Agnes Callard's Marriage of the Minds

The philosopher, who lives with her husband and her ex-husband, searches for what one human can be to another human.

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"Becoming a wholly other person is not out of the question," Callard said, of her relationship with Arnold Brooks.

Photograph by Elinor Carucci for The New Yorker

Arnold Brooks, a graduate student at the University of Chicago, came to Agnes Callard's office hours every week to talk about Aristotle. At the last session of the quarter, in the spring of 2011, they discussed Aristotle's treatise Metaphysics, and what it means to be one—as opposed to more than one. "It was the sort of question where I felt it would be reasonable to feel ecstatic if you made some kind of progress," Arnold told me. Agnes was the only person he'd ever met who seemed to feel the same way.

Agnes specializes in ancient philosophy and ethics, but she is also a public philosopher, writing popular essays about experiences—such as jealousy, parenting, and anger—that feel to her like "dissociated matter," falling outside the realm of existing theories. She is often baffled by the human conventions that the rest of us have accepted. It seems to her that we are all intuitively copying one another, adopting the same set of arbitrary behaviors and values, as if by osmosis. "How has it come to pass," she writes, "that we take ourselves to have any inkling at all about how to live?"

She was married to another philosophy professor at the University of Chicago, Ben Callard, and they had two young sons. To celebrate the end of the term, Agnes had made cookies for her students, and she gave an extra one to Arnold, a twenty-seven-year-old with wavy hair that fell to his shoulders, who was in his first year of the graduate program in philosophy. As Arnold ate the cookie, Agnes, who was thirty-five, noticed that he had "just this incredibly weird expression on his face. I couldn't understand that expression. I'd never seen it before." She asked why he was making that face.

"I think I'm a little bit in love with you," he responded.

Agnes had felt that there was something slightly odd about her weekly sessions with Arnold, but she hadn't been sure what it was. Now the nature of the oddness became apparent. "I think I'm in love with you, too," she told him. They both agreed that nothing could happen. They leaned out her window and smoked a cigarette. Then Arnold left her office.

The next day, Agnes and her sons flew to New York to visit her parents. Ben had gone to Philadelphia to see his mother, who was recovering from surgery. On the plane, Agnes said, "it felt like I was having a revelation in the clouds." For the first time in her life, she felt as if she had access to a certain "inner experience of love," a state that made her feel as if there were suddenly a moral grail, a better kind of person to be. She realized that within her marriage she didn't have this experience. If she stayed married, she would be pretending.

When she landed, she told her parents that she had to get divorced. "We didn't think it made any sense," her mother, Judit Gellen, said. "We had seen Agnes and Ben a couple weeks earlier, for a long weekend, and it seemed like everything was great." Agnes's sister Kata Gellen, a professor of German studies at Duke, said, "I love Ben—who is really generous in every sense of the word, an impossible person to dislike—and I just felt like No, this can't be right." Of her marriage, Agnes said,

"There were no problems. We never fought. We just got along really well. We talked a lot about philosophy."

The next morning, she took a train to Philadelphia to tell Ben, who specializes in the philosophy of mind, language, and mathematics, how she felt. "We talked for an entire day," she said. "I was approaching him with, like, 'Here's what happened. What should we do?' " The conversation felt so honest that she realized she had probably never felt so close to Ben in her life. He encouraged her to take time before making a decision; she agreed to try therapy. But the next morning Ben called and said that she was right: they should get a divorce. "I think we both trusted each other enough in that crisis moment to listen to the other person and take seriously what they were saying," Ben told me. "So, to that extent, it was connected to millions of other conversations we've had. She was just showing me the same things she had seen. Once I saw them, it sort of clicked, and everything became very clear." He described Agnes as "the least complacent person I've ever met."

Agnes was extremely upset that the divorce would harm their children, but she felt that the alternative was that she would become a bad person. "I thought that I would become sort of corrupted by staying in a marriage where I no longer felt like I was aspirational about it," she said. Her friends and relatives suggested that she just have an affair, but that felt impossible. "It's like you have this vision of this wonderful, grand possibility, and then you decide to just play at it, treating it like a vacation or something. It seemed like a desecration of that vision."

Agnes and Ben shared a divorce lawyer, and their divorce was finalized within three weeks of her introducing the idea. Ben said, "I think to an unusual degree Agnes sort of lives what she thinks and thinks what she lives."

