are possible only against those in our kinship community, and not against strangers. Luigi Mangione would probably disagree, as would anyone with an internet presence whose inbox is filled with rape and murder threats from strangers. This tendency to generalize from her experience is ironic given her emphasis on getting outside one's own sense of what is obvious or unquestionable. As a fellow middle-aged, female, autistic, Jewish second-generation Holocaust survivor teaching philosophy at a private research university in a large, liberal American city, I am about as demographically similar to Callard as people come. Yet our philosophical intuitions and presuppositions are deeply different, as is clear not just from this book but from professional debates we've had in the past. If I am too different from her to share the perspectives she takes to be universal, then she definitely needs a broader range of conversational partners!

Agnes Callard. (Arnold Brooks)

On behalf of Socrates, Callard offers fundamentally intellectual answers to questions about love, death and politics, arguing that bodily urges and social pressures distract from our devotion to the pure pursuit of knowledge and ideas. Most strikingly,

she argues that we never actually fight injustice with banal organizing and protesting. Injustice, she claims, is an "idea," and hence it can only be clarified through intellectual debate, rather than battled through practical action. Here Callard seems to be fallaciously conflating the concept of injustice with injustice itself. The *concept* of injustice is an idea, but *injustice* is a practical state of affairs. Unjust practices and structures are not proxies for the concept of injustice; they are injustice. It is true that fighting to eradicate the concept makes no sense. But I see no reason we cannot fight injustice by working to change such practices and structures.

In Callard's view, only philosophers who spend their time in intellectual conversation have lives "worth living"; people who build medical infrastructure in poor communities, create spectacular art or research how to mitigate climate change, without devoting themselves to extended conceptual analysis and existential arguments, are not living worthwhile lives. I remain unconvinced that an action-filled life that does a lot of good — even if that good is sometimes imperfect and untheorized — is less valuable than one spent obsessing over what one should do. Callard's philosopher-supremacism also risks elitism and ableism. Many people have disabilities that impede the kind of abstract analysis that Callard recommends. Many older people lose the capacity to track extended conversations and arguments. Many people simply do not have the time or resources to devote their lives to intellectual thought and conversation. I consider many of their lives valuable and worth living, and I set an extremely high bar — higher than "Open Socrates" can meet — for an argument to convince me otherwise.

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Open Socrates
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By Agnes Callard.
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