

The Philosophical Middle

The Middle with Jeremy Hobson

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On this encore episode of The Middle we explore the philosophical middle, and how philosophy can help veer us away from extremes in our daily lives. Jeremy is joined by Agnes Callard, a professor of philosophy at the University of Chicago and Stephen Asma, a professor of Philosophy at Columbia College Chicago.

Jeremy: Welcome to a special edition of The Middle. I'm Jeremy Hobson, and it is great to have you with us. Happy Thanksgiving. And if you're a regular listener to this show, you've heard me say that we're about bringing the voices of Americans in the geographic, political, and philosophical middle into the national conversation. This hour, as we dip into our archives, we're going to focus on that last one, the philosophical middle. What is it? What does it mean? Well, there's the middle way in Buddhism, there's Aristotle's golden mean, and there are other components of philosophical thought that urge people to... to avoid the extremes and find compromise. We're going to talk about that and more with two philosophers this hour.

So now to our topic this hour, the philosophical middle, what it is, and how we can weave philosophy into our politics and our daily lives.

Joining me this hour, Agnes Callard, professor of philosophy at the University of Chicago. Her new book is called *Open Socrates, The Case for a Philosophical Life*. Agnes Callard, welcome.

Agnes: Thank you. Thanks for having me.

Jeremy: And Stephen Asma is also with us, professor of philosophy at Columbia College, Chicago. You can also hear him on the Chinwag podcast, which he co-hosts with the actor Paul Giamatti. Stephen, welcome to you.

Stephen: Thanks for having me.

Jeremy: Let me first ask each of you how you would describe the philosophical middle. Agnes, I'll start with you.

Agnes: So in terms of ethical theories, I think what I would say is remarkable about philosophy is that it is a domain that's just very hospitable to extremism. So we have philosophers who deny the existence of the external world, deny that there are other minds, philosophers who are skeptics about Basically, anything you can possibly be a skeptic about, who have radically different conceptions of what a good life is and how you should live one. And all of those philosophers can kind of miraculously interact harmoniously and have productive conversations with one another, despite the fact that they occupy many different kinds of extremes.

Jeremy: Well, how do they do that? Where do they find the middle?

Agnes: I think it's in the norms of interaction. That is, they all agree on a set of norms about how to talk to one another.

Jeremy: Stephen, what do you think?

Stephen: Yeah, I like what Agnes is saying, because especially modern philosophy has this tendency to do these thought experiments that are quite extreme. But I think

the ancients, whether it's Aristotle or Confucius or the Buddha, and Plato too, they had a kind of suspicion and a kind of worry about extreme emotions and extreme beliefs. They felt that if you didn't sort of control your appetites and your emotions like anger and find some kind of moderation path, then you would be easily sort of manipulated by your own inner drives and sort of forces. So the idea you see in Plato's Republic is, how do you get it so that your reason will rule over your sort of emotions or your spirited part, which then they team up together against your appetites? And so there's this worry in the ancient world that your cravings, whether it's like for sex or chocolate cake or the latest TikTok video, that's gonna basically send you into a kind of spiral. So a lot of them saw the moderation in the middle way as the kind of life preserver, the raft that you could hold onto.

Jeremy: They recognized that their positions were extreme, even though they had them.

Stephen: Well, they saw extreme positions all around them, in religion, for example. mostly in religion and they thought of reason as a kind of, I mean, maybe we'd agree on this, Agnes, that they were naive about how powerful reason was and that it could. save us, but the Enlightenment project was that if you let your conspiracy theories fly, then you end up with a kind of chaotic, you know, you end up with a 30 years war and you end up with religious fighting and you end up with our contemporary, you know, a polarizing politics. So they thought reason was this middle territory that everyone shared. And if you could cultivate your rationality, you would stop these kind of overly dramatic passions.

Jeremy: Hmm, so taming the passion is important.

Stephen: Yeah, the Buddha, the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama is living in like the sixth century BC and he lived like his early part of his life, he was a rich kid. So he was a wealthy son of like, you know, landed gentry. And then he thought, he realized that everybody suffers from age and disease and disappointments. And so he leaves this wealthy, sort of life of privilege and he goes in totally the opposite direction. So then he starts living like a wandering mendicant. He's an ascetic. He doesn't eat much. He just practices yoga all day long. He starves himself meditating, but eventually he almost drowns like in the Ganges River and he's fished out of there and then he resolves, okay, I've tried both extremes. I've lived like a rich opulent lifestyle and I've lived this life of self-denial and these don't get you anywhere. So he says, I'm now gonna live the middle way, which is a technical term for Buddhism. It means like avoid the extremes, not just in terms of wealth, but also in terms of knowledge and metaphysics and all this other stuff. So it's a nice, I think Buddhism really clings to the middle.

