Minds Almost Meeting: Open Socrates

Season 10, Episode 6.

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Imagine two smart curious friendly and basically truth-seeking people, but from very different intellectual traditions. Traditions with different tools, priorities, and ground rules. What would they discuss? Would they talk past each other? Make any progress? Would anyone want to hear them? Economist Robin Hanson and philosopher Agnes Callard decided to find out.

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Robin: Hello, Agnes.

Agnes: Hi, Robin. So today we're going to talk about my book, Open Socrates, The Case for a Philosophical Life. Oh, thank you. I was looking around for a copy, but I gave away all my copy. I don't have a copy anymore. And I guess I'll start by saying what the book is about. So the book argues that there are certain fundamental questions. I call them untimely questions. They are questions where we find we already have an answer before we pose the question to ourselves. And these are questions about like, what makes someone a good mother? Like by the time someone poses that question to themselves, They already have an approach to mothering. And these are some of the most important questions of our lives since they're guiding us in kind of basic ways. but we can't inquire into them. We can't like check to make sure we have the right answers because since we have answers, we obviously think those answers are correct and we'll just rubber stamp our own approval of ourselves if we try to pose these questions to ourselves. And so my claim is that Socratic inquiry is an attempt to solve this problem. That is, that if you wanna be open-minded and pursuing the truth and avoiding falsity and being inquisitive in relation to sort of fundamental ethical questions, the way to do that is to have another person challenge what your answers to those questions or you challenge their answers. The middle part of the book argues for that claim, it's sort of the claim that thinking of this kind is a bicycle built for two, by arguing that There are three paradoxes about open inquiry. There's a paradox about how you could ever think you're wrong in the moment. Like at the moment at which you think something, could you think that that thought was wrong? There's a paradox about how it's possible to inquire into questions as opposed to just solve problems. And then there's a third paradox about who Socrates is that we can go into it if you have questions about it. And then all three of these paradoxes are solved in the same way, namely by adding another interlocutor. In the Socrates case, by seeing that he's talking to somebody else. The last part of the book tries to apply this method to love, death, and politics. That is, it tries to show you that if you took an inquisitive approach to these areas of your life, which Socrates sees as like problem areas, that

is areas where we regularly find ourselves at sea and screwing up our own lives and unsure how to proceed, that an inquisitive approach will kind of guide you straight in those areas. That's what the book's about.

Robin: Okay, so I read the book, but of course didn't write it, so you know more. I wrote a short review on my blog, and you've had many other prestigious reviews, so congratulations on the attention to the book. Thank you. I see or read you as making a bit stronger claims than the one you've just made so far. Okay. That as you describe a Socratic ethics, as a framework for thinking about ethics. And you seem to recommend the Socratic style as sort of an essential center of ethics. That is, this kind of activity is the highest activity, the best activity that you should. And you try to see other high activities like politics or conversation or love or death even In terms of this, that is, you suggest that we should find the highest value in all these other things in terms of the high value to be found in Socratic inquiry. And you are recommending, it seems, to not just a few people, but to a great many people to spend a great deal of time or energy in this mode of Socratic inquiry, it seems to me. I mean, you can tell me no. And that's a claim you're making that this is a key, pretty close to what's good is to be doing this. And then you make the claim that, I mean, this is apparently, you know, aspirational. Many people have, you know, acknowledged and I acknowledge that your book is inspiring people to a view of themselves and their activity that- Not you, though. Well, we can discuss how much in some, right? But I see the attraction of it as an inspiration. But instead of merely just saying, and that's why it's good, you instead say that what's good about Socratic inquiry, even more so than other inquiry, is that it can show you how to live, answer fundamental questions, things like that, and that you argue that getting at better answers to those is a high priority, and that if we don't get at them we have this problem of wavering, and that our lives, maybe not even being meaningful. And so, I see was raising the stakes a lot here, relative to what you just said that is. presenting a whole different center of ethics centered around this particular kind of activity as the highest activity and orienting other kinds of activity as valuable to the extent it promotes and embodies this key activity. I could give you quotes from the book that seem to say this.

Agnes: I think that there's a lot of different claims in the book. And you're sort of fastening the book as a piece of advice, which I think is something you could take away from the book. It's not what I think of as the primary thing. That is, I gave the description of what I thought were the claims that I really argued for in the book. And I think that if certain questions antecedently really gripped you, then you would experience the stuff I'm saying in the book as motivating. If you weren't independently gripped, then I'm not sure that I'm trying to beat you over the head with, no, this is what you have to do. Fundamentally, my project is not to tell people what they should do or what they have to do. It's to say something like, so for instance, it's not to say, oh, we'll take these high things, politics and conversation, and you have to start politics and love or whatever, and you have to see them in terms of, conversation, what I'm saying is take politics, love and death, notice that in each of these areas of our life, there

are these tangled knots. I can show you how to untangle them. And a lot of people, when I describe one of the tangles of knots, they'll say, oh, that's not an issue for me. Like, I'm not worried about death. That's just not, and I'm like, great, let's talk about politics then. That is, I can't, in terms of my book as like motivationally engaging the reader, it doesn't do that independently of the question of whether they experience some of these tangles, which is why I bring up a lot of them in a lot of different ways. um so it's not just merely like preaching to someone sort of independently of what problems they see and what motivations they have this is what you have to do that's really not how i understand the book it's more like look here's a predicament that people get in frequently in their love lives i'll give you an example a predicament that is very recognizable at least to many of us we have been in the situation where uh you are you're you're tempted to text your ex um even though you it was a bad relationship and it was a bad breakup and it was toxic and you kind of hate them but you're still kind of inclined to text them and try to get back together with them And that kind of behavior, if somebody behaved that way about a restaurant, like about food, if they were like, they were, they're standing at a door of a restaurant and they're banging on the door of the restaurant and you come up to them and you say, well, this restaurant's closed, all these other ones are open. And they're like, no, I have to go to this one. And you say, oh, okay, well, is it that you like love the food in this one so much? And they say, no, it's terrible, I hate the food. Like that person would be crazy. People would think they're crazy. There's something wrong with this person. Like they need mental health services. And what I want to say is, well, we normalize that kind of behavior around love. And then if that's recognizable to you, then I'm like, well, then we can draw some conclusions about how you must be positioning love in your mental space to make that kind of predicament possible. Um, so no, I just really don't see myself as just like preaching to people. You just need to do X, Y, and Z. What I'm, I even say this in the book in the, uh, in the interlude between the second and the third parts of the book, like philosophy doesn't begin from nothing. It begins when there's already some confusion. So I'm addressing those confusions.

