

# The Philosophy of Aspiration

Robert Wright & Agnes Callard

Recorded: September 5, 2019. Posted: Sep 20, 2019

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### Links Mentioned

- Agnes’s book, “*Aspiration: The Agency of Becoming*”
- Agnes’s essay, “Unruliness”
- Paul Bloom’s essay, “The Strange Appeal of Perverse Actions”

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EFqUahbPP2Y>

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**Bob:** Hi, Agnes.

**Agnes:** Hi, Bob.

**Bob:** How are you doing?

**Agnes:** I’m doing well, thank you.

**Bob:** Good. Let me introduce this. I’m Robert Wright. This is the right show available on both streaming video and via audio podcast.

You are Agnes Callard. That’s how you pronounce your last name, right? And you’re at the University of Chicago. You’re philosopher.

**Agnes:** Yes.

**Agnes:** And you’ve written a book not long ago came out, I think maybe last year called *Aspiration; The agency of becoming*. We’re going to talk about the ideas in that.

There’s another word that starts with A that figures into the book and that you’ve written about called ‘*acrasia*’. Less well known than aspiration, but not unrelated to it.

I want to talk about that because that as I understand it, is is kind of like doing something, even though you think it’s the wrong thing to do in one sense or another morally wrong, unwise, and you know that, and you do it anyway. That’s *acrasia*. I mean thinking of this, I was kind of thinking in some ways my life is a dialectic between the inspiration and *acrasia*. It’s not clear which is winning.

## Why Agnes once lay down on the yellow line in the middle of the road

**Bob:** But before we talk about those two words. I wanna talk about unruliness, which is the name of an essay you wrote. Because the way you first came to my attention was when. Was by virtue of your having at one point in your life laid down in the middle of a road at night on the on the like Yellow line in the middle. Which struck me as yeah, I really would be a fair, fair way to put it. You it's in your essay on unruliness that you described that behavior. Yeah. But I was very struck by that. And I thought I should get this person who allegedly did this to explain to me. Why she did it? So why don't we start out with unruliness? It's not. It's not actually unrelated to the other two things we're going to talk about. Why?

So this was what, 20 years ago or something?

**Agnes:** Yeah. Just about, yeah, I was a grad student at Berkeley studying classics at the time, and I guess I would describe. Unruliness more generally as when you see that there's like a certain structure of how people tend to respond or act in a situation, you see that structure and then you see like another possibility of just a thing that people don't. Another example I gave in that essay is like eating flowers. I used to just be really tempted to eat flowers. I'm like, they're so pretty. I just want to eat them and that it's like, yes, they don't taste good, but I would sort of keep trying. It was like, but that's not what you do. Like you don't eat flowers, right?

**Bob:** Did you ever do it?

**Agnes:** Yes, they don't taste good.

**Bob:** One does not eat flowers.

**Agnes:** Exactly. And so, like, there was this line in the road and it's like, here's what you don't do. Lie down on that line. And then once I get that thought, I'm like. But what would it be like if you did it like, we just have this rule that we all made-up. We all. Follow this rule. Don't do it right. And so the more you think about it, the more it.

**Bob:** Mm-hmm.

**Agnes:** Feels to you like you need that knowledge of what it would be like because the that excluded possibility becomes so sort of tempting. And for years before I lay down, I always loved to walk along the yellow lines, which is already.

**Bob:** That's that's rule breaking. As I understand it.

**Agnes:** Since high school, I often would come home. From debate tournaments late at night. And the world would be empty in in that situation, I'd always walk along the yellow lines and it's like. There it's like I. Would feel like like a car almost. You know, like you're not supposed to be in that space. Like I'm being a car. I'm playing a car. So I had already done that for years. But what I had never done was lie down. Be a stationary object now.

**Bob:** Wise wisely, I might add, you had never. You had never done that.

**Agnes:** Yes. Yes, and I never did it again because that, as I say in that essay, a policeman came along and I was trying to commit suicide. We had a long conversation. He made me promise. Not to ever do it again so.

**Bob:** Now, were there cars coming by while you were lying down on either side so you could have actually been killed?

**Agnes:** Yes.

**Bob:** I mean, you know. When my friend Paul Bloom described this to me, you know Paul.

**Agnes:** I I know him as the author of that essay, and I also think he's perfect. Yeah.

**Bob:** Of the essay which you mentioned, your essay, I said that woman must be crazy. Yeah, I mean, this is offensively, but that's. What I said about you.

**Agnes:** Please.

**Bob:** If there was a significant risk of you dying, it seems to me that the knowledge of what it was is like to lie down. There is really not quite worth the cost.