Jeremy: Yeah.

Stephen: Should be your patron St. here, the Buddha.

Jeremy: Maybe we should change the logo of the show. Agnes, what about the golden mean from Aristotle? Can you just tell us briefly about that? What is that?

Agnes: It's not a principle that's meant to regulate ethical theories. It's a principle about the kind of character that you should have, and the idea is that to be virtuous

is to inhabit a middle condition between two vices, so that a courageous person is not falling into the excess of cowardice, but is also not falling into the excess of rashness, of being like too bold. But even there, when Aristotle describes the mean, he says it's the middle condition in accordance with *Orthos logos*, the correct account, correct reason. And there's a sense in which for Aristotle, as for pretty much all of his sort of contemporaries and his descendants, and certainly for Plato and Socrates, his kind of ancestors, there is a kind of primacy of reason as having the role of determining what this middle course is. He didn't think it was obvious. He didn't think you just somehow average together the worst kind of cowardice with the worst kind of rashness, and you'll get this perfect golden mean in the middle. He thinks that you have to use the power of reason to bring the middle state to light. And so I do think that thinkers like Aristotle and Plato, maybe Plato more so than Aristotle, had a huge amount of faith in the power of reason. And they were in that way extremists about that claim. That is, they didn't think you'd be able to find the middle way except by understanding it.

Jeremy: Now, when you talk about these different philosophies and trying to get to the middle, trying to find reason, trying to find the more rational approach, Agnes, when you look at the country today, It does seem like in many cases in our media and our politics, we're moving in the opposite direction. We're getting more toward the extremes, less with a common set of facts. Do you agree with that or what do you think is going on in our society right now?

Agnes: I think that's a really hard question to answer. And one of the striking things about the world we live in is how ready people are to pronounce confidently on where things are going, which is like, it's just like an incredibly complicated math problem. How are things going? You have to choose what to pay attention to. It does feel to me like right now, everything is very loud. There are a lot of loud voices and they're kind of all yelling at the same time. I would separate the question about polarization from a second question about whether we can have rational dialogue. To me, those are really different questions for the reason that I gave earlier, which is that philosophy can be very polarized. People can adopt very extreme positions, and that doesn't mean that everyone is shouting and nobody can talk to each other. In fact, it facilitates people. It facilitates interesting conversations. In the same way as you might, in many contexts, we like polarization. If you know that you can see two movies, and one of those movies Everyone kind of says it's okay. And the other movie, it's like you either love it, it's your favorite movie ever, or you hate it. Which one do you want to see? Maybe you want to see the second one where you love it or you hate it, right? It's not terrible if something is polarizing. Polarization by itself is not necessarily a problem. What's a problem is when those polarized positions become structured as a kind of war where one side is trying to defeat the other. Instead of a situation where people use the fact that they have very different vantage points to their advantage in an inquiry, which is what we're trying to do in philosophy. So I think what we're seeing today with just the very many loud voices is there's a bunch of conversations

that we're sort of trying to have, but we're failing to have them. It's hard to know, that's what I was getting at the beginning, it's hard to know which aspect of that to emphasize. Is it really bad because we're failing to have them, or is it kind of good because we're sort of trying to have them? We've just been the beneficiaries of a bunch of communication technology that makes it, at least in principle, kind of feasible to think in terms of having this big national conversation, and then all we hear is a bunch of loud voices. But I find it hard to assess that situation.

Jeremy: You say we've been the beneficiaries. I guess in broad strokes, we have benefited from technology, but in some ways you could say we are the victims of this new.

Agnes: Right, we're the recipients. We're the recipients. We're the recipients of a bunch of technology. The jury is still out as to how we choose to use it.

Jeremy: Yeah. Well, stand by because in a moment we're going to talk about how philosophy applies to our politics these days, but as we go to break. Listen here to the British philosopher, Bertrand Russell, talking in 1959 about the lessons he would want to impart on future generations. Love is wise. Hatred is foolish. In this world, which is getting more and more closely interconnected, we have to learn to tolerate each other. We have to learn to put up with the fact that some people say things that we don't like. We can only live together in that way. But if we are to live together and not die together, we must learn a kind of charity and a kind of tolerance which is absolutely vital to the continuation of human life on this planet. Bertrand Russell, whose English is so proper, he makes King Charles sound like a commoner. Stay with us. More about the philosophical middle coming up. This is The Middle. I'm Jeremy Hobson. This hour, we're focusing on the philosophical middle and talking about what we can learn from philosophy and apply to our lives politically and socially. I'm joined by Agnes Callard, professor of philosophy at the University of Chicago, and Stephen Asma, professor of philosophy at Columbia College, Chicago. Stephen, you've written about Donald Trump and Trumpism in a philosophical way, not really making judgments about it, but just looking at it as objectively as possible. What do you make of Trump's dominance of our politics?