Agnes and Arnold struggled to do their work. Almost every day they went out for coffee together and had long conversations about philosophy—which felt like the real work. (In accordance with university guidelines, they had declared their desire to have a relationship to the chair of the philosophy department, and Agnes recused herself from academic authority over Arnold.) Sometimes it seemed to Agnes that the universe had been prearranged for her benefit. If she and Arnold were taking a walk together and she craved a croissant, a bakery would suddenly appear. If she needed a book, she would realize that she was passing a bookstore, and the text she wanted was displayed in the window. She thought that this was now her permanent reality.

Arnold said that, the first time Agnes's sons came to his apartment, "I remember watching them play on the furniture and suddenly realizing: this is the point of furniture. And with Agnes it was the same sort of thing: the world of a relationship has all sorts of furniture in it—the things you do and say and all of the conventions. But with Agnes, for the first time, I felt like it had some kind of point."

News of the divorce reached her students, and Agnes worried that they would feel disoriented or betrayed. That term, she had been invited to be the keynote speaker at an undergraduate conference for philosophy students. She decided to give her talk about what had happened to her. It was titled "On the Kind of Love Into Which One

Falls." Ben read drafts of the talk in advance and gave her feedback. He and Arnold sat next to each other in the front row.

"Six and a half weeks ago, I fell in love for the first time," she began. "You did not think I was a person who would subject her children to divorce. You did not think I was a person who would be married to someone she had not fallen in love with. You are not sure whether you know me anymore." She told her students that she felt she had a professional obligation to clarify the situation. Philosophers often describe love from the outside, but she could provide an inside account. Her experience had prompted her to reinterpret a famous speech, in the Symposium, in which Socrates, whom she considers her role model, argues that the highest kind of love is not for people but for ideals. She was troubled by Socrates' unerotic and detached view of love, and she proposed that he was actually describing how two lovers aspire to embody ideals together. True lovers, she explained, don't really want to be loved for who they are; they want to be loved because neither of them is happy with who he or she is. "One of the things I said very early on to my beloved was this: 'I could completely change now,' " she recounted. "Radical change, becoming a wholly other person, is not out of the question. There is suddenly room for massive aspiration."

After the talk, a colleague told Agnes that she was speaking as if she thought she were Socrates. "I was, like, 'Yeah, that's what it felt like,' " she said. "I felt like I had all this knowledge. And it was wonderful. It was an opportunity to say something truthful about love."

In "Parallel Lives," a study of five couples in the Victorian era, the literary critic Phyllis Rose observes that we tend to disparage talk about marriage as gossip. "But gossip may be the beginning of moral inquiry, the low end of the platonic ladder which leads to self-understanding," she writes. "We are desperate for information about how other people live because we want to know how to live ourselves, yet we are taught to see this desire as an illegitimate form of prying." Rose describes marriage as a political experience and argues that talking about it should be taken as seriously as conversations about national elections: "Cultural pressure to avoid such talk as 'gossip' ought to be resisted, in a spirit of good citizenship."

Agnes views romantic relationships as the place where some of the most pressing philosophical problems surface in life, and she tries to "navigate the moral-opprobrium reflexes in the right way," she said, so that people won't dismiss the topic as unworthy of public discussion. "If you're a real philosopher," she once tweeted, "you don't need privacy, because you're a living embodiment of your theory at every moment, even in your sleep, even in your dreams."

Jonathan Lear, a philosopher at the University of Chicago, said that Agnes approaches every conversation as if it were integral to her life's work, as it was for Socrates. "She's attempting to live a philosophical life, and this includes taking responsibility for the very concept of marriage," he said. "Part of what I take to be her bravery is that she is looking around, asking, 'Hey, I know all these couples have gotten rings and gone to the courthouse, but are they married?' One thing you can do with that

question is forget all about it and find some deadline to be anxious about. Or you can really hear the question, vividly. That's the place where philosophy begins—with a certain anxiety about how to live the life that is yours."

Agnes's work, which won the 2020 Lebowitz Prize for philosophical achievement, searches for ways in which we can become better selves than we are. She writes philosophy columns for *The Point* and the *Times*, and she will agree to a podcast with essentially anyone who asks, regardless of that person's politics or credentials. She also has her own podcast, called "Minds Almost Meeting," with Robin Hanson, a libertarian-leaning economist with whom she constantly disagrees. "I think you are insulting the human race in your book," she told him in one episode. In 2018, when she accidentally got pregnant, she gave a speech about misogyny at a conference of the Eastern American Philosophical Association, then told a room full of philosophers that she was considering having an abortion. "I am pregnant, and I don't know whether I want to be," she said. "Your shock is, of course, why most of those women don't talk about it; still less does anyone confess to being, at that very moment, engaged in the deliberative activity of weighing the value of a future human life." (At a Q. & A. session with two other panelists after her talk, no comments were directed toward her. Not long afterward, she had a miscarriage.)