**Agnes:** I see that. I like so I made myself very narrow, right, and it wasn't a super narrow road. And my thinking was cars don't turn. Until like cross over the lines when they're driving.

**Bob:** Now, this was before texting. I'll get. I'll give you that much. It's not like doing it in the age of driver texting. So yeah.

**Agnes:** I see, right? Yeah. There weren't many cars, too. I mean, there was, like, I can't remember how many cars passed me. Maybe one or two. And the policeman was in the car who saw me. Maybe he was the only one. Actually, I I I can't remember in terms of the car. I wasn't scared, but it seemed to me that the probability of being hit by a car. Very low. You might still. Think. Yeah, but it's high enough to make that a crazy thing. And.

**Bob:** That's what I'm that's what I'm thinking, yeah.

**Agnes:** I think that that makes a lot of sense to me. That point of view, right and one of the things we talked about in the piece is this, this difficulty of communicating with the police officer where I was like, I know I'm not going to be able to get you to understand. What was attractive? To me about this and how compelling.

**Bob:** I would say I would say cops are particularly tough audience for that for that message, yes.

**Agnes:** Right. So. Maybe one way to think about it to make it seem less crazy would be to put it in a context of thinking about. Thinking about that as a kind of outlier decision among a large field of decisions where I am more open and risk taking than other people like I'm sort of seeing more possibilities of what to do even just when I walk down the street and if there's like a little ledge like I'll tend to walk on the ledge because it's. More fun, and there's other people don't do that. And it's like I'm having a little bit more fun than the people who just don't think about. Walking up not a highlight, just like.

**Bob:** OK, I was going to ask, OK.

**Agnes:** No, no, no. I also like heights. So I do tend to climb up on things that are tall. But, you know, I don't know, like, 200 years ago I started this, like, late night debate series kind of out of nothing. I just saw the possibility of doing this. And. It's been really popular and it's something that it was easy to do, but just nobody saw the possibility. So it's like I see, I think most people it's not that they would say all things consider I shouldn't lie down in the middle of the road, that they would never occur to them to. Lie down in the middle. Of the road, right, that is in a way, what's abnormal about me is that I saw that possibly.

**Bob:** Hmm.

**Agnes:** And so I guess what I want to say is that like there are advantages to being attuned to those possibilities and to finding them compelling, but they're also disadvantages.

**Bob:** Yeah, those have occurred to me. You should meet. So maybe you should talk about the advantages.

**Agnes:** Yeah. Well, I mean, those were examples of the advantages. So the fact that I that I walk on the ledges and other people just walk on the sidewalk. I I.

**Bob:** OK.

**Agnes:** Just need like a. Foot off the ground or something. Like it's fun. Like when I walk down the. Street. Sometimes I skip, sometimes I dance. Right. I've known other people don't do that, so I get to have more fun than other people. That is because I'm seizing these possibilities that are there, that those ones are not dangerous, right. But whether I see the alternative possibility or not isn't so dependent on whether or. Not it's dangerous. So it's not like I can turn that on and off in that way. I don't think that I would do that now like I'm a parent. I'm older, you know, it was a particular frame of mind that I wouldn't describe as especially rational, but I suppose that I do do other things. I continue to do things that. People around me find a little bit puzzling, but maybe where the stakes are lower.

**Bob:** Do you have just one quick example spring to mind?

**Agnes:** Maybe my office is an example here. I'll show you this is what my office looks like. Like most people's offices. Don't look like that, right?

**Bob:** Have you ever tried sitting in that office while on psychedelic drugs?

**Agnes:** No, I've never done psychedelic drugs.

**Bob:** You don't need to, that's the great thing about that office.

**Agnes:** Thank you. So and I. See, I mean you can't even see this.

**Bob:** Trippy.

**Agnes:** So the point is like. That's a possibility that's open to everyone is to not have a boring office, but people just don't apprehend that possibility. So yeah, right.

**Bob:** I apprehend the possibility of having a clean, tidy office, but that has never happened that now that, I guess, leads us to aspiration. But before we get but go there, tell me is there a connection between your attraction to unruliness? We should add you define unruliness is not exactly the same as Rebellion cause rebellion has a purpose. Unruliness is like aimless rebelliousness or something. It's like. It's like for

the sake of the rebellion, as opposed to for the sake of some in state that the rebellion is designed to lead to, right.

