‘The worst echo chamber is your own mind’

The unconventional life of philosopher Agnes Callard

Angus Cowell, Agnes Callard

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Agnes Callard is a professor of philosophy at the University of Chicago. Her latest book, Open Socrates: The Case for a Philosophical Life, is an argument about how we shouldn't take cultural norms and rote-learned advice for granted. Instead, we need to talk with others, regularly, about the reasons for our actions. She joins Angus Colwell to discuss the book, and her life as a philosopher.

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`https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wrZORO_Mfkc`

Preview

Agnes Callard: I'm not saying like, oh, well, the minute you decide to get divorced, now is the time to question everything. Now is the time. It's the hardest to question everything. Arnold sometimes says your theory of marriage is marriage is a preparation for divorce. And I kind of think that that's right.

Introduction

Interviewer: Hello and welcome to spectator TV. I'm Angus Cowell. Should we be living life? More philosophically, what would that mean? How might we do it? And would the father of Western philosophy be any help to discuss all this? I'm joined today by Agnes Callard, who has written brilliantly a book called Open Socrates. The case for a philosophical life. Agnes, thank you very much for joining us. Your book is called the case for the philosophical life. So could you could you make the case? For the philosophical life briefly.

Living a Philosophical Life

Agnes: Yeah. Maybe the first premise is something like. Anything that you ever do, you're going to do it better if you understand what it is that you're doing. But a key component to what it is that you're doing is why it is that you're doing it. And we have a lot of reasons for things that we're doing that are kind of sitting there almost in the back of our minds or in the corner of our eye. And we don't quite know why we're pursuing. Many the things we pursue to live a philosophical life is to keep those why questions open. To keep our attitudes to what we're doing inquisitive, where that primarily is a function of how we interact with other people. On the occasions that we have to inquire into those questions.

Interviewer: So would you say you're quite mistrustful of the the idea that's been expressed by Burke and several others that there is wisdom in the sort of habits that that have passed down from generation to generation, we shouldn't question them too much because they've they've evolved for a reason, you know.

Agnes: I think the claim that there's wisdom in them and the claim that we shouldn't question them, sort of contradict each other. That is, if there's wisdom in something, then the wisdom is something you can learn. But in general, we learn by questioning, like if you were trying to learn some physics or some math, what you would do is like play with the equations you would. Question. And that's how learning works.

Socrates and the Power of Dialogue

Interviewer: Onto sort of playing and questioning. Let's sort of start with with Socrates, who this book is sort of pig 2 and and is very much about. Viewers will know that Socrates is sort of the father of Western philosophy is considered the father. Can you talk for a little bit about how do we know about him and from what we can gain from that, what kind of man? We'll see.

Agnes: Yeah, so he lived in the 5th century BC in Athens and he, you know, we know some biographical details. His father was a stone cutter. His mother was a midwife. We the way we know about him is primarily from three sources. Aristophanes, who's a comic playwright who wrote a play, sort of mocking Socrates. And then slightly later, Plato and Xenophon, who wrote dialogues which were sort of like plays but often written in the third person of Socrates, talking to some. Other guy or some? People, we also know that there were many, many other Socratic dialogues. That is, after Socrates died, this thing where you'd write a text of Socrates talking to some other person became a genre. The genre got created sort of spontaneously in response to the persona of Socrates, which tells you something about who he was. He was a shock to the system. He was the kind of guy you can't forget and the way that people tried to not forget him was to sort of. Reenact the way he lived his life. He himself did not

write anything down. He didn't write it down, his ideas or his arguments or whatever. So he's preserved through the writings of other people. But he's preserved really well if you just, like, compare him to other figures in the ancient world. Our record on Socrates is excellent.

Interviewer: There are two schools of thought on what we can know about Socrates, particularly through Plato. A lot of people think that Plato's sort of extrapolating himself and channeling himself into Socrates. Others think that Plato genuinely sort of loved Socrates and was trying to preserve his wisdom for for others, where, where do you stand on that?

Agnes: I think they're both true of different periods in Plato's life. So and here I'm just giving you the standard scholarly consensus, which is that early Plato, which is the dialogues that my book focuses on relatively earlier in his life in dialogues like the ladies, the comedies, the Mino, but also sort of the middle. Dialogues like the feet of the symposium, etc. Plato is in large part trying to present us with somebody, somebody that he encountered who he thought was extraordinary or world historical individual who developed like a new mode of being. But I do think that later, and I put the division roughly where the standard it's. It sounds weird, but it's in the middle of. In the after the first book of the Republic, basically is you start to get sort of more Plato's voice than Socrates even there. Plato's voice is put into a Socrates who behaves recognizably like Socrates, and in certain there are certain moments, even in the in the quite late dialogues, like the Thetis and the Philebus, where I feel like Socrates shines through. But I just think Plato did both. Of those things.

Interviewer: OK. Can we can we talk about the Socratic dialogue as a sort of mode of philosophy? How is it done?