Robin: So let's take you at your word, imagining someone like me or like most of us who find ourselves sometimes confused about what we want or what we think is good. Then conditional on that, are you making a recommendation? Or are we still needing to add further conditions before we are to recognize the book as making a claim?

Agnes: Well, so the book describes a whole bunch of confusions pretty concretely. Not only like, for instance, a bunch from the particular dialogues, you know, in the love, death, and politics part, like a lot of ones from contemporary contexts. And then in the first part of the book, more abstractly and more universally, I talk about Tolstoy. and how he had this sort of midlife crisis that he describes in this work called A Confession, where it was like there were certain kind of like existential questions that have been sort of about to trouble him his whole life. He's about 50 when this is happening. But he kept brushing them aside and saying, I'll deal with those later, I'll deal with those later. And he hits 50, he's already written more in peace in Anna

Karenina, he's incredibly successful, you know, revered writer in Russia, he has a big estate, he's noble, he's got this family, like, he has the perfect life, basically. And that's the moment at which these questions kind of hit him, and he immediately becomes convinced that there's no answer to them, and thus that he should commit suicide. And so that's a kind of generalized example. So basically, in terms of what I'm saying to the reader, As you read the book, you're supposed to be looking for, OK, which one of these scenarios or situations corresponds concretely to the kinds of confusions that I've had. I can't tell you what those are, but I give you a lot of possibilities to maximize.

Robin: As you can tell, I'm trying to elicit a claim of the book that I could engage and ask whether it's true or false.

Agnes: Right, but I'm trying to find a central claim.

Robin: But let's be specific. If I feel confused about death or love, for example, or even political ideology, then you think you have a claim related to my confusion, right?

Agnes: You might have a lot of different kinds of confusions.

Robin: OK. But which kind am I looking for then?

Agnes: I want to push back on this idea that in order for my book to have a claim, it has to give someone advice. that just seems wrong to me. My book is not an advice book. It's not aiming to give people advice. I think there are books that can be very significant to you, can even profoundly change your life, but not be in the mode of advice. And I think you're equating my book having a claim with my book giving people advice. Like my book, for instance, offers the solution to three paradoxes two of which are among the most well-recognized paradoxes in the history of philosophy. Those are some big claims that I'm making. I make arguments for those claims. You could challenge the arguments. I see that as making claims. Your book, Elephant in the Brain, does not tell people what to do. In fact, the whole beginning of it is like, we're not telling you what to do. Maybe you shouldn't read the book. But you make claims. And so why do the claims in my book only count as claims if I'm going to tell you what to do?

Robin: I seem to find claims when I read the book that seem to be adjacent to descriptions of people in situations as if those claims were relevant to people in those situations.

Agnes: So I think that the I think the stuff I'm saying in my book is relevant to people in their situations and it could very well affect how they behave but I'm not like dictating exactly how they should do that because There's just a lot that would go into what it would mean for someone to approach their lives or a part of their lives more philosophically.

Robin: But we want to pick some particular thing here to discuss concretely. which is a claim.

Agnes: I don't want it to be any of the claims in the book that I listed as the main claims in the book. It somehow has to be this other kind of claim.

Robin: So let's try to take a claim close to what you said, which is that in order to figure things out about fundamental claims, it helps to talk to other people or interact with other people. I could respond that pretty much anybody who has ever tried to engage fundamental questions has done that in the context of living live with other people having heard what other people said and then having spoken back to people so everyone has always been interacting with other people when they engage with fundamental claims how what is the you know claim Because no one has never not interacted with other people when they engage with fundamental claims. So what is your claim about fundamental claims exactly? If you're going to say it's good to interact with other people, it helps to interact with other people when you engage fundamental claims.

Agnes: Everyone has always done that, right? I'm not saying what's good to do or what helps to do.

Robin: Then what is the claim?

Agnes: That's not the claim of my book. I explained what the claim is. The claim is that there are certain questions that you cannot pose to yourself. You cannot inquire into them by yourself because you think you already have the answer. But in the presence of another person and using a quite specific format, which we haven't discussed, but I can say what it is, you then can inquire into the question. That's the claim.

Robin: But the vast majority of people who believe they have inquired in these claims and are recognized as having inquired in the claims didn't primarily use the method you are describing in order to do that. Do you agree with that? We have a long history of people inquiring into fundamental questions and claims in our world.

Agnes: I think that they very often did use this method. They might report the results of using this method in ways that don't involve the method itself. In fact, that's true of Plato too. And it is also the case, and it's probably worth noting, it's a little wrinkle in my story that I don't talk about in the book, that One thing you can do after you've done this a while, after you've had actual conversations with people, is that you can learn to simulate them a bit. You're never as good at it as you at replying as you are when there's an actual person, but you do get better at it. And I think of that as fundamentally what philosophers are good at. That is, that's what philosophical training is, is simulating conversations, which is predicated on, at an earlier stage, just having the conversations. But I think it's true that at least some work can be done by way of the simulation.

Robin: But how would we understand, I mean, we're trying to understand your claim more concretely. Is it a counterfactual that if they had done your method more, they would have had more success? If we looked at the pool of people who did your method more, we would see that pool being more successful?

Agnes: It kind of seems like you want, so I'm making a bunch of philosophical claims in this book. It's a philosophy book. It's not an advice book. It's not an empirical book. That is, it doesn't tell you how to account for stuff that's happened in the world. There are a lot of books of this kind. That is, it's not a genre that doesn't exist. It's a genre

that does exist. And it feels to me like what you're looking for is like, what are the non-philosophical upshots of your philosophy book? That's not a totally unreasonable question, but it's as though you haven't read my book. That is, I believe you've read it. I know you've read it. But you're not really responding to my book. You're trying to project my book onto some other space that you're interested in.