Stephen: Oh God, okay. We may need several more shows, but I was sort of making a general comment about my own background is in philosophy of biology, and I sort of look at things through an evolutionary perspective. I think in many ways, politics for me has to be understood in terms of the larger question of human evolution and cooperation. So I look at somebody like Trump and I see that he appeals to certain parts of the human being, all of us, which is somebody who has a sense of certainty, direction, mission. Even if you don't believe that he can deliver on any of those things, he represents a classic straw man I'm sorry, strong man, which might be a straw man as well. But that's sort of a— it's oftentimes the case that when there's chaos, people will give over their freedoms to somebody that has a kind of authoritarian approach. I lived in Cambodia for a while. After the Cambodian Khmer Rouge and after the Civil War, people were willing to hand over a lot of their freedoms to the prime minister, Hun

Sen. And he has held power there for over 30 years. And it's possible that somebody like Trump fulfills that need when people are feeling unstable. But I think what's happening is that the media, for example, also hijacks human nature. So we have an outrage media that hijacks the human attention towards threats. So we key in on things that cause fear and are threatening. So it's no accident that the media basically gives us two stories, like you're either with us or you're against us. Because it's not just that the media is out to get us, they're just simply hijacking a human system of attention, and human beings evolved to survive. So they attend to things that are fearful, and if you keep feeding them fear, they will keep tuning in. And so that's sort of the approach that I have about politics and media.

Jeremy: Well, and Agnes, it kind of gets to what you were saying a moment ago about sort of having such certainty about your position.

Agnes: Trump feels not so foreign to me as a kind of scholar of the ancient world. There were just a lot of tyrannical personalities and figures who achieved what they achieved, I think, because they were good at appealing to people. They were good at getting the people to set them, set them up as a tyrant. That's how Plato would put it. That was a common figure. And in fact, it was, there's a dialogue in which Socrates is asked, but look, isn't that what everyone secretly wants? Don't we all secretly want to be Trump? Don't we all secretly want to rule the world in a way where we are not subject to the usual constraints of the law or morality? And the person that he's talking to just thinks it's obvious that's what everyone wants. Most of us can't get it. And maybe we admire Trump because he's getting the thing we want, or maybe we hate him because he's getting the thing we secretly want, but we all agree that that's secretly, deeply what we would want. And Socrates says, No. If you're asking me whether I admire this tyrant, he's not asked about Trump, obviously, but he's being asked about a certain tyrant in his world. He's like, well, what I want to know about him is how does he stand with respect to justice and injustice? That is, is he a good or a bad person? I need to know that before I can admire him or not. And I think Socrates thought we really could get our bearings in that way. That is, we could educate ourselves into a position where we would learn not to admire people who were unjust, but that took philosophy. It took philosophical work to educate ourselves out of that. And so that's the thought I often have. If Socrates were alive today, he would... I think the thing I could say about him is he wouldn't be jealous of Trump, which is not a thing I'm sure I can say about anybody else, but I feel sure that I could say that about Socrates and his religious certainty. It has to do with like, you can be very certain of things and you can be wrong. And if you're certain of things where they're moral claims and you're wrong about them, then you might be in a very bad way and be unaware of it. That's what Socrates was worried about.

Jeremy: Stephen, is there a philosophical basis for democratic politics right now? Do you see anything in a similar way to how the Democrats act philosophically?

Stephen: I thought you were asking about sort of democracy small D, but you're asking about the party and the party.

Jeremy: Right.

Stephen: Well, God, there is a kind of, just sort of going off of what Agnes was pointing out, there is a kind of obvious tyrant, which is in the case of one person who's achieved a kind of... outsized power. And as Plato and many of the ancients would agree, that person might look like they're happy because they have so much power, but inside psychologically, they're very distressed. They're constant. It's like a gangster movie, like you watch, you know, *Goodfellas* or something. It looks great until you look at how paranoid and freaked out they are in their minds. And so that's sort of against the sort of centralized authoritarian tyrant, but there's also a tyranny of ideas. And what I think the left is good at— and I don't mean this as a compliment— but they're good at making an ideology that you must conform to. And if you don't conform to that ideology, you're considered either a racist, or a bigot, or otherwise some degenerate deplorable. They're very good at formalizing this nest of litmus test ideas. And it becomes its own kind of tyranny. You can't identify it so clearly like, oh, that's the guy. But you feel very distinctly like, I better not share this idea at work because all these lefties are going to crucify me. And that's a common problem in the academy where it's dominated by the left.