Arnold saw Agnes's first book, "Aspiration," which she began writing the year after they met, in part as an attempt to make sense of their experience of falling in love. In the book, which was published in 2018, she describes how philosophers have often scoffed at the idea of self-creation. Nietzsche dismissed the idea that a person could "pull oneself up into existence by the hair, out of the swamps of nothingness." But the book argues that people can embark on a path toward a destination, a new way of being a person, that they can't yet see or understand—a process that she calls aspiration. When aspirants make decisions, they are guided by the possibility of a future self that does not yet exist. They imitate mentors or competitors, risking pretension, because they understand that their current values are deficient; they haven't made room for another way of seeing themselves or the world.

Arnold came to see the idealism of the early weeks of their relationship as the first stage of aspiration. "What we had was an imperfect vision of something, but it pretended to be clear," he told me. Within a few months, they saw that in many ways they were incompatible. "Most people, myself included, would have met the realization with the thought: How could I have stepped into this with such naïveté, with such childish blindness?" he said. "But her instinct was to trust that initial experience."

Agnes and Arnold married a year after her divorce, at a chapel on campus. Ben gave the toast at the rehearsal dinner. By then, Agnes recognized that she'd oversold her understanding of love to her students. At the time, she thought she'd achieved more than she had. Nevertheless, she said, she'd had enough of a glimpse—a "foretaste of future knowledge"—to reorganize her life in such a way that a future self would "look back and be, like, Yes, she was on her way."

Afew months into their relationship, Agnes and Arnold had a bad fight, and she came across a copy of *Cook's Illustrated* that Ben had given her for Hanukkah years before, inscribed with a loving note. She remembered that she had been happy at the time. "I was just, like, Wait a minute, maybe I'm just doing the same thing again. The veil was lifted with Ben, and now it is being lifted again." But she was consoled by the idea that she and Arnold were philosophical about their relationship in a way that she and Ben had not been. Agnes, who was diagnosed with autism in her thirties, felt that she and Arnold were trying to navigate the problem of loneliness—not the kind that occurred when each of them was in a room alone but the sort of loneliness that they felt in the presence of another person. Most couples struggle with a version of this problem, but it often feels like a private burden. For Agnes, it was philosophical work, a way of sorting out "what one human can be to another human." It seemed to her that Arnold had come to her with a question: Is it possible to eliminate the loneliness that is intrinsic to any relationship, to be together in a way that makes full use of another person's mind?

Agnes has generally avoided speaking publicly about being autistic, in part because she worries that people will find it preposterous for her to use a label once closely associated with people who are nonverbal. But she feels that the diagnosis helps her understand her immunity to the pull of a certain received structure of meaning. In addition to the philosophical underpinning of her marriage to Arnold, there is perhaps an autistic one, too, in that most of us learn to ignore all the subtle ways in which we settle and compromise, based on our received sense that this is the way relationships work. Agnes never assumed that those social conventions inherently made sense. The period during which she and Arnold fell in love felt like proof. It was, she said, "the first moment when the world says to you, 'That can be possible.' Nothing can be more important than that. Every other little wrinkle and confusion—it's, like, whatever. Forget it. Set this aside. This thing is possible. And that's amazing—you're right to be taken in. Even when you start to see, Oh, he doesn't quite live up to the ideal, you owe them the very existence of the ideal in you. You owe them your projection. They pointed you in that direction."

Marriage takes many shapes, but a common one is a downward-sloping line. It begins at the top—the intensity of falling in love, feeling seen and heard in all your fullness—and the rest of the relationship is an attempt to hold on to the ideal without the attenuation's becoming too terrible. Joan Didion called this phase of marriage "the traditional truce, the point at which so many resign themselves to cutting both their losses and their hopes." But Agnes saw her relationship with Arnold as a kind of ladder. They were on the bottom step, attempting to climb the ladder together, in pursuit of a shared ideal: the right kind of mental dependence. Her thoughts felt like "mushy dots," but, through conversations with Arnold, they had started to solidify. "It was only then that I felt I could settle on things and start to complete a thought," she said.