Robin: So let me just read you some quotes from the book directly. Yeah, Socrates inspired people to become the kind who think ignorance is the worst thing there is. We should lead the second best kind of life, namely the one oriented toward knowledge. Socratic ethics inserts itself everywhere into every interaction. Inquiry is the best thing you can do with a life, given that one's not allowed to lead it. Academic philosophers are eager to allow that one can live a perfectly happy and fulfilled life without ever engaging in philosophy. They're careful to shield the rest of their lives from the philosophical activities. When it comes to the question of how to live their lives, we are already being intellectual and critical and thoughtful enough. This book is an argument to the contrary. So those sound like substantial claims about how to live life.

Agnes: So the first claim was a descriptive thing about Socrates. He inspired people to do something. Right. That's not a claim.

Robin: And you are trying to inspire them to similarly. Right. Aren't you. Isn't your book exactly trying to continue that inspiration attempt.

Agnes: I think that Socrates inspired people to do something by not having as his goal inspiring people to do something, but rather by making a set of arguments. For instance, he would make an argument for why it's better to have injustice done to you than to do injustice. And you could ask about that argument. You'd be like, so is he trying to make there be fewer injustices in the world? Or is he trying to? And it's like, no, he's trying to argue for a specific claim. And it's true that that has inspirational force. And so I see my book as similarly having a kind of inspirational force. But inspiration can't be the conclusion of an argument. That's not how arguments work, right? The conclusion of an argument is some claim that follows from the premises in that argument. I think it is fair that I am sketching a Socratic ethics and I'm claiming that it's different from Kantian and utilitarian Aristotelian ethics. That's part of what my book is doing is saying, here's an alternative. But as I make clear in the part of the book where I'm doing that, I haven't done the work of showing you that it's actually better than those other ones. That would require a lot more. That would require engaging with the arguments for those views, which I don't have space to do in the context of the book. So do I think I've proved that this is the best kind of ethics and it's the only possible kind, et cetera? No. But I think just having articulated a compelling vision of an alternative picture of what ethics could be about, that's a lot of philosophical work to have done that. And it is a picture on which inquiry is the best thing there is. Yes, but, you know.

Robin: You're not arguing for that claim. You are making it compelling. So how do you make a vision compelling without arguing for it? Isn't the whole point that

arguing for things is the way we should find out what visions of life are compelling? You're giving a book, making a vision compelling without arguing for it.

Agnes: It's just an abstract understanding. I am in some ways making a case for it, but the way to make it compelling, what it means for it to be compelling is that it's worth engaging with. That is, this should be on the table, this should be part of our ethical conversations, not, okay, finished, here's what you should do, here's my advice on how you should live.

Robin: The Socratic methods, standardly, has someone make a claim and somebody else try to take it apart or see whether it holds up. I'm trying to get you to make a claim that I can get a hold of somehow with respect to how one might live a life.

Agnes: I feel like you make decisions like those. The ones you want are either going to be about how people should change their lives or what percentage of certain kinds of successes in the world we can explain by such and such methods. And so my book makes plenty of claims.

Robin: So, for example, let's take a claim about love that sort of the highest form of love doesn't actually love the other person. It loves the arguments or the talk they have with them. Therefore, it isn't inclusive.

Agnes: It's not the arguments or the talk they have with them. That's not correct.

Robin: Tell me a claim about love that you have in the book.

Agnes: The claim is that as it stands, our ideal of love has two parts. One part is we want loyalty and attachment. We want the person that we love to stick with us and not leave us no matter what. And the other part is a kind of, I call it rationality, but maybe I should have called it goodness requirement. We want them to be good. We don't just want it to be just anybody. We want them to be awesome and amazing and ideal in some ways. And we want them to see us in those ways. And so we want something like a good fit with them. And then we also want them to stick with us. And the problem is that these two requirements come in tension with each other. Because if I love my partner for his good qualities, so if I'm really a slave to the rationality or goodness requirement, and then I meet someone who has better qualities, I should just immediately dump him. for the better one, if that's what I really care about. Whereas if what I cared about is attachment, then I should just stick with him even if he sucks, right? Even if he just deteriorates and is terrible, I'm more attached. And, um, what I say in the book is that we, you know, this is a tension, it's a tension we experience in our love lives, and the kind of, um, uh, you know, junky solution that we've worked out is a diachronic one where it's like when we're dating, we're very idealistic and we're like, I want to meet Mr. Perfect or whatever. And then we sort of married and then you're just supposed to stick with them. So we kind of load the rationality up front and then the attachment later on. And Socrates thinks that these two conditions, which are apparent, it's apparent that we have these two conditions from how we behave in our love lives, that they can be satisfied if we sort of relocate the target of love to a different place, not to another person, but to some ideal some ideal of perfection that we would like to approximate ourselves and where the process of coming to approximate that

ideal is a conversational process that we engage in with that other person. So the role of the other person is to be your interlocutor in the pursuit of that ideal. The target or what you really love is that ideal or the the knowledge that you would get at the end of the argument or whatever. Not the conversation, but the thing that the conversation gets you.

Robin: You are saying that one could have potentially this concept of love. Are you making a claim about that concept or merely describing the concept?

Agnes: What I'm saying is that there is a problem. There is like a

Robin: So in your book, you say Socraticized Romance would force us to leave behind a number of things people don't want to leave behind are listed there as things we leave behind. Are you recommending or arguing for Socraticized Romance or merely describing what it would be with no particular advice or commitment or implication at all about whether we should be attracted or want Socraticized Romance?

Agnes: So what I'm saying is that here's a problem that you have in your life. there's something else, namely, there are these two requirements that you're placing on love. Here's a way to solve that problem. Whether or not you, like, look, imagine, imagine, anytime two things conflict, you can always throw away one away, and then the conflict is solved, right? Right.