Jeremy: Was the world of philosophy, Agnes, touched by the kind of cancel culture that occurred a few years ago?

Agnes: I think touched is an understatement. It's like deeply shaped by it in the ways that Stephen was just saying. That is, it's not coming from the outside. The message is coming from inside the house. I think it's a really nice point about tyrannical ideology, and I had never thought of it that way, that insofar as you get a discipline where there is a fair amount of political agreement, among people in the discipline, and that's true for philosophy as it is for all of academia, then at least it's not going to be true for all of philosophy, but the parts of philosophy that kind of touch on politics, so political philosophy or ethics or whatever, there is going to be this kind of deep sensitivity to having your examples come out on the right side. And so it's not at the level of, here's a thing I'm afraid to say. It's slightly worse than that. It's like you don't even think of saying the thing you're afraid of. You're not even afraid of saying it because you're so fully indoctrinated into the way that people like you talk.

Jeremy: Yeah, I was just talking to a political science professor the other day who said he used to ask his students at the beginning of the class to kind of talk about what's going on in the news. And they're so afraid to say anything right now that he doesn't even do that anymore.

Stephen: That's sad, really.

Jeremy: It is sad. It is sad. We heard Bertrand Russell talking a moment ago about tolerance, Stephen, tolerating other people, even when they disagree, because we're so interconnected now. How do we get more of that, especially in our politics these days, to tolerate people whose ideas are dissimilar?

Stephen: Yeah, I think there is a, because things are so polarized now, there's a sense that if you're in the middle, that you must be some kind of coward and you just don't feel strongly about your views and that, you know, it's a position of weakness. I think this is a huge mistake. There's a wonderful tradition that Bertrand Russell's drawing on there. It goes back to people like Erasmus. and In Praise of Folly where it's okay to not know. It's all right to say, I need more information. I haven't made-up my mind about this. That teaches you a kind of what philosophers would call sort of an epistemic humility or like an intellectual humility. You know, if you look at Erasmus or you look at a lot of stuff that Bertrand Russell writes, it shows you that you should not be very confident about your views because knowledge is such a, It's just fraught with doubt and skepticism. And exactly when you think you have the truth, then you learn, oh, you were totally wrong about that, even in the sciences and physics. So people should just learn to hold their ideas a little more lightly. And when you do that, it tends to give you a little more charity towards other people's views instead of just damning them. And so that's the threat of dogmatism. And I feel like philosophy can provide some helpful, there's too much skepticism when you don't know what to do or say or think, but healthy skepticism is just sort of, I don't know, leavening your views with a little humility.

Jeremy: I was lucky enough during college to take a class with Elie Wiesel, the Nobel Peace Laureate Holocaust survivor, and he would quote, I believe a philosopher who said, Trust those who seek the truth, distrust those who found it, which I thought was just a great line. Agnes, you know, if you listen to politicians these days and they talk about the willingness to compromise, the thing that they'll say in the next breath is, but I, you know, I'm going to stand firm in my beliefs when I need to. Is it possible to do both of those things at the same time?

Agnes: To both compromise and stand firm with respect to the very same things? No, I don't think so. I actually think there's a real problem here, like that Wiesel quote, Trust those who seek the truth, but don't trust those who found it, like on the face of it, that's just kind of nonsense. If it matters for them to seek it, it'd be even better if they found it. Now, the way I think we're supposed to read that is, don't trust those who claim they found it, right? If they actually found it, yes, you should trust them. And so I think that this reveals like kind of, I kind of disagree with Russell and with Wiesel in that way, that I don't think tolerance is the highest value. I don't think compromise is the end point, is the goal. Compromise is the means and tolerance is like how we get through a rough patch. But the word I would prefer to use is patience. And that's because I think these questions where we're trying to figure out the answer, they're really important, and it's not okay that we disagree about them. And there's a way in which the attitude of tolerance can trivialize the disagreement. So I have a colleague who reports that with her students, when they talk about really charged topics, The students all say to one another, Your opinion is really valid. That was a valid opinion. And she says to them, Wait a minute, you disagree with this other person. Like, I wanna hear it. All they wanna say is your opinion is valid, right? So they're scared to

disagree. They want to just tolerate. And I think that that can lead us, we can kind of stall out on the seeking. that Wiesel was pointing us towards. We can stall out on the inquiry. So I guess the way that I see the value of compromise is that it has to serve a higher end of like, ultimately, I'm going to get where I want by compromising. The compromise itself is not a perfect instantiation of what I want. It's a compromise. And similarly, instead of tolerance, I would say, look, I'm going to have patience with people who disagree with me because it could be that I'm the one who's wrong and they're going to show me that I'm wrong. I'm not just tolerating their views because again, I might be the one who's wrong. So tolerance would be the wrong attitude. But it's that we're in the middle of a journey, not at the end of it.