Agnes and Ben shared custody of the children, who moved between their old apartment and a new one that Agnes shared with Arnold. On Agnes's nights with the chil-

dren, Ben would often come over and have dinner, and they'd talk about philosophical questions together. Ben approached Arnold with openness and warmth. Arnold told me, "He could have gotten really upset and done a bunch of destructive things—perhaps I would have, and I'm quite sure plenty of other philosophers would have—but it would have been useless destruction, and Ben had the foresight to see that you shouldn't do what you will later regret."

Agnes got pregnant shortly after getting married, and she and Arnold moved back into the apartment that she had shared with Ben. It seemed unnecessarily burdensome for the oldest children to bounce between two homes, spending half their time away from their youngest sibling, a brother. "We wanted all three children to have breakfast together," Ben said. Agnes noticed that people who had once urged her not to get a divorce were now pushing her to distance herself from Ben, to make a "clean break." But she and Ben were still dependent on each other in ways that she didn't want to ignore. They saw no reason to separate their bank accounts. They never stopped talking about philosophy. Ben took on a parental role with the youngest boy, Izzy, assuming a roughly equal share of the child care. When Agnes's best friend, Yelena Baraz, a professor of Classics at Princeton, visited, she was struck by how happy the children seemed. All of them had "genuinely gained a parent," she told me.

Jonathan Lear, Agnes's colleague, said that, when he first learned about the reasons for her divorce, he was reminded of a passage in Bertrand Russell's autobiography. Russell describes how he went bicycling one afternoon and, as he was riding along a country road, realized that he no longer loved his wife. "Something similar happened to Agnes," Lear said, but instead of bicycling back and severing ties, as Russell eventually did, "they spent their life happily together—all three of them. To my eyes, it's a beautiful, mutually supportive creation."

When I told a friend about Agnes's home life, she said that she was reminded of "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," a short story by Ursula K. Le Guin, about a utopian city where everyone's happiness depends on the suffering of one child, who is locked in a dark cellar, abandoned and starving. My friend suggested that Ben must live in the metaphorical cellar, sacrificing himself for the good of the family—an interpretation that, on some level, made sense to me. I had noticed, among my friends, that some of the most successful marriages involved inequality, and clarity about it: one person sacrificed more than the other, and it was O.K. Agnes told me that this interpretation was wrong. "That is a really common interpretation of our situation, and I'm struck by *how* common it is," she added.

In an e-mail, Ben explained that he understood that people assumed that he hadn't chosen the situation but was merely enduring it, but this was false. "Agnes and I are close friends, and we have a lot of respect for each other," he wrote. "But at this point neither of us can even imagine being married to the other person. I have moved on, just as she has." He continued, "We may well stop living together once the kids leave home, but until then we are all having a blast raising three (now two) sons together." (Their oldest son had just left for college.) He said that the two oldest boys were like

sons to Arnold, and Izzy was like a son to him. "I count myself very lucky to know Arnold," he went on. "A few years ago he and I camped in the Boundary Waters in Minnesota, and in the middle of a freezing night we went to a clearing in the forest and watched the International Space Station shoot across the star-filled sky. Next year, we are co-teaching a course on paradoxes."

Agnes hosts a popular late-night conversation series at the University of Chicago called "Night Owls," in which she and another scholar spend up to three hours debating a single subject, like sacredness or death or organized violence. About eight years after her divorce, she and Ben held a session called "The Philosophy of Divorce," which was attended by hundreds of students. Agnes, who always wears bright colors, wore a dress with psychedelic swirls. Ben, a slim man with a boyish face, sat beside her, wearing a gray suit and holding a typed sheet of questions.

"Is it possible for a good marriage to end in divorce?" he asked.

"I think it's possible for a good marriage to end in divorce," she said. "In a lot of ways, I think we don't see our marriage as a failure."

Ben nodded. He said that when they finalized their divorce the judge asked if there had been an "irretrievable breakdown," and if they had tried to repair it. As if, Ben said, "there's this thing and you were trying to do it, and it's broken, and it's failing, and it's bad to fail, and so it's bad, and so we should see if we can try to save it. And I'm worried that that's a kind of fallacy, that we have an overly formal conception of what failure is." Agnes listened with her hand over her mouth, as if restraining herself from jumping in with a thought. "I was going to ask Agnes this," Ben went on, "but I'll just throw it out to the group: Is divorce a failure?"

"A moral failure," a student suggested. "Not living up to your promise."