Robin: So here, you're just throwing one away, you say, okay, we're not going to have attachment, we're not going to have You know, we're just going to go for one end of the trade-off and therefore the trade-off is over. We've just chosen one side of the trade-off.

Agnes: So you could imagine a non-philosophy book. Imagine an economics book that says, look, if you find yourself with like this set of preferences in this situation, here's what you might do. And then you'd be like, well, are you saying they should do it or not? And it's like, well, in that situation, if that's the problem you want solved, here's a solution for it. But of course, you may have other problems. There may be other things that are relevant to the story. Here, I'm only focusing in on love, and I'm only specifically focusing in on a certain kind of romanticism that some people have and others do not. And if this romanticism isn't important to you, if it isn't an important part of how you understand yourself, if it hasn't, like, made you fall down flat on your face a bunch of times already in your life, then this chapter is not going to speak to you, which is why I also talk about justice and equality and death, et cetera. But yeah, in a way, my book is dialogical, right? It's addressed to the reader, and it's addressed to a reader who might have a specific problem, and this might be interested to learn, here's a solution to it. But apart from that, no, I'm not telling them what to do. I don't see that as a failure to make a claim.

Robin: I did quote claims that sounded like there were bigger claims earlier in the book. I mean, you start out by saying we're avoiding key issues, and we could think, no, you say that most philosophers disagree here. That is, most philosophers think that, in fact, most people do roughly know what they want or what's good, and they don't need much more philosophy to have a good life, and you're suggesting They have

more philosophy only if that resonates with them. Is that what you're telling me? Not that those clauses weren't really in that paragraph, but they were implied that. This book, it is argument to the contrary, but only for people who kind of feel this way. Is that the story?

Agnes: Well, so like, you might recall that at the end of the introduction, you know, I feel like we've had this conversation before about Elfin and the Brain, but just reversed.

Robin: OK.

Agnes: Where you're like, look, I'm not going to tell you whether you should even read this book or, you know. I say at the end of the introduction, like, look, I don't know whether this is going to fill you with hope or despair and, like, what effect this is going to have on you. That is, and in fact, I'm not telling you to do anything. Just as in your book, you're like, I'm not telling you to do anything. And I think it's important understanding what kind of book it is that I'm not telling people to do anything. I think that the thing I'm the disagreement that I'm having with most philosophers is it's not exactly disagreement over some proposition. It is they have a way of life that they adopt. I'm pointing out that that way of life itself speaks to a certain kind of avoidance of philosophy. This is also true of me, by the way.

Robin: Like, I am an academic philosopher and this... Avoidance seems to have a moral color there, as if, you know, you You're claiming that our answers are much less adequate than we think, I think. That is, if we think our answers are close, we have bodily commands and kin commands, and if we can't quite work out the details, but they're roughly close to what's in fact good, then we aren't that far off, and we aren't really avoiding the question. We're just not spending that much time delving into it. If we're really wrong, then It's much more important that we delve into them. But you aren't suggesting that we're really wrong only if we feel like we think we're really wrong, then we should delve into them.

Agnes: Um, I guess, um,

Robin: They could have just told Toy Story, look, you roughly know what's valuable. Just review the things that people around you think are valuable. That's roughly what's valuable for you. You got yourself all confused, but that's not what you're saying to Toy Story.

Agnes: Right. So, like, I think the thing that I'm, like, if I could speak to Tolstoy, I wouldn't give him any advice. That is, that's not how I would engage with Tolstoy. Now, it might be that some people, you, would be like, look, your life's fine. It's all good. You want to give Tolstoy advice because you think you have knowledge, right? And it, like, I'm a Socratic. I don't think I have knowledge. I don't think I know what people should do. I don't even know that they should inquire. But what I'm doing is putting something forward inquisitively, in an inquisitive vein. Here is a possibility. Here is how this possibility, and I'm putting it forward not only inquisitively, but dialogically. That is, here is why I think you might be interested in this possibility. But, you know, is it possible for you to just say, as you sort of did in your blog post,

like, I just think I've, you know, it's, I've done enough. Like, this is enough inquiry and that. It's good enough for me. Like, ah, And you're like, I'm not even saying I wouldn't have anything to say to you. I might if we had that conversation. But the point is, I don't have anything to say independently of letting you say something back. That is, that's why I have to try to catch or capture certain kind of knots that my reader is already in in order to have any way to engage them.

Robin: I mean, I disagree with some more specific things in the book, but I feel this usual urge to try to find the core of a book and engage that as the highest priority rather than what might be incidental claims made along the way. So for example.

Agnes: It feels like that's not going anywhere, so maybe don't do that. Let's take. I feel like we've repeatedly. OK. Completely tried to do what you thought was doing that and what I think is not really paying attention to what my book says. Well, let me try one thing in the middle, which is the benefit of listeners. We've had this conversation before and it failed to make progress the last time as well. So just as you can ask me whatever you want, but that's like your strategy of looking at core claims. Like one thing your strategy does is it ignores all of my arguments. That is, you just find a claim that you think is the core claim, and you find some quote that you think makes that claim, and then you construct arguments.

Robin: I'm having trouble to find arguments that are more than very conditional. If this feels right for you, then go with this, as opposed to something that is less conditional about your feeling matched to it or something.

Agnes: How about, here's a solution to Moore's paradox.

Robin: I have a chapter on that I explained what the paradox is and I guess so I just don't accept this claim that I can't think about certain things without other people that you just haven't demonstrated that to me you make the claim anytime is one of the ways I try to demonstrate that.

Agnes: So, for example, more specific claim. I mean, we don't talk about that one. I'm just saying that there's lots of really specific claims and really specific arguments. And I will say, maybe you want to reflect on this at the meta level, but even though the reviews have been positive and very gracious towards me, I've noticed a kind of not wanting to engage with the concrete arguments in the book on the part of basically everyone who's reviewed it, including you, including both the positive and the negative people. They're kind of like ignoring what the book actually says. And I'm not sure why that is. It might just be that, you know, it's those arguments are quite detailed and it's hard to put fit into a review or something. But it's sort of like people are vibing with the book rather than, for instance, saying, like, here's why she doesn't actually resolve Moore's paradox or here's why Socrates really is a gadfly and not a midwife like that.