Jeremy: Well, and Stephen, let me throw one other thing at you that probably a lot of our listeners have experienced, which is people who on social media where a lot of the conversation takes place these days, they just start unfriending or getting rid of the people who say things that they don't want to hear. So then they end up even in more of a bubble where they only reinforce the beliefs that they already had.

Stephen: Yeah, that's a common problem. And I think it's we have to we have to change that view about beliefs really, and about, I suppose, even about the ideas about the truth. It's very common for family members to even like break apart just because they disagree about politics. When I was a kid, nobody did that. You would disagree about politics, but there was a sense, there was a shared world as well. And you could exit your political bubble and enter this shared world together, which I think is harder to find. because we're increasingly living in this simulacrum all the time, this online world of extremes. And even just, you know, you have to understand who the stakeholders are. You might have a very hardcore Republican and a very hardcore Democrat, but then maybe they meet at their kids, you know, fencing or little league game, and they share like a conversation, they realize the other person's not a monster, there's a sense in which these, like, I think they're sometimes called third spaces, by social science, they're decreased maybe, and that they act as a wonderful curative to some of the partisan sort of living in a bubble problem. I also think there's a kind of maybe a utopian sense about the truth, which is when you have it, all of the truths are going to live together with each other. And I'm sort of more of a conservative and think that actually what happens is it's not like you're right and they're wrong, they're right and they're wrong. Oftentimes it's a battle between two good things. They just are mutually exclusive. And that's a difficult thing for us to accept because we're all kind of utopian, liberal-minded. We think everyone's going to be able to share and get along and it's going to be a kind of, Kumbaya thing ultimately when we get there, but ultimately some of the good things for my family are not going to be good things for your family. That's just the way it is from my point of view. I'm sort of influenced by a philosopher named Isaiah Berlin, who thinks about the good as not absolutely opposed to the evil or bad, but rather politics is about trying to balance and find coexistence between goods, but ultimately there's friction and contest and conflict.

Jeremy: Agnes, what do you think about that? People who sort of go into their information bubbles or they just, they'll take any fact or news item and just use it to bolster their preconceived notions about something.

Agnes: I'm inclined to think that when we frame a person that way, we're just not understanding them very well. That is, that's a caricature of a person. And if they were here, we'd have an interesting conversation about that. So we're repeating the problem by thinking about it that way. But I think I think it's interesting, this Berlin thought, this thought that conflicts of interest are final or something. That's really very deeply different from the way people thought in the ancient world, where they believed in the unity of the virtues. So this is Plato, this is Aristotle, they all believed that it's not gonna end up that the courageous thing to do is an unjust thing to do. And so if... courageous thing for me to do would be unjust to you, it would be bad for your family or something. I'm not gonna, it won't be courageous, that won't be the good thing for me to do. I guess in that way I'm a naive ancient thinker in that I believe in the unity of the virtues. I think it's sort of incoherent that the good could be divided from itself in that way. However, I think conflicts of interest are very much endemic to ignorant creatures, so that's what we are. It's not that we understand the good, but it's conflicting with itself. It's that our understanding, we're messed up, and our understanding is poor, and so it looks as though the good contradicts itself. So that's the situation we're in, and that's why we're bad at talking to each other, is that we're ignorant.

Jeremy: Well, on that note, let's take another listen to the British philosopher Brian McGee talking about the Enlightenment thinker John Locke. Here he is talking about that.

Agnes: One thing that I admire, in fact, I think the thing I admire most in Locke's political philosophy is the clarion call for tolerance. And at least one of his arguments for that is based on his insistence that, after all, we don't really know all that much in this life. We are wrong about a lot of things. A great deal is mysterious to us. And therefore we are not justified in imposing our opinions on others by force.

Jeremy: Stephen, as we go to break, what do you make of that?

Stephen: Yeah, I think that's right. I mean... I can't figure out how to grow good tomatoes in my garden. I can't even get along with my neighbor, but I'm supposed to like have the right ideas about international policies. People think they know a lot more than they do. I think we should accept this sort of general skepticism and tolerance, yeah.