"I guess I just think more generally, like, we shouldn't always be avoiding those sorts of failures," Agnes said. She described marriage as "a promise not only to keep loving the person" but to "love them a lot, at any given time," and it's impossible to commit to that in advance.

Throughout the event, Ben seemed to recede. He kept pulling the discussion away from his own life toward increasingly academic problems. It was a testament to his generosity that although he didn't seem to feel comfortable with the project—he told the students he was an "under-sharer"—he was doing the best he could, because Agnes wanted to show their students how philosophy could apply to the most consequential decisions of their lives. Ben told me that the process of becoming a well-known public philosopher, as Agnes has, would "ethically devastate a lot of people." He went on, "For most of us, having fans and followers feeds terrible things in our soul. But Agnes doesn't have that. She's changed very little, as far as I can tell." She seemed immune to the damage, he said, because she saw each reader or audience member as a potential interlocutor, another person who could challenge her thinking. "It's not that she lacks interiority," he said. "It's that she has a low view of the significance of that interiority." As she saw it, thinking is not something that one person can do alone. It takes two people to have a thought.

For Christmas last year, Agnes and Arnold and the three children went to Pennsylvania to visit his family. Agnes couldn't stop coughing and sneezing. About a week earlier, she'd had a severe allergy attack, brought on by a cat, and the symptoms hadn't subsided. One night, she was making pita bread, coughing every few minutes, and Arnold was sitting at a table in the kitchen, grading papers on his laptop. They were sharing the same space, but Agnes felt as if they were in two separate worlds. She was reminded of a line from the Icelandic novel "Independent People," by Halldór Laxness, which she had just read: "Two human beings have such difficulty in understanding each other—there is nothing so tragical as two human beings."

The next day, when I visited Agnes and Arnold at his parents' house, she told him that, while making the pita, she had felt as if they were out of synch. She wished he had put down his laptop and talked to her. She was aware that something more purposeful could be happening, and the lack felt tragic. "He's not paying attention to what I want him to pay attention to," she said, of that moment. "He's not interested in what I want him to be interested in." She recognized that he had to grade papers, but she was still annoyed. "I'm, like, why didn't he do the grading earlier today?" she said. "I bet there was lots of time today when he was wasting time."

"That's probably true," Arnold said. We sat at the kitchen table, and he dipped the pita into hummus he had just blended. The boys were at the mall with his parents. "Also, the thing with the coughing and the sneezing is funny, because you're clearly suffering in a pretty serious way," he told Agnes, "and you have been for days. And, at this point, I've just faded it out. I just don't hear it anymore."

Agnes said that in moments of disconnection she repeats a little mantra to herself: "It's fine—you can do this on your own. You can figure things out on your own." But she knows it's a lie. "I almost have a feeling of pleasure, like a sick pleasure, as I placate myself with the thought," she told me.

I asked Agnes and Arnold if they still felt that their relationship gave them the capacity for radical transformation, as Agnes had told her students. "I think there was something right in that vision," Agnes said, "but it has been so much harder than I thought it would be. To change—but also just to be in love, like, to relate in a really loving way to another person. It's like once you start trying to do that you come up against all of your limits." In her marriage with Ben, she hadn't been aspiring toward any particular ideal, so her flaws didn't feel as painful. "I think I never realized how fundamentally selfish I was before I met Arnold," she said. "I'm just really not able to be much less selfish than I am."

Arnold said he had never expected that he could become a new person. "For me, it was more, like, meeting Agnes was the experience of finally not going to waste."

"Nothing about you changed, but you became oriented towards what was important, in some way," Agnes explained.

Their marriage had ended up being more asymmetrical than they had expected. "Your entire philosophical career is a discussion of our marriage, in one way or another,"

Arnold said. Agnes agreed. If their marriage was a kind of play, she was the central character, and the author, too.

A common refrain in their fights was whether Arnold, who became an assistant professor in 2021, should aspire to more. Agnes felt that he could write an extraordinary book about Aristotle, but he was content to read the texts and share his interpretations with his students. "Arnold fundamentally sees life as, like, you're supposed to find a place of contentment," she said. "And his way of doing things often shows up to me as: he's not working hard enough. And my way of doing things often shows up to him as: she's incapable of being happy."

Arnold clarified: "The source of my question is: What is the aim of work? It has to be something that's not work. Aspiration can't be infinite, as much as you would love it to be, because at some point you have to get to the value that you are supposed to be aspiring towards. And, once you're there, that's who you are."