Robin: Let's take something very specific like revenge. I don't know how central you think that is to the book, but you make claims on revenge, and you say that, you try to explain Socrates' position on revenge, that it's bad to hurt people. Basically, as I

understand, the point is that if you hurt somebody, that's bad for them, and therefore it's bad to do it, and therefore revenge is bad because it hurts people.

Agnes: So to be clear, Socrates doesn't think, for instance, cutting people or even killing them is bad. That is, the point isn't about whether people experience what can extensionally be understood as harms. Socrates fought in a war. He killed people. What he thinks is it's bad to do something where what you see as good in the thing that you're doing is how bad it is for someone else. And what he tries to do is to unravel the... So is deterrence revenge then by this definition? It might not be. And so deterrence would be fine. But there's a way of thinking, there's a characteristic mode of thinking that people often have when they're getting what we might call revenge, and often when we call it by other names as well. And Socrates thinks that mode of thinking is broken. And that's what he tries to show, say, in Crito. And I show that by going through the argument.

Robin: In deterrence, a central part of deterrence is the harm that they suffer that's causal for the deterrence. It's plausible that somebody motivated by deterrence would talk and focus in their language and description on the harm, because it is quite central to the concept and process.

Agnes: Right. But I think if you saw the harm, if you cashed it out fully in terms of the deterrence value, what you're really saying is, in this case, this harm is just a good thing. It only appears to be a bad thing. If I go to the dentist, I go there in order to be harmed, right? Right. No, not really, because at the end of the day, that pain is there for a reason, namely to get my teeth cleaned. And so if you view the punishment of criminals in the same way, that that's not revenge or retaliation, and that's fine. But Socrates thinks that a lot of people, when they act in relation to somebody who has harmed them, they do so with a certain thought, that is a certain kind of mental device, where that mental device is broken. And so that's his argument against revenge.

Robin: That just seems to be, you know, using it by definition answer.

Agnes: So I don't, I, you know, I can't really engage that definition that is, and I think the way that Socrates establishes that it isn't is that he comes across people who have a vengeful thought, and it's just a very different thought from a deterrence thought. It's a thought where you take pleasure in the prospect of harm to somebody else. You think they deserve it. And Socrates wants to show you there's something broken or wrong about that thought. That is, you're making a mistake in the way that you're thinking, if you think in that way. That's not my definition, because people have this thought all the time.

Robin: Right. But if the causal reason they have that thought is that natural selection selected for revenge in order to deter, then They are invoking this revenge urge and feeling in the context where it does produce deterrence. They might not be very conscious of that function, but it is in fact, in that context, good in that way.

Agnes: Natural selection could select for us to have incoherent or mistaken thoughts. Of course, that's perfectly possible. Socrates is only pointing out to you that something that you thought made sense on its own terms as a thought doesn't make sense. And

that's in the history of thought, that was a huge move. It was a radical cultural revision in a world where people thought revenge was justified, not because of a deterrence, but because they thought the vengeful thought made sense. Socrates' point of view on revenge, I think it was countercultural, but hugely influential. I mean, when Christianity kind of take this up as almost being obvious, but it's not obvious. It's a giant ethical move and was largely successful. So I don't think it's a small feat. And I also explain the argument of how he gets there. So these are all claims that the book makes.

Robin: Take the example of political conflict, fighting, as you call it. You want to argue that fighting is a mistaken way to argue, and you should better do inquiry in order to discover the good, and then you wouldn't need to fight, and you can't discover the good by fighting, and so therefore fighting is ineffective and mistaken. That seems to be based on a key assumption I think you often make, which is that there are no real conflicts of interest. That is, we all share the same good and would all do the same, pursue and support the same good outcomes if only we understood our shared concept of good. But if there are in fact conflicts, then it could make more sense to fight to achieve your different good against their trying to achieve their different good and you could both know fully that's what you were doing and there could be no ignorance whatsoever and we could have a sensible fight.

Agnes: So I think, let me start with a case that I discussed in the book. So I think not every case of like using physical force against another creature of your kind would count as fighting in this sense. And so in that way, The word fighting may be broader than the set of fightings where I think that they count as pretend arguing. Still, the set where I think they count as pretend arguing is very large. So it's not like the claim of the book is nothing. But I think, for instance, if you and I are on a lifeboat and the lifeboat can only hold one of us, And I might push you off the lifeboat and say, I'm sorry, Robin. You know, like nothing personal. It's just like, I want to survive. I don't think I have any reason to be preferred over you. I don't think there's any reason why, like, it's right for me to survive and you not to. No shared reason, at least. Suppose I just had to press a button to eject you, eject secret. We wouldn't think of it as fighting. But now suppose that, like, actually you're resisting me and we have to, you know, scuffle over it, then we might call it fighting. And I just want to grant to you that that sort of case we may not want to construe it as pretend arguing. However, if you actually want to think about, like the case where I press the button and the case where we have to physically fight are different. And if you think about the psychology of, I don't know if you've ever been in a physical fight, like where you're physically being aggressive with someone, but you have to work yourself up to it. Like cycle, you can't just do it where you're like, these are movements I need to, like, you have to get into it. And you basically need to activate anger. And anger is this feeling like, um you're wronging me and you you don't deserve this and I deserve to stay on this boat and that like if I were physically fighting you I think I would get into the kind of mode the kind of combative mode that I'm a little bit in right now in this conversation right where where I like philosophically I'm like look our interests are not we don't have

completely interest in this conversation we actually have the same interest which is coming at the truth but my my brain is distorting that into a situation where we're at we're adversaries that's what it feels like to be angry at someone So I want to grant that I could use physical force on you by pressing the button, or maybe if I'm an extremely weird person, like if I was an assassin, my guess is that assassins and people who are trained in combat may be able to trigger all those fighting movements of their body without thinking that they have any reason to win the fight. But for most of us, those things go together. We have to be angry in order to fight someone. And anger means thinking you've been wronged. And that means thinking that there's some issue that you're fighting over where you're right and they're wrong. And the only way to adjudicate that is by argument.