Jeremy: That is philosopher Stephen Asimov, also speaking with philosopher Agnes Callard. We will be right back with more of The Middle. This is The Middle. I'm Jeremy Hobson. This hour we're focusing on the philosophical middle and how that can improve our politics and our daily lives. I'm joined by Stephen Asma, professor of philosophy at Columbia College Chicago, and Agnes Kallard, a professor of philosophy at the University of Chicago. So Agnes, your book is called Open Socrates,

The Case for a Philosophical Life. What does it mean to live a philosophical life in the modern context, and how do we do that?

Agnes: It's living your life as though you don't know how to live it. As though the project of your life, we're trying to find out. So your life is lived in pursuit of knowledge. The way you pursue knowledge is by talking to people. Because since you don't already know how to do it, you can't guide yourself. And it's a specific kind of conversation. It's the kind of conversation where when you say something wrong, the other person corrects you.

Jeremy: But I think of as you get older in life, you want to know how to live your life. You want to say, okay, I've got this down. I've figured this out. I'm doing this properly. This works for me. You're saying that we should continue to question?

Agnes: I think it's going to be, this is going to be a really hard sell to old people. And they're probably not going to embrace it. But if I get the young people, they might stick with it.

Jeremy: Stephen, what do you think? How much do you incorporate philosophy into your daily life?

Stephen: A lot, I hope. I try to do what Agnes is describing, although I also think philosophers... from the time of Socrates down to the present, oftentimes are very much in their head, and they're very much about the language and the conversation. So for them, the meaning of life is in this conversation. And the tradition really embraces this. It's a very conversational tradition. But I myself want to remember the body. And I think the body is extremely important in living the good life. And there's been a sort of movement in the last, I don't know, 10, 20 years called embodied cognition. And a lot of the way we understand the world is through the body, through making art, through things like dance, through investigation with the body. And a lot of these things can't be expressed directly in a conversation. They don't submit to language very well. Language... is sort of like just the top part of how the mind works, but there's all this mammalian problem-solving ability that we have. And I think somebody like Aristotle understood this. So he said, You can't just talk your way to the good or the right. You have to develop habits. So there's kind of behaviors that you have to sculpt and model and always be changing your habits, informed by conversation and discourse. But I think also just creativity and doing something creative is also a kind of meditation and it's a kind of philosophy, but a lot of philosophers haven't really noticed that. They'll sort of dismiss that as a kind of aesthetic exercise, not a way of gaining knowledge or investigating the world. But anybody who does art knows that they are also investigating the world.

Jeremy: Agnes, have you lived by what you write about in your book, *Living A Philosophical Life*?

Agnes: I try to. I think it's very demanding and you can't do it all the time. And I agree that sometimes the body calls you to pay attention to it. And maybe I just view those moments slightly differently from Stephen. I don't embrace them like I wish my body would shut up so I could do philosophy, but I can't make it shut up all the

time. And so there's just, the way that I see it is we live lives of leisure. relative to almost everyone in human history that is quite wealthy. Everyone who's listening to this show has the leisure to listen to it. And we have the leisure to be here and to sit and talk. And philosophy is an answer to the question, what do you do with leisure? That is, what do you do when you're not constantly worrying about how you're going to survive? when you've freed up some time. And Socrates's answer, I agree with Steve, it's different from Aristotle's, but Socrates's answer to that question was, well, maybe you use that time to figure out what you actually should be doing. And that means that, I guess, in a concrete way, in everyday interactions, what you do is when someone is talking to you, listen for the criticism in what they're saying. People often present a criticism in a way where you could hear it as like just an observation or just a right? But you intentionally hear it as a criticism and you welcome it. You respond joyfully to that. And when you do that, you're kind of giving a signal to the other person that you're open to inquiry. And I think Socrates thought that's the most fundamental way in which human beings can help each other, is we can help each other think.

Jeremy: Stephen, do you think we do that enough, that we are open to that kind of criticism or even that we think philosophically that we use our free time to think about things as opposed to just doom scrolling on Instagram or something like that.

Stephen: Yeah, no, I think that's right. I mean, as Agnes was describing it, I was just realizing how hard it is to do what she is suggesting. But it's the core idea in Socratic method, which is you can't have a deep conversation unless the participants are willing to engage in something that might damage the ego slightly in the conversation. I would say our Western I've lived on and off in China and taught in China and the Confucian tradition which I have a great respect for does not like questioning authority and it's not the model they say like the authority is contained in the in the the elder son and the father and it's a sort of top-down authoritarian so you don't challenge authority and And you master wisdom by understanding the tradition you're in. But in the West, from Socrates, we're taught to challenge authority, and that authority has to justify itself through some kind of rational explanation. And even though I think today we don't do that very much, it's very much part of the Western tradition. We could get back to it, but at the moment, the media is not fostered. I mean, this show is a good example of how it could be done, but it's a rarity in the media to find a conversation like this.