Agnes had just finished a draft of her second book, which fills in what she considers to be a significant omission in her first book: the degree to which aspiration depends on other people. The book examines the ways in which Socrates recognized our vulnerability and neediness and incompleteness. His greatest insight, Agnes believes, was that people are intellectually lonely—they live under an illusion of self-sufficiency. Dialogue was the only way out of their natural state. And yet the people who took up Socrates' work, developing the field of philosophy, struggled to keep that insight in view. They went off and came up with theories on their own. Perhaps they thought that Socrates secretly possessed his insights all along, that he didn't need other people to answer his questions, an assumption that Agnes thinks is misguided. "He was not doing this from a position of strength," she said.

One chapter of the book is about Socratic love, and it builds on the talk Agnes gave her students in 2011, when she first fell in love with Arnold. She repeats the argument she made about Socrates' vision of love as a kind of ladder, two lovers aspiring together to the same ideals, but she also contemplates what it means when the "company of the person one once chased with breathless abandon loses its thrill, the frequency of both sex and vigorous conversation decreases, and living together becomes a matter of routine. This supposedly 'good case' is, in its own way, also far from ideal."

As their youngest son grew older, and there were fewer urgent distractions, Agnes became aware that marriage is a thing that can die. She described the experience as "persistently ignoring the thought that there's something wrong. You just turn away from something and then keep turning away from it, and eventually you can't see it anymore."

Her parents, who emigrated from Hungary when she was four, were united by a shared sense of struggle; they were trying to adapt to a new culture, with little money or command of the language. The structure of marriage suited them well. Agnes felt that she had imported the conventional trappings of marriage without evaluating which features remained relevant. She worried, she said, that she and Arnold were "losing the spirit of marriage for the sake of the convention." They labored under the shadow of

the transcendence of their early romance. "I'll be, like, 'Why can't we get back to that?' " Agnes said. "And Arnold will be, like, 'That was never there.' He is offended by my attempt to go back in time. And I feel like he is taking away the foundation of our relationship and telling me that our lives are built on a lie."

After seven years of marriage, they watched Ingmar Bergman's "Scenes from a Marriage," a portrait of a couple as they struggle to understand the limits and possibilities of their relationship in the course of a decade. "It's extraordinary that two people can live a whole life together without—" the wife's mother says. "Without touching," the wife answers. The couple divorce, but their relationship continues, without the distance and artifice that marked their marriage. The ending is not widely viewed as a happy one, but both Agnes and Arnold felt that the couple, through their divorce, had discovered how to be connected to each other in a real way. Agnes is planning to write her next book about the show, as well as about what she calls her "philosophical marriage." The show clarified her feelings of estrangement. Until she met Arnold, she said, "I didn't realize how lonely I was. You don't see it. It's like the air that you breathe, but when you see that you can be relieved of it there is this weird way in which the relationship exacerbates the loneliness."

For Agnes, loneliness was the experience of having thoughts she wanted to communicate but felt unable to, because she knew that her words would come out wrong or be misinterpreted. Whatever she said would be a distortion of what she was feeling. "And that experience is almost a kind of madness—the experience of not being able to settle on a view about how anything is," she said.

I told Agnes that once, when asked to share an inspiring quote for a friend's wedding, I picked one from Rainer Maria Rilke: "I hold this to be the highest task for a bond between two people: that each protects the solitude of the other." In hindsight, my choice seemed silly, and I guessed she would agree. "Yeah, it feels like a way of reassuring yourself that some of the flaws in the relationship are actually really beautiful," she said, adding that this is "why Socrates thought the poets didn't know what they were talking about." The ineffable wisdom they wrote of—inaccessible to others, because it was so mysterious and private—sounded to Socrates a lot like ignorance, she said. The idea that a marriage should hold space for each person's incommunicable core, she believed, "comes from this pessimism where it's, like, Look, at the end of the day we know we can't really help one another, so the best thing we can do is not interfere too much."

Arnold aspired to rid the marriage of loneliness, too, but he defined it differently from Agnes. "For me, togetherness is something like: imagine being with somebody where it would never occur to you to say anything but the truth," he told me. "There's no strategy, no attempt to get anything." He continued, "Whereas Agnes's loneliness is a barrier between two people, for me loneliness is almost like an internal problem. How can I manage to find reasons to tell the truth? Or how can I make contact with the idea of being honest?"