Agnes: Yeah, so it works roughly like this. Socrates walks up to someone, or in general, they've already been introduced. That is not a stranger, but he's in some kind of encounter with that person. And Plato will usually do some work to sort of set it up. Like, how did this encounter happen? There might even be a frame, like one guy's telling another guy. Remember that time when somebody was talking to the other guy. OK. So there's going to be a frame, and there's going to be a little bit of. Sort of small talk. And then Socrates will find his way to what you might think of as like the sore point of that person's identity. So if that person is a general, he might end up asking them what is courage if they're a child like lysis, he might ask them. Do your parents really love you? If they are like Alcibiades, a guy who wants to rule the world, Socrates might ask what do rulers do? What do they pursue? If it's an orator, he might say what is oratory? Are you able to say it like, do you have the words? Are you able to speak so as to tell me what oratory is gorgeous? So what he's doing is he's asking people not just any old question, but in some way a question where they are committed to having deep knowledge about the answer to that question and then they pursue that answer. Usually what happens is that there's a few sort of unsatisfactory initial responses. Quite often, the very first response will be something like. Well, that's easy, Socrates, that's obvious. Anyone could give you an answer. There's no problem

answering that question sometimes, like all those in a row with one response and the minute we get something like that. And then gradually, what Socrates will do is kind of make clear to them what it is that he wants by way of an answer, which is not the thing that they initially thought he wanted so often. Like, let's say to youthful what is piety, youthful will be like, youthful is like a prophet. Piety is what I'm doing now, persecuting my father. It's it's a weird story. Maybe we'll get into it. And so I was like, no, I didn't want an example. I wanted to know what is it? What is the thing not? What's the definition of the word piety? What is the thing, the name of which is piety. OK. And then they kind of try to work towards an account and they come up against various stumbling blocks. And as they come up against those stumbling blocks, you start to get into view. The very possibility of looking for this thing that Socrates is looking for.

Interviewer: So this is. This is a social philosophy as well. This is a social way of doing philosophy or social.

Agnes: Yeah, it's a social. Activity language is a social activity, right? I mean first and foremost we use language to communicate and first and foremost we use it to communicate in person with each other. And philosophy is a form of communication, so it shows up. Yeah. In this communicative context, my book really pushes that angle. So what I argue is that all of those things are not accidental to the philosophical nature of the topic that Socrates discovered are really deep fact about certain forms of inquiry, certain kinds of questions that we want answers to. We can't look for those answers by ourselves. We actually need the help of the other person. And so a lot of I'm explaining a lot of what shows up in the dialogues by way of sort of Socratic humility and Socratic deference. As Socrates pointing us to the fact that he's a needy man. He is reliant on dependent on in the hands of people who are willing to answer his questions.

Interviewer: Questions. So the the image that people might have when they when they hear you arguing for living a philosophical life is emphatically not the kind that we might associate at first, which is the solitary philosopher in their bedroom with their head in their hands.

Agnes: Right. Exactly. So, you know, you might think the counterpart in a way to my book is Descartes meditations, right? Descartes, like, let me lock myself away in a room by myself and ponder except.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Agnes: Except he's writing a text to another audience and it's incredibly it is incredibly engaged and engaging with the audience that he's writing to. But basically, we do have from, I think **** Hart is one of the places we have this image of. The solitary philosopher. I think, Socrates. Kind of shows us that there's a problem with that, at least as far as a subset of the questions that you might want to inquire into our concern, namely, we have certain blind spots and we're not going to see our blind spots. That is when we sit by ourselves in a room, what we're going to do is affirm what we already think the worst echo chamber in the world is your own mind. And So what another person is, is an escape valve from being trapped in your mind.

Interviewer: Peter Singer, who's is quite sort of unfashionable now, once said that ethics is practical or it is. It is not ethics. What are what are some of the practical uses of the Socratic dialogue, do you think?

Agnes: Of the Socratic dialogue. So I mean in the last part of my book, I try to bring out the practical implications of Socratic intellectualism, which is sort of the view that you should live your life by way of dialogue. But maybe one way to think about the practical uses of the Socratic dialogue is to think. In in many conversations that you're in, maybe even most, there's a kind of space in those conversations that you're not exploring, that you're sort of leaving away. The conversation could open up. You're leaving that space to the side and. That's sort of the space of asking why at the right moment and. You could sort of do that. A little bit more in almost any interaction. You have to do it at the right time in the right way, and you know sometimes it's not going to work out as we see it didn't. It didn't always exactly work out for Socrates. But it's basically the practical upshot is that. Actually, the stuff we're already doing in our lives lends itself naturally to philosophy. And what the last part of the book is trying to show you is concretely exactly where. But I actually think it just generically applies even in areas I don't talk about, like conversations with your kids or with your best friend.

Interviewer: Yeah, in Britain we have we have sort of a long tradition of emotional suppression. And the sort of suspicion of philosophy that goes all the way back to. When Samuel Johnson kicked the stones, or a few, you know, Barkley, Barclays argument about the existence of the external world. Is it a failing if people are not living philosophically? It's that kind of attitude failing.