Jeremy: Agnes, When you think about the strands of philosophy, the big ones, existentialism, nihilism, hedonism, stoicism, etc., which one do you think is most prevalent in the United States? We just heard about China and Confucianism, but what about in the U.S.?

Agnes: I think what's most prevalent is confusion and inconsistency. I think people will be hedonist in one moment when that serves them and they'll pull up stoicism when that makes them feel good about themselves. They will vacillate between all of these positions and they, I mean, Socrates thought the basic problem with people was not that they were stubborn. It's not that they're dogmatic. It's that they're unable

to stick to any claim for more than like 30 seconds. and that what they will do is they will cover their vacillation over with language. So, if I don't like the fact that you are changing yourself and amending what you do to please other people, I'll call you a conformist. If I like it, I'll call you cooperative. I'll just choose the word based on whether I like it or I don't like it. I'll call it freedom of speech when I like it, and I'll call it by a variety of bad names when I don't like that kind of speech. And there is no position that I'm consistently adopting. I am at the mercy of my whims, and I'm at the mercy of what I can say to please the people around me. And that's just totally inconsistent. There's no theory that underwrites it all along from beginning to end.

Jeremy: Stephen, Agnes loves when you criticize and disagree with her. So do you agree with what she just said?

Stephen: Well, here I have to say this is, what's funny about what Agnes just said is that it sort of describes how Plato talks about democracy. that in this, in the order of states, like the one that's just next to being the worst, tyranny is the worst, but the second to that, he thinks is democracy because of the problem Agnes talked about. Since everybody, this is basically what the federalists were sort of arguing this too. They think everybody is Homer Simpson. So Like you see something shiny and you run in that direction. And then you see something over here and you run in that direction. So it is a problem, I think. It depends on how pessimistic you are as to how big the problem is. But I think it's true that human beings are easily manipulated and easily distracted. And now we have these phones. and these social networking sites that are really keeping us completely distracted. And it keeps us from having a kind of like a program or a purpose, what Aristotle would call a teleological orientation in life. And the existentialists talked about this too. We are just buffeting back and forth from one stimulus to another, and that's sort of how modern life is. So you almost have to do things like have a media diet, stop for like a week, get offline. As the kids say, go touch grass. You have to have these measures by which you can reconnect to real life instead of just being bounced around because of these appetites that we have.

Jeremy: Do the kids say, go touch grass?

Stephen: Yeah, that's what my son says. He says, go touch grass means you've been online too long. You need to go out into nature.

Jeremy: Yes, yes. Something that you write about, Agnes, is the importance of symbols in our understanding and judgment of people, like a red MAGA hat, for example, or a pride flag. How does that fit into what we're talking about here?

Agnes: I think symbols are... are like automated thinking. I think that we become a little symbol mad sometimes. That is, we want to automate more and more, and especially as we get involved in larger and larger conversations with more and more voices, and there's just so many things going on, we kind of want these like anchor points. And so what happens is that a person can become a symbol. like Trump, right? Or a MAGA hat, a hat, which normally you could respond all different ways to a hat, right? But if it's a MAGA hat, there's kind of only two responses you're allowed to have. That's automated responses. even a concept like abortion, right? You might

have thought, well, there are many different responses you could have to the concept of abortion. No, we've automated it so that there's two that you're allowed to have. So I think that this kind of symbolic thinking, the heavy use of symbols and using people and ideas and sentences, freedom of speech, all those things as symbols, That's a kind of way to create some stability in a discourse, but it heavily inhibits our ability to think, because we don't want to automate all of those responses.

Jeremy: Is it new?

Agnes: I don't know. I do seem to see more of it over time. So I suspect that it is increasing. And you would sort of predict that it would increase. as we get this kind of communicative mayhem that we don't know how to sort out.

Stephen: I would argue that it's actually quite old too. I think it is like ramped up now more than ever, but I think the way that an image gets right at your emotional, you know, lexicon almost faster than language does, I think it's quite old. Like there's always been this hostility towards iconography in the, Jewish and Muslim tradition, and even in the Christian tradition, even in science, people were afraid of images because they tilted you one way because of your emotions, and it could be the wrong way. But it is, it's sort of stronger than ever at the moment with memes, meme culture.