Marriage is "an institution *committed* to the dulling of the feelings," Susan Sontag once wrote. "The whole point of marriage is repetition." Agnes and Arnold felt that they had entered marriage without clearly thinking through what the institution was actually for. For many couples, marriage ends up being about making a family, and, when it fails to meet other needs, the couple lovingly and generously lets it fail. But Agnes was uncomfortable with the prospect of a relationship that had lost its aspirational character. She wondered what it would look like if she and Arnold integrated new romantic relationships into their marriage. They would all keep talking about philosophy, but with fresh ideas in the mix. They asked each other whether it would violate the terms of their marriage if they became romantically involved with other people. "We didn't think there was any good reason other than the usual conventions of marriage to answer that question with a yes," she said. They referred to their new agreement as the Variation.

Agnes was struck by how bound by convention she'd been when she divorced Ben. "I was almost saying something like 'Look, I left my husband for this other man, but he's the one person—the one and only person—and I promise I won't do it again.' " It was as if she had been unconsciously trying to justify a kind of social dogma: that you can love only one person at a time.

Agnes said that sometimes colleagues tell her, of her relationship with Arnold, "I'm so glad it worked out." She finds that form of thinking alien. "It's a very narrative, novelistic approach to my life, and the only area of my life that I see in such a progressive way is the pursuit of knowledge." The proof of success or failure is her insights, she said, not the plot of her life.

After our conversation in Pennsylvania, Agnes said Arnold worried that they'd given me the impression that their marriage was a success story. At the time, I had expressed that, if cooking pita alone felt tragic, then things seemed to be going well, but I had perhaps overlooked the way that tiny kitchen conflicts can expose relationship fault lines that feel elemental. When we talked again, I asked them about the ways in which they weren't as happy as they appeared to be. They spoke to me on Zoom from Agnes's office, which she had turned into a kind of magical kindergarten: bright stars, circular mirrors, and L.E.D. lights hung from ropes wrapped in yarn of different colors; the walls were covered in fabrics featuring flowery blobs; a table had large polka dots. "It's not like this thing that we do, which is constantly talk about philosophy, is a happy activity," Arnold told me. "It's just as difficult and problematic and fraught an activity as what I take it many couples would do together."

"I guess I would go even a little further than Arnold in saying that this territory is pretty often painful," Agnes said. She was sitting at her desk, wearing a pink dress with large llamas on it. Arnold had pulled up a chair beside her. "There are certain reliable circumstances that will make it non-painful," she went on. "I can tell you exactly what they are: it's when Arnold is explaining Aristotle to me." She felt that no one could explain anything as well as he explained Aristotle. He was always patient, never defensive; his interpretations weren't tied up in his own ego. "The way we first

got together was by talking about Aristotle," she said, "and yet I just thought, Well, yeah, but that was incidental. I could have been teaching a class on anything. It turns out, no, it was actually really important that it was Aristotle."

In her marriage with Ben, Agnes had never wondered whether the relationship was going O.K. But, with Arnold, she said, "we've often had the kind of stress and struggle of, like, is this working?" She continued, "In that way, it's a less happy relationship than the one I had with Ben."

She added that, when she and Arnold fought, they could rely on Ben to provide an objective perspective. He would try to think through the problem from both of their points of view, rather than reflexively offering validation. (She said that she does the same for Ben when he discusses his own relationships.)

"The phrase coming to mind is 'immaculate divorce,' " I said. "A divorce without grief or sorrow or pain."

"I actually think that's a pretty good description," Agnes said. She had been taking notes throughout the conversation and wrote something down. "This has come up in conversations where we've had dark moments and Arnold is, like, 'Look, if we have to get divorced, we'll do it correctly.' " No one would feel trapped, morally or practically. She imagined marriage as a "bundle of services": along with love, there's security, friendship, child rearing, financial support, and assistance with one's work. "Arnold is sort of saying, 'Look, we can unbundle it.' Marriage has a lot of stuff packed into it, but if you knew what job each bit was doing, then, if you lose the marriage you could still potentially reconstitute the bits." She added, "The only barrier to our getting divorced is our wanting to continue to be married."

In an episode of "Scenes from a Marriage," the wife comes to ask the husband to sign divorce papers, and he, realizing that he is bound to the marriage in a deeper way than he'd known, locks his wife in his office and then strikes her in the face. Agnes and Arnold's marriage was set up so that no one would ever feel locked in. But Arnold also identified with the husband's blind panic at the prospect of losing the relationship that has given his life meaning. "It's not that we live without that feeling," he said. "It's that we are trying to manage that feeling."