**Agnes:** Right. It's less purposive, yes.

**Bob:** And is this related to your being attracted to philosophy, your unruliness?

**Agnes:** Yeah, I think so. I think that. So here's a way that I put it recently on Twitter, like I'm attracted to. Transgressive views, too, like transgressive ideas, not just transgressive actions, right? And that's a dangerous way to be, because if you're attracted to a view on the basis of the fact that, like other people disagree with it, you're pretty likely to. Be wrong a lot. Of the time because. What most people think tends to be right. And so one thing that philosophy does is like puts me in constant contact and constant argumentative contact with other people so that I can, like test whether this transgressive idea is it like a good one, or is one of the garbage ones? Most of them, the vast majority of them are garbage. So I'm someone who needs a lot of. Personal interaction in order to think, and that's really a big part of why I left classics. I was a grad student in classics like. On Ma I. Took all these exams, but in classics you're sort of expected to vote. Develop your ideas on your. Own and I would develop pretty crazy ideas like I once handed in a paper on the immediate. Said that was about how the entire Ennead was a dream, and it had a soundtrack. You were supposed to listen to Disney grad school. OK, well, the paper had a soundtrack, and it was like, supposed to be it was. Just crazy, right? So suppose, like you're a little bit crazy, you need people to bring you in, and philosophy gives you that.

**Bob:** OK. So it's like a a good intellectual prison or or safe house or something for you. Now that's a bad metaphor.

**Agnes:** It's a good intellectual workout.

**Bob:** It's a good gym. It's a good, safe gym for you.

## What explains “akrasia,” or weakness of will?

**Bob:** OK, so let's talk about now. Let's back into aspiration via akrasia because one one thing that occurred to me when I, you know, and that's a word that. I I could not have defined it until I saw it in your. In your work you don't hear it much, I think. Is it a word in Spencer's the Fairy Queen does it come up? You know? Because I know a crazy in which is this stuff. The chemical that that leads slime mold cells to like bond and form a kind of single multi cell organ. ISM was named after. I think the word akrasia as used in Spencer's the Fairy Queen it. Was this was. John Bonner, this Princeton biologist named it. But anyway, I digress. So Akrasia kind of acting against your better judgment while you're thinking this is longer and wise, I had two thoughts. One it it kind of is something I do. On the other hand. It seems to me that usually I guess my question is, how often do people do this? Don't people usually manage to convince themselves that when they're doing something that they kind of know is wrong at that moment? Aren't they managing to come up with a justification for it so

they don't think it's wrong? So like? An example of me is like watching sports when I should be working right like and this is I don't watch a lot of sports but it it does seem to me like kind of a pure waste of time. So like. You know, sometimes I'll even wake up at night and I'll have spent, like, an hour watching, like the US Open some day before and I'll think I'm not gonna watch it at all today. I'm not gonna watch it all today. I'll vow to do that. And that vow will let me get back to sleep because I'll be at peace with myself, and then about 50% of the. Time I will. Violate the vow the next day, but often it is with the justification floating around my mind. Like, OK, you put in a lot of work. You deserve to do this and so on. So first of all. Is it? Is it acrasia? If I'm justifying it at a conscious level, no matter how self deceptive the justification.

**Agnes:** Good, I would say philosophers often talk about hard cases versus easier cases where the easier cases are easier to explain away philosophically. So that would be an easier case, maybe just to take a step back. So so the word acrasia you can you can take it away.

**Bob:** Oh, it's not christia.

**Agnes:** You say in Greek it's comes from the word strength, Kratos and then ah, alpha primitive. So it's like. Strength. OK.

**Bob:** So we should say for well for everyone 8 it's AK or sometimes AC, but then RASIA, is that right?

**Agnes:** Exactly. In Latin, it's called incontinentia incontinence. So it's sometimes called that, but that means something. Else now in English, right?

**Bob:** Now, yeah, let's go with the crossing.

**Agnes:** And then and it's sometimes in English referred to as weakness of will. So just those all those 3 mean the same thing, OK. Accuracy. Yeah, we'll call it that. Yeah. It's acting against your better judgment. So it's like, I know I should do this, but I do this instead. Now there are two ways to take a case of acquisio and make it. And sort of soften it into an easier case. One way is to think at the last minute I changed my mind. So at the last minute, I convinced myself that actually that was the better thing to do. The other way is to. Say I didn't convince myself, but I I was powerless. I couldn't control myself. So in a sense, I didn't act intentionally. So you can take a case of acrasia and sort of soften it, make it easier by turning it into a case of change of mind, or turning it into a case of involuntary.

**Unknown:** Hmm.

**Agnes:** Action. But if you don't do it, either of those things. Then you get a. Kind. Of paradox, which is like, well, if you thought this other thing was the better thing to do.

**Bob:** Why didn't you do that? Now, strictly speaking, is that the only true across you when you're actually thinking this is the wrong thing to do as you do it?