Agnes: Well, first of all, I would really separate emotional subtraction, suppression and the resistance to philosophy. Like, philosophy requires a little bit of emotional suppression, that is. Often, in order to like engage on a topic, and in particular, in order to engage with someone who's saying that you're wrong, you have to like, tell yourself to chill and to not get defensive and not have, like the emotional reactions like actually before this interview started as it was starting, I could like feel certain emotions coming up in me. I'm like, ready to be a bit defensive and I had to tell myself like. Though that's not gonna help you. It's not gonna help you think about answers to questions, right. So actually think a certain amount of emotional expression is part of philosophy. OK, so let's go to the second part. Like a tradition of being. Is it bad if people are in unphilosophical? I think many people think that about themselves. And in a way, I'm speaking to that in the person that is. I think that a lot of people. In the corner of their eye they see like. This thing that they're not doing, that they kind of feel they should be doing, they can't put a name to it, but. And that's why I start the book with Tolstoy. So you know, Tolstoy, in some ways the most successful human being who ever lived. Like he'd be on the list right in, just in, in kind of every respect. I mean, not just an incredible models, but in a role model for, like, all Russians, you know, he made, like, alphabet books for children. He had this, like, big household, lots of kids. He was a nobleman, but he was also cared about the fate of the peasantry. He

was like a cult leader. I mean everything, right? He was just. It's an amazing from a really young age. And you know, after he'd written war and peace and Anna Karenina. But. But don't worry, he's still gonna write amazing stuff later, right? Like he's, like, 50. He has this crisis where he's like, my life has no meaning. There's no point to anything. And nothing I've done is any value. And you. Just like, wait, Tolstoy can say. That he can worry about whether his life has any value if he. Can worry about it? All of us have to worry about. Right. And what he says is that he realized that there were these questions he was holding at Bay all along, that there was this existential crisis sort of looming for him that hit him at a certain point. And I think a lot of people feel either hit that crisis or they feel like it's waiting in the wings for them. And maybe. The richer we get, the more luxurious our lives get. The more free time we have, the greater the chances that we're not going to be able to hold that crisis at Bay with the thought. No, there's something I must urgently do now.

Interviewer: Would would you say that had he, you know that there's a quote, quote from him here that I've got where he said if an enchantress had come and offered to fulfill my desires for me, I wouldn't have known what to say, would you would you quote?

Agnes: Yes.

Interviewer: But would you say that had he really thought about it or really discussed it, sort of almost socratically, he would have known what to say. Absolutely. Do you think there is an answer out there? There was a belief system that was sort of secretly sustaining him and he was unaware of it. Ohh.

Agnes: No, I think. It's that if he had someone to talk about it, he could find the answers. So it's like.

Interviewer: OK.

Agnes: Like if you ask me if an enchantress could come to be and tell me and give me my deepest desires, like I've got some things to ask for and the things I have to ask for are the products of conversations that I've had that have made me like get into view. Like for instance, what are the things that are blocking me? From, you know, living the life I want to live, I have a conception of that. And so I have a thought about what I want to wish for. Look, I could be wrong, but I wouldn't have that if I didn't think. If I hadn't been able to. To think about what it is that I want and thinking about what I want is a conversational activity.

Interviewer: So you're you're with mill. Had a had a sort of thing quite about, but it's to be it's Socrates dissatisfied than a full satisfied you would agree with that.

Agnes: You know what's funny about that quote? I mean, it's of course. Mill, saying that is mill challenging his own view, right. So mills utilitarian and mill has this theory where it's like well, the point of life is utility where the most natural way to catch that at his happiness. But he is. He's just also a highly cultured man and and so it's it's a very Socratic moment in mill, right, because mill is like, yes, of course we're going for pleasure. But I mean, I have to make this distinction between higher and lower pleasures that I can't justify in terms of the foundational principle of my theory.

But I'm just going to do it. Because it seems true, because I'm going to be true to this insight and potentially sort of contradict my own basic principle and acknowledge that it's better to be Socrates, it's better to be dissatisfied and be unhappy. Have less. Utility. I think Socrates was happy, though. That is, Socrates was dissatisfied and he was happy. I think that there's there's such a thing is the best life, the best life is a life that you have. If you have knowledge and then you know what you're doing and then you always do the right thing. So what he did not live that life because he didn't have knowledge, but he lived the second best life, the second best life is the life lived towards knowledge or in the pursuit of knowledge. If you don't have it and you know the reason. The reason why I think Socrates has an explanation for why you'd rather be Socrates than well, yeah, than the pig, or certainly than the human being who doesn't. Who assumes that he knows a bunch of stuff that he doesn't know? Is that none of us wants the appearance of the good. We want the real good. Of course. Whatever appears to us to be good, we think, is the real good. And so we go after it. But our commitment is to going after the real good and Socrates, because he takes an inquisitive attitude because he doesn't assume that he knows what he doesn't know. He's able to live his life in pursuit of the real good.

The Nature of Knowledge vs. Opinion

Interviewer: Well, he, he, he. As you right, he believed that ignorance was the sort of stem of all problem. Is is the is his aim, truth or knowledge? I was sort of reading your book and and trying to separate in my mind what what was different between those two things are people when they philosophy. Should they be aiming for truths? Are there do you think truths that are out there that they can attain through discussion and query and rationalizing reasoning? Sorry. Well, what's the difference between truth and knowledge?