"So it's like we're always breaking up?" Agnes asked.

"No, it's like the philosophy-is-a-preparation-for-death thing," he said, quoting one of Socrates' most famous lines. "Maybe our marriage is a preparation for divorce. The thing we're trying to do is approach that fact—that another person could be so deeply tied to the meaning of your life that, without the relationship, life might feel meaningless." He was uncomfortable with how dependent this made him feel, and he thought he should somehow overcome it. According to Aristotle, "Happiness belongs to the self-sufficient." He was striving to fulfill that ideal. "It's something that I'm aiming for, and it's something that I don't have yet," he said.

"I think a lot of our fights boil down to Arnold thinking he's already arrived at the final condition where he doesn't need me anymore," Agnes said, "and me trying to

point out to him that he's not as great as he thinks he is, so that he can see that he actually does still need me."

Arnold smiled slightly, his eyes cast down.

"And that actually is a way of understanding how marriage is a preparation for divorce," Agnes went on. "It's a preparation for the time when you won't need another person in order to think." She said that maybe that would be the title of her book about marriage: "Marriage Is a Preparation for Divorce." She had written the line down in her notebook.

"It's this idea that we want marriage to have a point," Arnold said. People talk about the aim of their careers, but they don't use that sort of vocabulary for marriage. "When Socrates says that philosophy is a preparation for death, he's very clear that he doesn't mean you're supposed to commit suicide. It's just that there's some way in which philosophy could stand up to the task of making you able to deal with death when it comes."

"The corresponding claim," Agnes said, "would be that somehow the project of marriage would make you capable of being alone."

Sometimes, when Agnes discusses her marriage with Yelena Baraz, her best friend, Baraz gets frustrated by her philosophical approach. Agnes said, "I'm, like, O.K., what is jealousy? Am I entitled to feel it? Is there something I'm getting right in feeling this way?" Baraz wants to comfort her. "I feel like she's treating herself as a guinea pig or a case study," Baraz told me, "and I want to relate to her as a person I care about who is in distress." But Agnes is impatient with the "let's-get-through-the-next-fifteen-minutes kind of approach. The way that I think about it is: there's no other time when you could understand this thing. Devastating problems in your life can also be *interesting*, and they can interest you as they're happening to you and as they're causing you intense pain." When Baraz tries to look for a cure, "I'm, like, No," Agnes said. "This is my chance to understand it. This is the time when we can be serious about our lives."

Agnes eventually wants to write about unconventional family arrangements like hers, but she has also noticed that when people write about such topics they are both celebratory and defensive, as if they were trying to put a good face on it. She doesn't want to draw conclusions until she can "grasp the real thing in all its tragic splendor," she told me. When I asked about the nature of the tragedy, she sent me a list of sixteen points. "However many people you have, it is never enough" was the first point on the list. "One is not enough (this is part of the tragedy of monogamy), but neither is two, or three." She went on to describe how differently she and Ben and Arnold dealt with their fears of aging and death and their unspoken wishes for their children; the realization that honesty is often brutal and intolerable; the understanding that passion is unsustainable. She felt as if she were constantly trying to open their eyes to the tragic aspects of their lives, and they weren't seeing it. There was also the problem of equilibrium: each relationship settles into its own patterns, a set of interlocking arrangements based on each person's insecurities and needs, which become nearly

impossible to alter, even more so among three. “So many things get ‘let go of,’ ” she wrote, “rather than really resolved.”

I asked Agnes if there was a version of aspiration that takes the form of becoming a person who accepts what is good enough. Life is fragile and terrifying, and so much of it can be taken away. Can you aspire to know how to fully inhabit a relationship, a life, that feels like a plateau? “I think grateful acceptance can be loving, but I think exacting demands can also be loving,” she responded in an e-mail. “Marriage has an amazing PR team, for 2 decades it has been continuously telling me, ‘This is good, this is how it is supposed to be, this should count as enough, lots of people don’t get this much, you should accept this and move on to other concerns’—and I feel increasingly emboldened to say, ‘No thanks, I’d rather keep working and searching and striving.’ ” ⊠

Rachel Aviv is a staff writer at The New Yorker. She is the author of “Strangers to Ourselves: Unsettled Minds and the Stories That Make Us,” a finalist for the 2022 National Book Critics Circle Award.

Rachel Aviv
Agnes Callard's Marriage of the Minds
The philosopher, who lives with her husband and her ex-husband, searches for what one human can be to another human.
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