**Agnes:** Depends on who you ask. So some philosophers think that true one doesn't exist. It's impossible. OK.

**Bob:** They're right, Socrates. Or Plato or right, they, they they wrote about this right. They or one Part 1 wrote.



**Agnes:** Yes, so Socrates famously. That's a view that's usually described to him, and I also agree in ascribing it to him, though some people don't. OK, so, so, so Socrates, have this view. I think my colleague Robert Pippin has the view that there's no such thing as what I would call the hard case. Now, if you think there's no such thing in that case, you're going to call the other. This is not quite right, so if you want to ask me which is the true accusing it. Depends on whether you're talking to a skeptic or not. I'm not a skeptic.

**Bob:** So Socrates says there's no such thing as doing what what? What is the? Hard thing against your better.

**Agnes:** Acting.

**Bob:** Judgment acting while against your better judgment.

**Agnes:** Voluntarily, you have to throw that in there. Right. So he thinks that if you. Do what it. Looks like acting against your better judgment. It must have been the case either that you change your mind at the last minute or that you weren't actually in control of your actions. So like a drug addict, right might be like I shouldn't take this drug, but they take it anyway. That might not be a case of the hard case. About Russia, because they. Their judgments were not controlling. What they did in any sense?

**Bob:** OK, so if the if your, if your judgment isn't, that's funny. Well, he's kind of OK so anyway. The. Your view is what that?

**Unknown:** 4.

**Agnes:** Right. So my view is that cuisine and aspiration are actually related in that. In a case of Acquisita, you are looking at the world simultaneously from two different ethical points of view and the easiest cases to think of are ones where the we have some kind of like blue bodily appetite, like like desire for sweets or something. Right, like a desire to eat another cookie. And you say to yourself, no, I'm gonna have a stomach ache later. If I eat another cookie, I shouldn't eat one. But they like, look really good. So we don't want to think about that. As like there was. A. You know you have this point of view on the cookie where you're like. Yeah, I mean, that looks so good. Right. There's a time in your life where that was the. Only point of view on it you. Had when you were like 4 or something, right. So you're 4 years old. You just want. The cookie and you don't think about will I get? A stomach ache. Later the ethical. Point of view of prudence, where you step back from yourself and you. Think about your. Life and that. That that just you didn't have. That at that age, right, so you had to learn to think about the world in that way. But when you learned that you didn't totally unlearn the four year old's point of view.

**Bob:** You're telling me?

**Agnes:** That's still kind of Wicky. So I think what's happening in. A case of acrasia. Is that you? You sort of pulled yourself aspirationally out of a certain kind of older, you know, more childish, more immature, way of approaching the. World where immediate pleasures are the only things of value, right? You've pulled yourself out of that, but not all the way, right? You still have that review. And so when you look at the action

of watching sports or eating the cookie, you look at it from you look at it both as like, oh, that would be so fun. Yeah. Yeah. And. Well, no.

**Unknown:** Mm-hmm.

**Agnes:** I don't want to do that. Have this better option and. Some of the you know there's a lot of ways to manage that dialectic, right? And one way to manage it is actually to sort of tell yourself a story that will satisfy your prudence. Self, right? That's what we call rationalization, right? Where we, we, we sort of convinced the prudence self that actually having the cookie or watching the sports thing. Like if I don't relax a little, I won't get any work done, so I should. And so that and I would say in that sort of. Case you're not weak well because. You don't. You're not experiencing this kind of. Straight up clash.

**Bob:** Ohh, really? Well, that's a relief because that's what I do then. I'm not weak willed. Good.

**Agnes:** It's maybe worse though.

**Bob:** Oh.

**Agnes:** And this rationalization isn't better, right? It's it's a way to adjudicate the conflict. Between the two perspectives. That is like non ideal or non optimal it you do, you're doing it in. Some sense by self. Deception. Right. You. You can almost think of this younger you perspective as like that, that you knows that he's not on the best rational grounds. Right. And so he kind of has ways of Co opting the prudent view by giving kind of fake reasons for why. The imprudent thing would be the better thing. To do so, yeah.

**Bob:** Yeah, seems to me it seems to me this should be called weakness of will. But go ahead, it depends on how you define will and what your mind is.

**Agnes:** I I think it's. I think it's fine to call it like to use an umbrella term or something like that. It's a reason. So the reason to be kind of a stickler about the hard case is that the hard case can look impossible if you make a certain set of philosophical assumptions that an action is only intentional. If the agent does it for a reason. That a reason is the. Agents, all things considered, judgment about what the best thing to do is right. And so then if that person thinks no, this other thing is the best thing to. Do it just. Looks like it follows that the person can't intentionally.

**Bob:** Right. You can't be acting against your better judgment cause you're better judgement feels like your judgment at the time is that. You should do it. Right.