Agnes: There's a really important difference, so this comes to the fore towards the end of the dialogue, the Meno, where Socrates says is true opinion just as good a guide as knowledge, right? So. And he says, look. Let's say you knew the road to Larissa, right? Then you could go to Larissa. But I mean, if you just had a true opinion about the road, Larissa and you didn't have knowledge about it, but you just had a truth. You could also get to Larissa. And Mino was like, Oh yeah, I guess so. And Socrates says so is true opinion the same as knowledge? Are they just as good aminos like, well, true opinion might go away. Might not be stable. Or it might. Yeah, you might like, have it for one month. And and Socrates, yeah, but OK. But as long as. It sticks around. Is it as good? I mean, I was like, yeah, I guess own doctors. Like no, wrong, wrong answer, Socrates says. It's like the statues of Dedalus. So Dedalus was this mythical sculptor who made these statues that could move. And it would be amazing to own a statue of Dedalus. But imagine you had a statue of Dedalus on your lawn. You might be like, hey, I have a statue of Dedalus and and some would be like you don't really have it

could just walk away at any moment. And he's like, you know, it would be good. You have one and it's tied down, so it can. Go away now. You got a statue of Deathless, he says. Knowledge is like that. So the issue about opinion or truth is that it's it's it's something that's like in your mind, but not of it. It's sort of sitting there. You sort of absorbed it, but without knowing the reason why. It's not really your own a way to think about that is like actually the word and the word for opinion and Greek is dog. And in Greek it's the same word as the word for reputation, which when I first encountered I thought was super weird. I'm like, oh, OK, I guess they use this word to mean two different things. Opinion reputation and then eventually, like through reading Greek. I was like, but they don't use it in two different ways. Like, it doesn't seem like two different words in the way that they use it. It's that. My my reputation is your opinion of me, right? A reputation is an opinion. It's somebody else's opinion. And there's a way in which my reputation kind of lives or is housed in you. And so like that sort of bespeaks or makes reference to a kind of social world where people think what they think, partly because they want other people to think well of them, partly because other people think those things and their attachment to. Those claims is it's going to move around with the shifting opinions of other people. My reputation moves around with what other people think about me. It's not really mine. And part of what Socrates is doing in introducing the space of knowledge and telling you that you should go for knowledge is to say there's something that could be really yours and it would be different from an opinion. It wouldn't be contingent on other people in the same way if you had knowledge. It's like for the first time, you would really have a thought.

Interviewer: I'd like to. Say that that part of the appeal of that is, is stability. I mean you you mentioned in the book the implications that thinking socratically might have for politics. Mm-hmm. You see it as a good thing if we're changing our mind a little bit less. Yes. Am I right in saying, yeah.

Agnes: Correct. So I think that I think along with Socrates that everyone waivers pretty much constantly and cannot say the same thing about the same thing. And we have a kind of illusion. Of people that in politics, people are stubborn or they won't change their minds. But really the problem is the opposite. The the. The reason what generates that illusion is that when we change our minds, which we do constantly on every topic, we change the words that we use. And so we make it look consistent superficially. So like an example that I give in the book with words is just like being cooperative and being conformist. So both of those mean doing what works for other people. But when you do what works for other people and we like it, we call you cooperative. And when you do what works for other people. And. We don't like it. We call you conformist and. We, you know, we don't have any kind of systematic account of when you should, you do what works for other people. That's what we really need if we had. That we could have a stable thought.

Interviewer: OK. You also speak on the the final part of the book sort of covers politics and it covers love and it covers death. Let's speak about love a little bit and

you write about marriage, which I found very interesting. You questioned whether the status quo that we have with marriages, if they evolve at the moment. Is all that good for us? I mean, if if I could quote you, you say the you describe a lot of marriages, the company of the person one wants chased with breathless abandon, loses its thrill. The frequency of both sex and intense conversation decreases and living together becomes a matter of routine. Even the good case is far from the ideal. Can you speak about that a bit more? It's fascinating.

Love, Ideals, and Relationships

Agnes: So I think that. What I'm doing in that part of the book is adverting to a romantic ideal that we have, and this romantic ideal shows up paradigmatically in movies and poems, very much of so in poems. From the ancient world up till today and in novels, there's this idea of like passionate romance and that that is an expression of something fundamental about human beings and our like. What we need out of life. And I think it's a relatively common place thing to say that once you've been married for a long time, there isn't as much passionate romance as there once was. Perhaps this is not true of all marriages, but it's certainly true of many marriages. Like if I just trust popular cultures, representation of marriage. I think it's. Why a lot of people fear marriage. Actually, and so. So like what I'm doing is showing you that the romantic ideal. Doesn't fully get itself realized or expressed in marriage. I also think it fails to get itself realized or expressed in single life dating. Even passionate romance, insofar as that tends to lead to, you know, well, horrible breakups, toxic relationships or dull marriages. So there's the it's not what I'm doing. There is not just a critique of marriage. It marriage falls under a larger set of romantic activities. Where what they point to is it looks like we have an ideal that doesn't get realized, and that's really interesting. Where do we get this ideal? Why do we have it? Why are we sort of applying it to our lives in this way where it makes our lives sort of fall short? If I could give one other example that I think is sort of helpful to see the kind of point that I'm making about the distance between the ideal and the reality, it's an example I give in the book. Where there are ways that we behave in relation to romance, where if we behave that way in relation to food, people would think we were insane, like actually insane, had lost our minds, and so like an example I give is. You see someone he's banging on the door of a restaurant and you say, well, this restaurant is closed and he's like, I have to get in and you're like, well, what about all the other restaurants on the streets? Like, no, I can't go to this. I can only go to this one. And you say, like, is the food here really so amazing? He's like, no, it's terrible. I hate. So, you know, at some point in that conversation, as it progresses, you'd be like I think you need help, you know, something is wrong with you. But like, that's a conversation that many of us have had with our friends who are, like, texting late at night, their ex, who they said was horrible. And it was a terrible relationship. And yet they're

still obsessed with them. But like, there's other fish in the sea, and they could move on. And what is happening there? What is happening with us having normalized that kind of romantic trauma? It suggests that there's an ideal. There's an idea or a norm that we have. Have to apply to romance that we just don't apply to food, and that idea is what?