Robin: And this is a claim about the emotion anger that the emotion anger is tied to a shared concept of good it can't be tied to a different emotion of anger is tied to reasons that is.

Agnes: We don't.

Robin: Reason's tied to a shared concept of good.

Agnes: So when we get angry, we think we're right about something. And that means it's tied to like a shared conceptual space. That is, the other person is wrong. It's not each person thinks is right. Whoever thinks they're right is right. No, when you're angry, like moral relativism, you know, you have to leave that at the door when you get angry. And you think that it's only because you're actually right, and the other person should recognize that you're right, that you should get this thing. And so in that sense, yes, it's based on the thought that there's like a shared point of view that could be arrived at, which is yours as it happens, the correct one, where if they saw that they would willingly give you whatever it is that you want.

Robin: So the claim is, I just can't be angry when I fight a lion or an animal, even if it's for my life. I would lose all the motivation of anger then. I might well lose to the lion because I just couldn't get myself angry.

Agnes: So I think, as a matter of fact, that is probably correct for many people. That is, when they saw a lion or other animal, they would be terrified. They would be afraid. And they would not be able to work up anger. But I think some people, like, I actually think it's not inconceivable that you could personalize. You're not taking my life away from me, you stupid lion. It's imaginable that somebody could work themselves up into a state where they're sort of imagining. Given that the anger involves you're falsely imagining something that isn't the case, you can falsely imagine that about a lion as well as about another human being. I think it's a bit harder. And so the default for most people is actually going to be fear because they're not going to be able to muster up the anger. But I don't think it's inconceivable that someone could muster up the anger.

Robin: Maybe we could go closer to sort of my personal situation, i.e., I compared to most people are much more into inquiry. So I happen to share a devotion to and love of inquiry, but I'm more of an academic and see myself as part of this large shared

enterprise of humanity together, figuring things out over centuries and millennia. And I contribute by inquiring into my particular topics that I find comparative advantage on, and then deferring to what people figure out on other things. And in that process, we've worked out a distribution of the usual styles of interaction and conversation. Whereas, for example, we have some conversations, and we write articles, and we get feedback, and we give talks and things like that. Are we making a huge mistake in terms of if our goals are to sort of produce this aggregate effect that we've seen over a long time of our slowly understanding things better, including fundamental questions? Are you suggesting that for this purpose, not just generic advice, but for the purpose of continuing academic sort of shared progress of experts who specialize sharing their insights into figuring out everything interesting, including the fundamental questions, that we are not having enough Socratic-style conversations? Is that a strategic mistake we're making? Is that a claim you're making?

Agnes: That is not a claim I'm making in the book. I mean, one way you can tell is that I don't make it. And another way you can tell is it's a bit of advice. And as I said, my book is not an advice book, but. I think, well, first let me go back and give a different, I have a slightly different description of you than you have. Namely, I do think most academics, the way that they understand the division of labor is that they find their niche. And you've found ways to rationalize not having a niche where it's like, no, my niche is that I'm a polymath or whatever.

Robin: I may have 20 niches, but there's 20,000 niches that I'm still somewhat specialized.

Agnes: Right, but you're not. Like, that is, I've just been able to get you to talk about just about anything. You've never said to me, no, that's not one of my 50 niches. So I don't experience you as relegating yourself to some part of intellectual space that you're interested in. I do often experience you as like trying to pull any question or focus where I have one particular way of thinking about it into your way, but I think I did the same thing to you. But that's not a good thing. That's a bad thing that we both do. And so I think of you as somebody who, in a lot of ways, is pushing and fighting against the dominant way that academia proceeds. A lot of your contributions are not in academic journals. The bulk of your contributions are probably not in the venue that is usually. So you're not doing the usual thing. You're not a usual academic.

Robin: But is what I'm doing Socratic compared to what other people do?

Agnes: I think what you're doing is a bit more Socratic, yes. So I think one reason it's more Socratic and one way in which academia could be more, so I think one way in which ordinary people could be more Socratic is being a little bit more academic than they are. And I think one way that academics could be more Socratic is by taking their, like, uh, moving their inquiry around a little bit. Um, so, so what, where one thing is just like, um, um, you know, finding ways to, um, call into question, like, what are the fundamental principles of their discipline? Or even what are the topics that their discipline ought to cover?

Robin: Just asking more basic questions, is that what you mean?

Agnes: Yeah, and also, like, if I think about, say, my own field, ancient philosophy, Like, I think, for instance, being willing to, as it happened, this is a contingent fact about the way that the field is organized, and it hasn't always been, but like, being willing to ask the question, was Aristotle right about this? Or was Socrates right about this? Like, so for me, I think, you know, I think, I sort of agree with Socrates with a bunch of things, but I don't agree with him about everything. As I say in the book, I explain the parts where I don't agree in the book. And the thought, it's not really allowed to talk about that in the context of ancient philosophy scholarship. You're just supposed to be laying out a certain set of views. And you're actually experiencing, but in how I'm interacting with you, you're experiencing the effects of that. Even though I push against it, it's actually, in a lot of ways, true of me relative to someone like you, which is why the way I talk is like, well, I'm laying a certain thing out, or I'm presenting a certain Socratic view. That's me showing you how my field works. Because it works that way. It works less that way for me than for just about anyone else in my field. But still, I'm still a representative of my field, and I have its flaws. And so I think those are ways we could be more Socratic. But the point of my book is not to tell you you should do that. The point of my book is to tell you that's a thing that exists that you could be doing. And I think part of it is a lot of people in a lot of different ways are already antecedently committed to being Socratic. And so if I can just tell them, look, here's what it takes, then that's a motivational argument right there, but I only provided half of it.