**Agnes:** Right. And so.

**Bob:** That's in the case of rationalization, I mean.

**Agnes:** The point? Right. In the case of rationalization, right? And so, so so that just doesn't count as a case of acting against better judgments and have just been particularly interested in the sort of, paradoxically, of inactions being both intentional and against ones that.

**Bob:** Are and that does happen? I mean, sometimes I'm sitting there watching the sports and I think, OK, now I should go up and work. And I don't get up off the couch.

And then I feel this gnawing feeling of kind of guilt inside me. That's true across here, right?

**Agnes:** Right. I'll put this way. That's the kind. Of case that keeps philosophers up. Right. Mm-hmm. But I think during the same family, I mean, I think. You're right that. What motivates us to create false rationalizations is the same kind of conflict that shows up in a particularly strident form in what the philosophers call the hard case.

## Agnes's book, *Aspiration: The Agency of Becoming*

**Bob:** So it should be clear to people that across here is a great thwart or of aspirations, but we should at the same time, before we get into your your book on aspiration or as we get into it. Be clear that you're defining aspiration in particular ways. It's not like anything you want where where as it is used that way sometimes, right? So you're, I mean, first of all, you're interested in the acquisition of new aspirations. How is it that one moment I have no desire? To even play golf and and then some days later, I want to be the greatest golfer in the world or the greatest piano player in the world. Or. Or maybe I just want to be, you know, morally upright in some particular way that never mattered to me before or whatever, right?

**Unknown:** Yeah.

**Bob:** These are the cases that that. From at the beginning, puzzled you or puzzle you. That that people can acquire whole new values that that, that, that guide them in certain they're the the things they didn't value before they come to value, that's part of the process you're trying to.

**Agnes:** That's right. And maybe it's it's it's the, it's the process of acquiring new values. That's what aspiration is, right. So and one way to think about it is just to think that there's all sorts of things that you value right now, all sorts. Of things that I value that if I go back far. I don't buy that thing, right? So the question is like, how did? I get from there to. Here and you know one answer we could give is like, well, I was shaped by my society by my parents, by my friends, by accidents. Stuff that happened to me. Right. So you could think that the reason why you value. UM. You know a certain kind of music or the kind of work that you do or whatever is sort of external factors that have shaped you, but that didn't ring true to me in terms of explaining how I came to care about most of the things that I care about. But is it felt to me like I had a hand in that. That there was something I was doing so as to bring myself to. Come to care about. Those things. And so I wanted to come up with a theory of how that's possible. How is it possible to make yourself come? To care about something. Mm-hmm. Because the answer can't be well because. You care about it cause you don't.

**Bob:** Yeah, right. So the the kind of. Paradox is. You know you can. Until you have a value you don't value it right until you value. You don't value it. So how does one

get from the place of not valuing it all to suddenly valuing it when you describe it that way? It does seem paradoxical. Where is this you describe the person as a as passive being, you know, pushed and pulled by their environment doesn't seem so paradoxical, but you want to preserve. Some notion of agency, right? Some.

**Agnes:** I think aspiration is something that people do, even though I also want to recognize that they tend aspirants tend to need help, so they tend to have like mentors and supportive environments of a variety of kind, more so than they will need once they've arrived at their aspiration. But nonetheless, I think just cuz you do. Something with doesn't mean you don't do it. So. They are doing it one important way in which I kind of reframe the problem a little bit. So in, you know, in the philosophical literature, one way that people thought about this problem is just as you describe how. Do you go? From zero not caring about it all. OK, to caring about it and I think. The way I think about it. Is how do you go? From caring about it, very little. To caring about it a little more. That is, how do you increase your caring for something? I I don't take myself to have to answer the question, how do you move from zero? Because it seems to me that if you don't care about anything at all, like not even in the slightest bit, then there's sort of. No motivation for you to work from to. Try to care about it more.

**Bob:** But it does happen, right?

**Agnes:** Yes. And so I think that that's where the environment then. Plays a large role.

**Bob:** OK.

**Agnes:** So. Think that all of our aspirations have to get started, but we don't have to start them. It's quite often that somebody took you to a particular performance or somebody you know, started arguing with you philosophically and like something happened. But I think it's important to recognize even if we give these kind of environmental jumpstarts. You know their place in the story. That that that's not doing the whole work. Of transforming you into the person who's really like. Passionate and invested in that thing. So like a friend of mine. She was not really into food, and then she spent like a year abroad as a high school student in Osaka. And it was such a culinary Mecca that that was like, you know, this kind of jumpstart for her. And then she over many years, she became a going on and great chef and all this stuff. And but like. We don't want to. We don't want to have like we want to give that moment it's due without thinking somehow going to Osaka transformed her into the person that she became many years later. It jumped. It started.