Interviewer: I'm interested in Socrates argued that the you know, the highest, the highest kind of love is is not for people, but for ideals. Yeah, there's, you've you've you've thought a lot about, about that sort of idea. I was wondering if you could talk sort of a bit more about it.

Agnes: Yes, so. Socrates thinks that the right way to think about love of another human being is that what you really love is the ideal and the human being is kind of like a vehicle to the pursuit of that ideal. So he is not. He's not like changing the topic. He's not like saying well, ignore people love ideals, cause you can only love ideals with people because the way that you love an ideal is trying to pursue it. And the way you pursue it is the conversation with another person. But what he wants to say is that like fundamentally like. What love is is. In some way, connecting to another person and but what is the nature of that connection? What can you get from another person? What is another person to you? Right. What? What? What use can they be to you or what way can they connect to you? And Socrates thinks well, the deepest and most profound connection that you can have to another person. Is that they can be a source of answers for you. Answers to your questions, or a source of questions that will challenge things that you've said that's in some way what another person is for as far as you're concerned. And so he thinks the. The the highest ideal of love is an ideal in which. You engage in that activity with a view to a certain kind of perfection, where the important contrast here is that he thinks a lot of people, including people he's interacting with, including people who are falling in love with him, like Alcibiades. Our thinking that when you fall in love with someone, you pursue them as perfection, the other human being has to be perfect. Ideal, perfectly. Beautiful. You know, at a perfect age of life, which is, you know, young and and you sort of worship them. And I think Socrates, no, you shouldn't worship other people and associate. You shouldn't worship him. Rather, if you're going to worship something, I mean that thing had better be really, really good. It had better be kind of perfect. An idea? And what another human being is is to help you in some sense worship that ideal.

Interviewer: Usually it would be sort of impolite to to ask a a guest about their personal life, but I hope you you hope don't mind as a sort of example of living a philosophical life and sort of learning how others live for viewers who might not know there's a sort of big New Yorker profile. About two years ago, which described your your philosophy of marriage, where you live with your current husband and your ex husbands, do you, do you still live with both of them? Yes and. Did your life. Change much after that piece was published.

Agnes: No, not that much. I mean, there was like a big there was like a big storm happening in the world, but it didn't hit me that much though it maybe that my life

changed in ways I didn't notice as much, I guess like some people maybe liked me less and so I don't know, maybe things I didn't get invited to or something I would have, but I wouldn't know. Right? So there's there's ways you can stuff can change that you don't know. I think a lot more people have heard of me because of that piece. So that's like, but that also doesn't change. That's not my life. So that's doxa, right? My reputation is something that exists in the minds of other people. It's not me. I guess one way it changes people ask me about it a lot. So, but you know, there was like a kind of short term turmoil. I mean the the events that are described like are things that happened to me a long time ago. So like it wasn't like a recent thing in my life. It was my romantic life didn't didn't change around the time of the.

Interviewer: How long have you been married to your current husband?

Agnes: We've been married for like, 12 years and I think we've all lived, we we. Arnold and I, Arnold's my husband, Arnold and I have lived with Ben since. My third child, which is Arnold's son, was born so like a, you know, a big I think I say this in the piece. I can't remember a big part of what motivated us to want to live together is that, like, I figured I wasn't only have maybe one other kid, you know, I was getting older. That is, I had two kids with Ben. I was probably only have one kid, and I really wanted. Him to like have brothers in a really substantive sense and kind of the sense where I think it really helps if you know, like you're in the same room. I'm I'm a kind of like kids in the same room, person like family in close space forced to interact kind of person and so. I mean background is like we all got along well. I wouldn't have thought of this if we hadn't got along very well, but yeah. So so anyway, that's how I remember when it's from. It's like basically when Izzy was born. He's 11 now. So we've lived together for maybe 11 years. And then Arnold and. I been married.

Interviewer: For like around 12 something like that and and do you do you? You're sort of current philosophy the way that you live as a as a result of. Philosophy is it is this sort of a. A sort of real world. Not that your academic discipline. You're an academic philosopher should ever be separated from the way you live your life. But many, many sort of do think and act like that. Do you view this this as sort of part life, part philosophy?

Marriage, Divorce, and Parenting

Agnes: I think certain aspects of it are very philosophical. Not not all of it. So one thing that interesting happened after the profile actually like lots of people wrote to me and were like, Oh my God, me too. But I never tell anyone. Yeah. You know, people think I'm so weird and they're not all philosophers. So this is not an arrangement that, like, only philosophers get into. It's just like people are freaked by it. So, you know, they're not going to, like, make it that. Public, I mean mostly I you know, it's not like I made it public before I was asked about it in an interview either. So why would people know otherwise? But. I really think if I want to identify the philosophical parts of it, it's

sort of like. The fact that you know when. Ben and I were getting divorced the way we did that is to like, think it through together, where there's, I think, Socrates says, that I love that talk about in the in the equality part of the book calling for a vote from one man alone. Like where I think we were able to navigate. The part of our relationship where we were breaking up. Through conversation, because our relationship wasn't just a relationship of attachment and marriage in a certain way like it had this other. Strand to it. That was continuous. We had like a kind of ability to think things through to. Other and and had thought so many things through together. I mean had had so many conversations that were sort of some of them were were practical about our lives and some of them were more abstract and like we've had so much practice talking to each other, I guess about so many different topics that even when we encountered something where there was no real cultural script for it. You were able to navigate it. That does seem to me to. The philosophical though I could imagine that maybe like a couple that was like therapists or something, they're like we use therapy to, you know, it's like it's possible. I don't wanna claim philosophy is the only thing that could do that.