Robin: So we could say there's a style and way of thinking or talking. And there's two things we could talk about it there's what what it would take to achieve that style that is what are its prerequisites components, you know, context, etc. And then there are what are the consequences of that style. And I do think, I grant, that you have somewhat successfully described what it is, that is, how you do this thing. What's the context, the process, the mechanisms, the components, such that you achieve a more Socratic style. But I also thought you would be making claims about if you achieve that Socratic style, what are the consequences? What follows from that? And that's why I was trying to ask here, what do you think academia, what consequences would follow from an academia who was more Socratic? If we, for example, by more often asking fundamental questions, what would result?

Agnes: I think that we would enjoy undergraduate teaching more, because that's one of the places where we naturally do this. Um, and there is a tendency, you know, well remarked upon to be like, um, favor research over teaching and just sort of think the teaching is what you have to get out of the way with. But in, I once knew someone, an ancient philosopher who, very good, very good scholar, who had really been looking forward to retirement so that he could really get some work done. And he told me, that like a year into his retirement, he realized that his students were where he got all his ideas. And I think that if we reorient it in this way, we might recognize that and we might recognize undergraduate teaching as the treasure trove that it is. That will be one effect. that might happen. I mean, again, my book, I haven't done the research to

give you the arguments that that's going to be a conclusion. That is the actual work that my book does is giving you actual arguments that none of which you've asked me about. But you just want claims or conclusions or predictions, which I can make. It's just like I don't feel in a particularly great position to make those predictions because nothing I say in my book determines how I make those predictions. I'm just giving you kind of common sense.

Robin: So we've talked before about STEM versus humanities, and I guess that difference is being especially vivid here in this conversation, because I'm trying to find ways of taking sentences in your book and seeing them in a STEM sort of way. Yes. And you're saying, no, no, no. They're just claims that if you define the terms the way I've set it up, then these conclusions follow logically and you can't disprove that at all. And I go, but like what I wanted was.

Agnes: You can't actually, you totally can. And I've gotten some really good philosophical challenges to my book. It's not impossible to challenge these claims at all. That would be amazing if I created such strong arguments that they couldn't be challenged. You're just not challenging them. So I'm not claiming they can't be challenged.

Robin: But like the way you do revenge is you define it such that, of course, he is right by definition.

Agnes: So there's nothing to say about that. I mean, there's an argument. And there's also part of the argument is making a compelling case that when we feel this need for revenge, that the right way to cash that out is the way in which he's described it. And in the credo, in the place where this argument occurs, what you have is this series of sentences that have a set of substitutions in them. And you have to agree that the substitutions obtain and that they're reasonable. And in fact, the way that I present it in that chapter is quite complicated because I say, really, if you want to understand this, see it as a parallel to the weakness of will argument that happened earlier. These are structurally parallel arguments. So I'm doing all of that to try to show you what is the argumentative structure in place. And it's not a truism.

Robin: But for example, the argument structure for love was to say, look, there's this trade-off between A and B in love. One way to solve this trade-off is to throw away A and just do B. Ta-da, there's your solution. And I go, well, that's just logically trivial, but not very interesting. It's not very compelling.

Agnes: Saying that love is a trade-off between those two things is a massive intellectual achievement. It's a huge insight into love. It's very original. If you think it's true, then that book would be worth it just for now.

Robin: I think it is a trade-off in love. I'm not at all convinced that it is the main trade-off in love.

Agnes: That's an argument we could have. That would be an argument that would engage with the book, if you're like, there's a different trade-off. But the point of the book, the solution is not to dump one of them, just to be clear. You're not supposed to dump either one. The solution is... I think you just didn't understand the chapter very well. The solution is that if you relocate the target of love from another person

to the ideal, you can be both attached to it and you can still satisfy the rationality requirement. So both original requirements are still in place. You're not dumping either one. So that's how Socrates found a way to solve that problem.

Robin: Right, but it's just not compelling to me, because I don't see why I should relocate love somewhere that I don't love. I don't love in these abstract idea love people, so why should I relocate it?

Agnes: I think it's wrong about you. Like, I think you love abstract ideas, and you like people.

Robin: In addition to loving people.

Agnes: Nah, I think you like people insofar as they help you explore abstract ideas, and otherwise you don't have that much use for them. I mean look you're human and so you're social and so you're going to be like kind of the bare minimum of being nice to people but you're not that nice. Like you're not you're not that much of a people person. You're an idea person and like it's a perfect story about you. It's not as good a story about most other people.

Robin: So when we talk about academia you said, you know, basically we'd enjoy undergraduate teaching more if we were more Socratic. And that seems to be just going along with the idea that like, there's a set of topics that are just innately, plausibly interesting to ordinary people. And then academics diverge from those topics and that they get into other specialized topics that they decide are more important. And then the Socratic claim here is that these naive judgments about what topics are interesting are in fact, better judgments, because the college student judgment about topics are interesting is actually better if we went back more to fundamental questions we would be pleasing the college students more and also addressing fundamental questions more. That's a way in which ordinary people's inclinations in this context are more well-grounded, but there's also a sense in which Socrates was initially such a strange thing at odds with ordinary practice that we can't see him as just representing naive perspectives. There was something very different about what he had that if it's valuable is quite at odds with ordinary, habitual, what people find interesting.

Agnes: I think that we just have to reconcile two contradictory things. The one of them is the thing you just said, which is right, that Socrates was, he was called atapos, which means placeless, or like really weird, really, really, atapotatos even, superlative, as just like someone who has no place because he's so strange.

Robin: Max weird.

Agnes: So maximally strange, exactly. On the other hand, Socrates did not have any special sauce for forcing people to talk to him, right? These people in general were wealthier and more powerful than he was. They were gonna stay in the conversation as long as they felt like it. He had to make it worth their while. And that means he had to find the topics that would engage them, ordinary people. And he was really good at that. That is, he was better at being an ordinary person than ordinary people are, even though he was very, very strange. And so, and I think that this comes out, one way this comes out is if you just look at an intro to philosophy course today, 2,500 years

after Socrates, living at a time where almost nobody wants to read any texts, we are still assigning these dialogues to students as like an introductory foray into philosophy because we think it is going to speak to their naive, unschooled, like, approach to life and to bring up questions that they find interesting and engaging.