**Bob:** OK. And so you're interested in the dynamics of the process itself, what sustains the transition and the progress?

**Agnes:** Yes. And maybe even more specifically, I'm interested in the ways in which theorizing that process requires us to break. Out of certain. Let's say dichotomies and ways of framing areas of philosophy that are already established. So it's sort of like philosophers are making a bunch of assumptions in a couple of different areas of philosophy in the theory of rationality, like what is to. Make a rational. Decision in the theory of moral psychology, which is like the the thing about ethical points

of. View that we're talking about. Law, psychology and then in the theory of moral responsibility, what is it to be responsible for who you are and to get credit for it? So please just make a bunch of assumptions in those areas which if? Those assumptions were true. There could be no such process, so in a lot of ways my book is not so much giving you a theory of aspiration as doing something. Explaining why we need to break a lot of structures and philosophy so as to make. Room for the theory of aspiration. That they're going to.

**Bob:** This because current views and philosophy don't leave a lot of room for agency and free will or what? What?

**Agnes:** No, it's because they conceive of agency. In somewhat narrow terms, so like here's an example. Suppose that you think of agency. Just in terms of decisions. So what it is to be an agent is to make a decision and maybe what it is to be an agent. Overtime is to make a series of decisions. Then you're understanding agency in a way that is reducible to what happens at kind of an instant right? A A decision happens in in some kind of an. Instant or short time? And. And I don't think you can decide to aspire. That is, I think aspiration essentially is extended overtime. It's a form of agency that is extended over. And so if you don't recognize that, it's possible to sort of be an agent in a way that's spread over time, then it's like you have this blind spot, right? It's a little bit like 1 analogy might be if you think of if you think of. You know, a physical description of the world as one that is true at any instant. Right? And then there's gonna be another description of, well, true in another instant. And the whole all of our suppose that. All of our physics were like. That OK, it kind of is now, but. Then it's like you wouldn't have a theory of. Because what you have is a theory of states, right? And you could you could analyze motion as like a succession of states, but you might have thought, well, no, there's this. There's this thing called motion that essentially takes place overtime. It doesn't take place at a series of instance.

**Bob:** It's fluid. It's not just a series of discrete states.

**Agnes:** Exactly right. And so aspiration is a little bit like that. It's like a kind of ethical motion that a person engages in. And so all you see are these punctuated decisions. It's like you don't have the right framework for seeing the, you know, another kind of agency.

**Bob:** OK. OK, so before we elaborate on your account of how the the kind of fluid the fluidity happens, I mean let me give you what what is the kind of counter argument you've probably heard which involves less agency maybe in your model, so 13 year old kid never had an interest in golf turns on TV. He's this guy. Tiger Woods. Everybody's showering adulation on him. The women love him. Guys like golf. That could be interest. Thing has a friend who plays golf, goes out, isn't bad. Get some positive reinforcement, the friend says. Yeah, you're not. You know, you're not bad. You've got kind of a natural swing. They go out again, you know, and and and and you get more and more positive reinforcement. You start getting a claim and and and and golf has its its internal. Positive reinforce. It just feels good to hit the ball where you meant to. We hit it and so I I don't know. On one hand, you know, you

could call that kind of fluid. On the other hand, there are discrete episodes of positive reinforcement. So you could look at it that way. But in any event, it's it doesn't seem to require much explanation, you know, and then eventually. You know, you ingrates to a relatively seamless process that you get to be like Tiger Woods, absolutely obsessed with organizing your life around what will maximize your success at golf. Right. You can imagine that happening through a series of steps. And on the one hand, you're the, you know, and you can see it, it not being really emphasizing agency in the sense that the basic mechanics, positive negative reinforcement is something you know we think we see rats as capable of as amenable to right. So what's wrong with. With that, that scenario where you say what's, what's the mystery? What more do we need to say?