Interviewer: That the the the piece, that piece sort of sets it up as a binary choice that you had to make, which I I I'm not sure if you show yourself between living honestly and sort of the the common desire why probably a lot of you know couples who is not quite working stay together stay together for the kids. Yes that's part of the sort of suite of. Off the shelf recommendations for these types of things that are that is said to anyone, just as a default, like oh, you should be friends with your ex and things like that. Do you think life would sort of be better for a lot of people if more of us questioned those sort of received wisdom?

Agnes: Yes. I think that the time when when a crisis hits, it's generally not going to be the time when you start questioning like that is you're gonna need to practice before. That is the first thing I would say is that it would be pretty hard to think like creatively about cultural scripts starting at the moment when you know. Your partner tells you they fall in love with someone else or something like that. You're going to feel the magnetic pull of like a certain set of emotions and a certain set of validated responses that, like all your friends, will tell you, yeah, you should respond in that way. If you respond in those ways and to really think it through, like on your own in that sense, that is in the sense where you're not. Ensnared in duksa in the world of duck. You will have had to think about it before then, and so the question should you question it, I I think it matters like when I'm not saying like ohh well the minute you decide to get divorced. Now is the time to question everything. That's the time. It's the hardest to question everything. Arnold sometimes says your theory of marriage is marriage is a preparation for divorce. And I kind of think that that's right. It's like look. You might have to get divorced from your spouse. That's just any couple that is possible. For that to happen, it's possible that the world hits you with a kind of thing where after that you're just like we can't be together. I think it's possible for anyone. And the question is how if that would happen, if that catastrophe would happen and

maybe there are many couples where the kind of catastrophe that would cause that is so extreme that it's really unlikely to happen. OK, but if it were to happen, how would you deal with it? How would you navigate it? Could you do it with, like dignity and decency towards one another in an open minded and inquisitive and truth seeking? Way like marriage is a preparation for that in a way.

Interviewer: Well, I think it's almost now in this country one in two marriages end in divorce, but you would see it that as, but every marriage acts like it'll never happen, you know.

Agnes: Right, exactly. And like, in a way, divorce is. Maybe it's a little bit like those, like hidden questions that I was talking about at the beginning where there's like stuff at the corner of your eye that you don't think about. You don't think about the prospect of divorce when you get married. And I'm not really saying you should always think about the prospect of divorce. What I'm saying is you should think about your relationship as the kind of relationship that would have. The strength in a way to withstand the divorce. What I mean by withstanding the divorce is like being able to converse through it.

Interviewer: Do you think divorce needs sort of be this terrible sort of social failing that that that, you know, ever that that needs to be terrible for the children or or do you think that there there there can be such thing as sort of a positive right divorce?

Agnes: I mean I when I was like, gonna get divorced. And, you know, when this prospect was first showing up for me, I thought it was gonna be devastating for my children. Like, I thought I was traumatizing my children. And, like, and I was like, yeah, I'm gonna. Do. It anyway, like they're gonna be hurt, you know, that's the way life is. I'm gonna help them through it and. Like. Life is hard, and sometimes your life hard. Life starts a little bit early. That was the way I thought about it. That's meant to be wrong, like as a matter of fact, my children were not traumatized. They they. Like, well, the third one's glad he exists, and the first two, like, are very glad to have Arnold. You know who, for their point of view, is has the role of the father to them, and they think they're lucky to have, like, an extra parent. Like it's great right now I'm away from my kids. One of my kids was sick when I left, you know, having two people in the house to hear them like I think worked out but. I think that. And I know lots of people where they have, like custody sharing arrangements and stuff where that are long standing where at least from my observation, you know, kids life is perfect, but the kids seem happy, flourishing, doing well. I think the the process of divorce is can be incredibly hard on kids. That is that period, especially if it's protract. Did. Lots of things are hard for kids, though it's worth keeping in mind, not just divorce. Going to school can be incredibly hard and incredibly traumatic, like day after day after day of the kids, life can be kind of hell because they're in school. We put kids in school anyway. You know, loneliness can be really hard for kids. Kids. You don't have friends, like so many things can be hard when you're a kid. There's just lots of trauma that you're going to face when you're a kid. So I guess I think I tend to think that the process of divorce itself is going to tend to be hard on kids. And whether the result

is hard on them is is partly a function of how that's managed and arranged, like how many other people are in. The kids lives. Help out and I guess partly a result of how society is organized.

Social Norms and Kinship Bonds

Interviewer: And I want to be on sort of the the final part of the interview, which is I wanted to ask you as a philosopher, some of your thoughts on some of the philosophical trends and and discussions that have been going on over the past few months and years of marriage is an interesting one because we we had just towards the tail end of last year in this. Through a very interesting political debate about whether or not cousin marriage should be banned in this country, 90% of people said yes. And then there are a couple of libertarians who said no, I do not want the states to be deciding who anyone may or may not marry. That's a sort of, obviously standard libertarian. I'm not saying all libertarians think that, but there are a couple, and I was wondering your sort of your thoughts on that discussion.