Jeremy: And you think that that's just because we want to simplify an otherwise very complicated world. We're trying to make it easier for us to digest and understand.

Agnes: Basically, yes. And the tools that we might otherwise use if that world weren't coming at us in such a weird medium, namely like conversation, is not available. So we've got to use something else.

Jeremy: So Stephen, if our listeners are hearing this and they say, I want to take a more philosophical approach to my life, what would you suggest that they do?

Stephen: Sort of some obvious stuff would be think more critically about what you're consuming. Everybody sort of knows that, but it would be really valuable for people to really study a little logic. You can learn a lot of informal logic anywhere, like YouTube, anywhere, but you can start to see what at least fallacies are. And if you know what some of the classic fallacies are, slippery slope fallacy, a false dichotomy fallacy, you can start to spot them in all the media that you're consuming, and that gives you just a little bit of distance on what you're consuming, and that's always a good thing from the philosophical point of view. But it's also this kind of evaluation of your own thinking. And again, I'm very influenced by people like David Hume and the skeptics of that tradition, which said that you can't get rid of the emotions. They're oftentimes going to be leading you. But you can educate them so that they don't give in to your worst tendencies. It's very easy, for example, to wind somebody up with fear. But there's many other emotions that the media could be working with and that we could be working with, like the feeling of wonder or the sublime. That's something you can inculcate in your own life by just trying to focus on it rather than doom-scrolling fear all the time. But you have to make a conscious decision to do that.

Jeremy: Agnes, what do you think? What can people do to take a more philosophical approach to their lives?

Agnes: I'm much more skeptical about our ability to cure ourselves. My inclination is to say that, yes, it may be good to do less doomscrolling or learn some logic, but the thing that's really going to get inside your head and reshape the way you think about something is probably going to be another person if you let them in. I guess an alternative thought is just a kind of reorientation towards the people around you, that they're a kind of incredible resource that you're underusing. The people around you have all sorts of thoughts about the ways you go wrong and they're scared to tell you them because they're scared you'll hate them if they do that. If you can somehow create a new mode of interaction where you make it clear that you're going to be grateful, there's a lot you could learn.

Jeremy: And Stephen, let me ask you from the other side here. There may be people that listen to this and say, why are you talking about this? Why are you talking about what's happening right now? This is so overly intellectual. What do you say to people who feel that philosophy is not connected to our modern lives?

Stephen: Well, that's kind of an American tradition, isn't it? The dismissal of the intellectual. The only philosophy that America produced as a sort of identifiable movement is called pragmatism, which tells you something about the American psyche. I guess I feel like this is wrongheaded and that you can't solve even practical problems without a little bit of philosophy. And philosophy is extremely valuable in all fields, whether it be public policy, policing policy, legal questions. Those are places where philosophers actually shine. If you look at people who study philosophy, kids who come out with a BA or they go on to a master's, they do well in any areas that require sort of conceptual analysis. So some people will talk about philosophy as being a kind of conceptual engineering. And that works really well in many disciplines, including our most pressing social problems. So I just think there's a kind of anti-intellectualism about philosophy, which I just think comes from a kind of naivete and I'm not a fan of it. What can I say?

Jeremy: I'm sure, I'm sure. Agnes, let me just finally come back to Socrates and your book is about Socrates. You've studied Socrates extensively. He was sentenced to death because of his beliefs. Are you worried at all as people worry about sort of the freedom of speech right now in this country about not maybe people, philosophers being sentenced to death, but just a pulling back of the freedom people have to speak out, think what they think, say what they think.

Agnes: I guess we're a lot more free than Socrates was and than the people in Socrates' world were because we have protections that didn't exist, and yet we still don't do it. So I feel like I don't take intellectualism as an insult. I'm an intellectualist. I believe that the highest thing we can do with our lives is to engage in intellectual pursuits, and it's a great privilege to be able to spend any of your time doing that, but that we recoil from it, and we're terrified of it, and we make it clear to the people around us, don't go there, or I might react poorly. So yes, I'm very worried about the fact that we don't make use of the freedom that Socrates didn't even really have, and

he still made use of it. But I'm not sure that our current political situation is that we can blame our cowardice on that. I think it runs deeper.

Jeremy: That is Agnes Callard, a professor of philosophy at the University of Chicago. Her new book is called *Open Socrates, The Case for a Philosophical Life*. And Stephen Asma is a professor of philosophy at Columbia College Chicago and co-host of the Chinwag podcast. So interesting to talk to both of you. Thank you so much for joining us.

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