**Agnes:** Yeah, I mean. I think a lot of that story that you told, I could just accept as being ways of describing some of the details of a case of aspiration. So I don't want to say the cases I'm talking about are different from that case. That's a perfectly fine case of aspiration. But what I want to say is like, look. At the person. At the end, look at Tiger Woods, right? And I'm. Do we think he got where he is by a series of like incentives that people would describe as driven, right? We would describe him as somebody who, at least it's maybe not when he was four years old, but at some point really started to see that he could be great without quite seeing what it would be to be great and to respond to the. World in a way, a great person. Us, right. Such that maybe by the end of that trajectory, he's like, as you say, has organized his whole life in this systematic way around golf and has perfected this. Way of being Tiger Woods, right? It's not like that happened by accident. That happened because he was trying to get there from maybe 5-10 years earlier when he had done some of it but could tell that he wasn't doing it as well. As he. Could be doing it? Yeah. So what is? I think, distinctive about this kind of diachronic agency is that when you're engaged in it, when. You're doing it. You have this sense that you're doing something not as well as you could. And not only that, but that you don't even quite sort of see the world in the way that you will when you do this thing better. So you're sort of reaching beyond your current grasp of like. How to be good at what you're doing? You're trying to be better. Even at being good at what you're doing, right? You're trying to better understanding what you're doing and what it is to be good at golf and what it. Is to see the world in. The way that a golfer does, I can't speak very particularly about that, cause I don't play golf. But but I think that you're sort of working your way into a point of view that when you get to the final Tiger Woods has like fully it's fully blown, right. And I think you could get someone a few steps, few early steps you could get someone going without them participating in that and without them in some sense driving themselves. When you're looking at the the you know, someone like Tiger Woods, it's it's a good case for me in the sense of it's clear. That he really needed to have. A hand in his becoming tiger.

**Bob:** I mean, in some ways, maybe he's a bad case for you because his father was so hands on. I mean, his father, I think, kind of decided he's going to be the great, you

know, from an early, I mean, Tiger Woods was like on TV when he was four years old, swinging a Golf Club. But anyway, there are athletes who who who have less hands on encouragement. And guidance early on and then they follow the path we described. So. So go ahead the the.

**Agnes:** Yeah, and it doesn't. I mean it sort of doesn't change the case like as I say, I think that for everyone there is some amount of environmental input, right. And it may be that for a lot of. The sort of. Greatest and most talented people, and especially for certain kinds of talent, right? Like famously, you know, chess. Or certain kinds of sports, right? Maybe there? Needs to be a lot of a certain. Kind of input. So that in terms of the the hand that they have and maybe it starts a little bit later, maybe a little bit less of it, right, and that's fine for me. My thought is just that it doesn't seem right to describe such people as fully a product of the values of other people. It seems like at some point their own. Value system kicks into gear. In a certain way.

## How Agnes views free will and self-creation

**Bob:** OK. And and and this is at the same time? You're making a statement. You know almost about metaphysics, right? You're saying there is such a thing as agency? Are you saying there is such a thing as as free will?

**Agnes:** Yes, I'm even saying something a little stronger than that. I'm saying such a thing as self creation so. A lot of ways talk about the self, OK and I don't sort of get into that in my book. But what I do is I kind of make an assumption that I think is like a plausible assumption, which is that yourself is very closely tied to your value. So like instead, like when Martin Luther King says, don't judge a person by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. What he means by the content of their character is their values. What's really important to them? What drives them, what is their life organized around. So if you'll grant me that your values are in some sense who you are, what yourself is, then. To the extent that your values are the product of your agency, you. Are the product. Of your you created yourself. Now I don't think anyone completely creates themselves for the reason I've already given that external practically. But I think that. And this is like, you know, I was saying that we make these assumptions in philosophy that would preclude the possibility of aspiration. So one of those assumptions is the impossibility of self creation, which is almost like kind of a little bit of a doctrine in philosophy. Nietzsche says that the idea of self creation is a rape and perversion of logic. It says that it is like trying to pull yourself by the hair out. Of the swamps of nothingness. It's like it's just absurd. How could you create yourself? Where's the root? That's gonna create you like it? Must have been. You already it almost looks like a logical. Contradiction. Even to talk about it, right? But what I want to say, because no, it's not a logical contradiction. It's possible it's actual. We've all done. And. So in terms of the metaphysical commitments, I'm not only committed to the usual forms of agency, right? Where in some sense, the usual

forms of agency start off with an agent that already has values. If you think about like the agent of economics and the home of economics, right? He's like a guy with some preferences and some values. And the question is how does he satisfy them? And his actions are going to be the things that he undertakes.

**Unknown:** The.

**Agnes:** That's fine. Well, my question is, how did you get? There, how do you? Get those preferences right, and I think there's agency there too. That is, there's not just agency. Once you have the preferences, there's agency. That's the word to. The preferences. That's the story I want. To tell and and so the the kind of agency that I'm talking about is like. Some sense even more metaphysically committal than the. Usual kind where acting from your preferences, yeah. I can talk more about the self creation. Thing, but that's the.