Agnes: Yeah, I've never thought about this before, but here are my initial thoughts. So I think that so in the book I talk about that absent philosophy, the guidance that we have as to how to live our lives comes from two sources. The first source is our body and you know the feeling of pleasure and pain first and foremost are repetitive desires. But then also all the resources that we see fit to gather in order to be able to in the future satisfy those desires. So the desire for wealth etcetera. That's one source. But I would I wouldn't put that even at 50%. I would put it maybe at like 20 percent, 30% and then the rest do philosophy is gonna be all the rest right. The rest is what I call kinship bonds, which I'm I'm stretching the word kinship because I'm stretching it to include really all group membership. Maybe I should have called it membership. Sounds, but so like. A lot of how we behave, what we're doing is following rules that pertain to the group that we're in, and that's probably like a big part of what Burke was thinking about in his, like, wisdom. Like, the wisdom is like, just do what everyone else around you does is generally what, like traditional wisdom is. And so dress like the people around you talk like the people around you have the right facial expressions. In the in the context that the the kind that you're supposed to in the context that you're in. You know the way that you do burials the way that you do weddings, ceremonies, what festivals you separate, celebrate all those things. You're given directions. You're given like a set of instructions from the group that you belong to. But of course we all belong to a lot of groups, right? So we might belong to the group of, like, our, our our family, by which you mean your parents and your siblings. And then there's another family you belong to, which is like your spouse and your children. At least some people have both of those families. And those demands are not always like the same sets of demands. And there's a kind of deep question about the relationship, actually, a lot of Greek tragedies sort of about the family that you came from versus the family that

you create and and the tensions that can exist there. And like, which one do you really belong to, Antigone, for example? Well, I mean, of course. Oedipus, we got to start with Opus, right. Mixes the two families together to this horrifying effect, and Antigone is your loyalty to your future husband himon and the children you might have with him, or is your loyalty. To your brother. Paul and I sees and burying him and your, you know, your parents and that family, right. So this is like a problem for human life that we belong to many groups that we belong to multiple families. And I think norms about who you can marry sort of about this territory. They're about kinship bonds and the structure of kinship bonds and separating the family that you came from, from the family that you create creating that separation is like important to us. I'm not exactly sure why. It's actually a pretty deep. Question, but it's it's a thing that human beings like noticed, you know, like a very long time ago. That is it's. We've been observing this for a very long. Time and so like, it seems to me that, you know, one thing that we culturally seem to want to do is in some way police the forming of those bonds and maintain the kinship structures that we have in the way that we have them. And we there's a question, how do we how do we do it? Libertarians don't wanna do it with the law. They probably still don't want to marry your. Cousin and they. Don't wanna marry their cousins, right? But they want to separate the law from the kinship relation. Fine, but in a way, the deeper, more interesting questions about the relation itself. And like. What governs? What are the rules that govern it? Like who, who you like to marry? I mean, this is something that people have been trying to police with social norms for super long time. Like last night. I talked about the institution of the CHARIVARI, which was like, you know, in the medieval peasant village, if you did something wrong as regards marriage. You married someone too much older than you, someone too much younger than you. Someone from a village. Too far away. Someone who's too close at someone. You married someone to too close to a time when someone in your family died, etcetera. There's a lot of rules about who you're to marry. And how people who go outside your house and start banging pots and pans to be like a norm violation has been committed. This was not as it sounds. It sounds funny. It sounds kind of cute. People committed suicide because of these and not just the shame, the noise. They couldn't sleep. But it was a real problem. This was like a major mechanism of social control, right? If you married your cousin and you weren't supposed to in that group, or maybe if you didn't marry your cousin cause you were supposed to in that group, you might get a charivari. We're still living in the world of the charivari. Sometimes it takes the form of the Twitter mob or whatever, right, and we're living in that world because we're still policing a set of norms that we haven't fully grasped and. That's my way of thinking about this question.

Interviewer: I mean, yeah, you you mentioned the Twitter mob, you're you're sort of tousley on Twitter. Have you found since its founder has proclaimed a an increasing support of free speech, do you do you think that the the public square has sort of improved in the past two years or or that any of this has been genuine?

Agnes: So it's an interesting fact and I sort of like observed this in my book that like the. If you say question everything that's not a question, that's an assertion. To assert that you support free speech is not to support anything. It's. Make an assertion. It's one thing to actually speak freely and actually to support free speech and it's another thing to like, have that as your mantra. All I'm saying is there's there's an in principle separation between those. I'm not making a claim about. Elon, in particular.

My own experience of Twitter, hasn't changed that much since Elon took over. That is, it hasn't. I don't think it's changed because he took over. I think I have withdrawn from Twitter a bit over the years. That is when I joined it. I joined in 2018, which is kind of late and I had a lot of optimism about Twitter as a venue for philosophical engagement, and I have less optimism now, though it's probably still more than most people actually, but less than I had.