Robin: So one last attempt to find like, where are there concrete claims or not that you're making? I mentioned in the book at one point as a contrast between many social scientists taking diverse human behavior and reducing it to some simple motive like status or signaling. And that in contrast, Socrates was trying to take diverse Aries behavior and unite them under an aspiration of the thing they all have underlying. And in your example, inquiry is a thing underlying politics and love and other sorts of things. You're describing this difference in attitude between trying to unite things by via an aspirational goal that unites them versus united them in terms of some historical causal force that shaped them. What claim are you making about that distinction, other than that there is that distinction?

Agnes: None in that part. And so, for instance, I'm not trying to insult you. I make no claim that the reductive approach is bad or even is worse than the Socratic one. What I'm trying to do is get my reader to notice, here's something very familiar to us, a reductive approach. Here are all the different ways that it shows up. And we're very familiar with it. It's a familiar form of explanation. All the people I mention are people that I'm an avid reader of and learn from, including you, even when you annoy me. And so in that sense, I'm giving you respect by mentioning you in connection with all these other extremely famous people, right? But what I wanted to say was there's something that's very, very different from these things, that is a different kind of intellectual approach. You can see the difference by seeing that it's the valence reversed of this one, and this is the approach where instead of taking some ordinary activity, instead of saying it's got these lower motives or historical causes or whatever, what you say is it's actually more noble than you thought it was. You're actually underestimating the degree to which this is like, you know, a place of sacredness or something like that. And so, like, I think it's hard for my reader to get that thought in view, and they use you and some of these other people as a foil to just try to get that thought clearly in view for them. But I just don't think I can go all the way. It's like Moses in the promised land, right? So basically, I can describe something for you and articulate a set of ideas and even show you how they're connected. But at the end of the day, whether you think they're right, there's going to be some steps you have to do.

Robin: But I think this is close to a key question, and we're going to discuss this book again at another event in six weeks or something.

Agnes: This is our advertisement. We're going to solve all these problems on December 27th at our interview. Don't miss it.

Robin: But there is this key question of, how simple am I in terms of my goals, or what's good for me, or good to me, That is, this historical approach says, I'm a complicated creature that evolved from lots of different pressures, pushing together lots

of different inclinations in me that make me not want to starve and stay warm and have company, all sorts of things. And this historical approach suggests that what I want, what's good for me, is in fact a complicated amalgam of many particular desires and motives that come from these various sources and that, you know, best I should hope to be able to do is maybe sort of make them a little more systematic and figure out exactly how I'm going to trade them off. And then it seems like your Socratic, your book is basically saying, no, you don't have to like take the commands of the body and the commands of kin and try to weigh them up and produce that as the thing you want. You can just pick this whole other thing. inquiry and then organize all of your thinking about everything you want in terms of that. And that's an available move to you. You could actually just be the person for whom that is your goal. And you have the power to subsume all these other desires and organize them in the support of this higher goal you've chosen. And that seems to be an open question. Is it possible to actually change yourself that much?

Agnes: So I don't think my book is making such a strong claim. I think it is making a claim that you have more options than you think. You thought you had the choice between listening to your body and listening to your kin group, but here's a third thing you could do. Now the thought, can the third thing fully substitute so that the other two things never have any role in your life, so that hunger never determines whether or not you eat? I'm not making such a strong claim as that. And I'm not even making the version of that claim that some Kantian philosophers do make where they're like, well, I still have to validate my hunger in order to endorse it with my reason in order to decide to eat. That's the Kantian move, right, that says we can make everything be the kinship command. I'm not saying anything like that. I'm not denying that like for instance you're pretty complex like you're made of a lot of atoms and it may be for instance that like understanding you know one of your goals is going to be to keep your body in working order and understanding how to do that it's not going to entirely be Socratic inquiry because you might actually need to like do some biology to know how to keep your body in working order. So no, I'm not claiming that the Socratic angle could take the place of every other kind of thinking in your life. What I'm saying is that there are problem areas of human life. There are points where we are struggling, and we're struggling because we're not seeing that in those areas there's a knot that could be untied in this way. So I say what they are. They're things like the fear of death, politics, including the desire for revenge, and like our kind of impassioned sort of idealistic approach to romance. In those areas, there's a knot that can be untied in this way. I'm not even saying you should untie it. I'm saying that here's an option that's there that you hadn't noticed before.

Robin: But it still seems like, I mean, you know, you keep going through the motion of saying well is this extreme that extreme and you're not seeing either extreme I'm not saying you're saying you're extreme I'm saying we're just saying that I was saying you can do everything with Socratic inquiry and it fully replaces the other two things. I'm saying there's this dimension, and that you're highlighting a dimension.

Agnes: Yes, that is.

Robin: How far could we go? Is this open question? How far could we change who we are?

Agnes: That's an open question. Earlier you were saying, I'm making the claim that this could do everything. I do think you were saying I was making that claim, and I don't think I'm making that claim. To be fair to you, that claim is consistent with my book. So I don't deny that claim either.

Robin: Right, but you are organizing all these areas of life around inquiry as the underlying goal. And that's suggesting that we could see it that way.

Agnes: But I picked the areas. I didn't just do everything. It was not a random choice.

Robin: Right, but those are a lot of areas.

Agnes: Those are big. You wrote a book about signaling. And maybe your view is really everything is signaling. I could have picked indeterminate areas of life. And that's not my view about Socratic inquiry. So these are special things that I picked. I don't think these are the only things I could have picked. I think I could have talked about parenting as well. and some other things. But I don't think I could have picked medicine. I just don't think there is a very Socratic approach to medicine. So I think that some things are the province of technology, even though technology requires the guidance of human wisdom. But in those areas, Socratic inquiry is going to help us much. So I have less of a totalizing approach than you do, I think.

Robin: We probably should stop now. Yes, thank you for talking.

Agnes Callard & Robin Hanson
Minds Almost Meeting: Open Socrates
Season 10, Episode 6.
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