I've actually recently coincidentally, to try to understand why my optimism has decreased. I've just been doing a lot of reading on conversation and from a lot of different areas of like psychology, linguistics, philosophy. But then I hit upon the people who really understand conversation, which is sociologists and what sociologists lay bare it's like just how much structure is in the interaction we're having right now. So like you respond to stuff I say. In 2/10 of a second, which is faster than your brain can process the signal from the end of when I speak to like, respond. So what's happening is you're predicting when I'm going to talk next and you're accurate, you're able to do it even we don't know each other. In fact, you're doing it even faster because we don't know each other. We do this. Better in a way, not better, but faster when we know each other because. Awkward pauses are more of a thing with strangers, because with strangers you never know like, like does she hate me or, you know it? Like, is the conversation over? I don't know. So you want to, like, make sure that you respond quickly, OK. So that's that's just the pause thing. There's turn taking when, when do I? When am I done talking right in a group? I mean, incredibly complicated. There's there's, like, the use of we we don't we don't tend to repeat nouns too much in conversation. So if I say mill. Then the next time I'm going to say he I'm not gonna say Milligan and what that like my, my, my utterance will quickly become embedded in its context.

OK, so that's how human communication works. That is, we are using a lot of signals and cues, and there's a giant like social structure that our words are embedded in and that's how we. Understand each other. And what I've sort of come to realize is like all of that's missing on Twitter and we don't even realize it's missing, cause we don't notice this there most of the time we don't notice the use that we're making of it. But I think we are. And so I just think on Twitter we are understanding each other incredibly poorly and people interpret that as malevolence or bad intention. And it's mostly that, like our brains and our social practices are not adapted for communicating in the absence of a set of cues that in fact are absent on Twitter.

Interviewer: One of the other and this this was sort of very big on Twitter back in the day. But since the fall of Sam. Bankman, fried and FTX. Has sort of had a bit of a public image problem and one of the most notorious examples of philosophy being

acted about and done in public over the past few years has been effective altruism. Which are the actual views? No, but was sort of about giving what you can doing the most good with what you're giving, and it was sort of a kind of reheated utilitarianism. Hmm, that movement is widely regarded to have failed. I was wondering if you had any thoughts on on. What that what went wrong with that whole?

Agnes: Scene. I know lots of effective altruists still, and they're still doing their thing. I think they were ashamed in the public eye and the way people talk about that is they failed. Whether they're going to achieve something or not remains to be seen, but I guess more generally, I actually think philosophy is getting acted out all the time. Actually, most of our actions are philosophy being acted out. So I think like there are two fundamental. Ethical systems that are available to people, let's say in the West today, one of them is utilitarianism and people do think in utilitarian terms and have utilitarian intuitions. And like, that's a philosophical theory that people produced and it's trickled down into our everyday lives. And the second is content. ISM, which says like treat people with respect, do your duty and you know don't use another human being as a means. These two sets of intuitions often come into conflict with each other and then people feel at sea. And so we have these trolley problems that illustrate the fact that are too philosophical theories that ground. Everything we do in everyday life aren't fully consistent with one another. We're not, and we sure which to follow.

There's a third theory that, you know has become popular in philosophy, has less, has touched down less in everyday life, yet which is Aristotelian virtue ethics. And that says like be a certain kind of person, be a generous, decent, just, etcetera person. Don't worry so much about whether maximizing utility or whether you're doing your duty. Worry about the kind of person you are being habituated, being that kind of person.

OK, well, my book is is an attempt to give you, like, a an additional item on that menu is to say there's another ethical theory. It's going to touch down in your life. It's going to change how you do everything and it says the point of life is not utility or duty or being a certain kind of person. The point of life is to acquire knowledge, and a big part of my book is to say, if you start to live your life this way, it will change how you do everything.

Philosophy in Everyday Life

Interviewer: So, when you when you talk about you know we are living philosophically in many ways. I mean there's a very popular say in this country is every pub is a parliament you know though. So the diverse people it brings in and the issues discussing. So when someone meets up with their friend and so they've been through a breakup or so they're having a crisis about you know what job they should take next and they discuss it, they are philosophizing?

Agnes: So I don't think I said we're living philosophically, I said. We're acting out philosophy and what I meant was we take a certain set of philosophical thoughts and we stop thinking about them and we just act them.

Interviewer: Sorry, Yes.

Agnes: And I do think that if you act out Socratic intellectualism, you're living philosophically. But I don't think that's true. The others, and I don't think the proponents of those theories would disagree with me about that. That is, most comedians don't think you have to be like a philosophical intellectual to be a good person. That is what Socratic intellectualism says. But then if you ask me, OK. But like so like what happens in the pub? Yeah, I think that that's right. But I also think the thing I said earlier is right. Which is that those conversations that happen in the pub when you're asking someone about their breakup, one thing you can do with that conversation is go through a bunch of cultural scripts. Oh, she fell in love with someone else. What a bitch. That like, that, that conversation is gonna work, right? You're going to be playing out a conversation you heard somewhere else, and it's going to like, it's going to go easy, and it's going to go smooth. But another thing. That you can sort of acknowledge and recognize and see is that there's space in that conversation. There's like creative space, individual space, kind of freedom that you. Have it may be the most fundamental freedom that we have is conversational freedom, the freedom to take the conversation to a new place and come to think of thought that we hadn't thought before. And yeah, I think that freedom is there for us in the pub.

Interviewer: Well, you make you make the whole endeavor sound quite fun as well. Agnes Keller, thank you very much.

Angus Cowell, Agnes Callard
‘The worst echo chamber is your own mind’
The unconventional life of philosopher Agnes Callard
Feb 4, 2025

The Spectator. <youtube.com/watch?v=wrZORO_Mfkc>