**Bob:** Yeah. Now it's interesting, I mean. Hurricanes are an interesting thing to think about. Hurricanes are sometimes called self organizing systems. I mean, they would be the the the metaphor invoked by someone who disagrees with you. I think because it does look like. You know it start. It becomes this thing that we talk about that, you know, looks like it wants to head here or, you know, is headed here and so on. And yet I think people would say all that said, we can, we can explain both its origins and its growth. In terms of just the you know its environment, as you know the laws of of physics and chemistry operating on it via its local environment, right? And you're saying that's a bad metaphor when it comes to to organic beings, at least our species.

**Agnes:** Right. Or at least it's not, it doesn't work. For all the cases.

**Bob:** Right.

**Agnes:** Well, there could be somebody who just ends up somewhere. OK, so. You know, we can imagine somebody who's through a series of accidents and through maybe she didn't even realize it was happening. Right and. You know, in a certain kind of life. One one way that one philosophers talked about this is drifting, OK, just right, drift into it and she wasn't headed there in any intentional sense or in any sense that is dependent on. Her attitudes on. Her mental states, right. She just ended up there. That's. Like the hurricane. Case and now the question is do. We want to have the philosophical resources. To draw a distinction between that case and some other cases that we think we've encountered in our lives, perhaps in our own persons, right. And like that is is it? Is it a possible self understanding for you to think that has been my?

**Unknown:** Life.

**Agnes:** And I guess because.

**Bob:** You mean? Then? I just drifted and been shaped by my environment. Nothing. Yeah. And I wasn't and some jeans, but those aren't, you know, those are just algorithms. So. So they don't they don't impart agents.

**Agnes:** That's environment. Yeah, it's another kind of environment, right. And I guess for me anyway, if I think about like, say becoming a philosopher or something,



right, you know, and what it was like for me as when I started as a grad student and I would attend talks and I would be so confused. And I would. Say to myself like, well, I have to ask a question even no matter how confused I am. And and you know that self depending back on that self, right? She would find it. We should find it almost incredible to think there's going to be a time where you're going to ask questions and talks and you're actually not going to be paying any attention at all to how smart other people think your question is. You're going to be. Listening for the answer, you know.

**Bob:** I'm still trying to get there. Have you gotten?

**Agnes:** There I usually yes, actually I'm and and. But so, so sort of like. But I look back on her and I'm like, yeah, her. Move for herself. You have to ask a question. Am I move for myself was if you literally understood nothing from the talk. I didn't really have this rule. I always had this question. Then you have to ask the question. I understood nothing from your talk. Could you summarize it for me very simply in one sentence. But that was like a kind.

**Bob:** Of threat to myself, right, by the way, the very few academics. And be able to do a good job of that, but I I digress.

**Agnes:** I never had to use it. It was like a threat. It was like if you don't come with a question to ask, you have to ask that one. That's so embarrassing. So and that motivated me to actually help with some other question. So I never used it, but I probably should. But I I guess my thought is that like that that thing that decision to always ask the question that wasn't just like something that happened and then like it kind of I ended up here right, there's a sense in which I was working my way towards an understanding of what philosophical conversation is and. What philosophical questions? Are and how to communicate in philosophy and what the ideas were? And it's absurd to me to think that's just something that happened to me. It's like. I had to work so hard, like I had to read all these books. I had to construct these arguments. I had to. I had to constantly be asking myself. Am I doing? This right or not, and that questioning am I doing this right or not? How could I do it better? The fact that that thought was always accompanying what I was doing. If I interpret myself as the hurricane that thought in a way becomes inefficacious. It doesn't do any explanatory work, but my intuition is that that kind of self monitoring is doing a lot of the explanatory work of somebody trying to gauge whether she's moving forward or not. MHMM.

**Bob:** Yeah, I mean maybe an intermediate scenario between the hurricane and yours would be a kind of like, you know, I'm, I'm not big on a kind of evolutionary psychology view of human nature. And it would be kind of like, well, we're designed by natural selection. To. To kind of adjust our way of being to the social status we've been accorded. So as you move through the hierarchy and now you're not a lowly graduate student, you're teaching students and graduate students and so on. And and you're just getting positive reinforcement. People are saying good things about you. You know, your serotonin level rises or whatever. And you just become less concerned with

what these people think about you, unless you suddenly go to a super high-powered conference where there's all these academics that are legends. And then suddenly you're very self-conscious about your questions. That's the way the brain, that's the way we're designed to be. It makes sense to be, you know careful when there are people whose esteem we can't take for granted and when they're worse, surrounded by people whose esteem we can take for granted to spend our resources in ways other than being worried about whether or not.

**Agnes:** And then.

**Bob:** They like us, right? So that that's not. That doesn't accord with your model right fully.

**Agnes:** No, but only because there's something you've left out which is that. Well, I'm. I'm. But even in this story, I can just think that which is that I think over time it's not just continuous response to positive reinforcement, it's that one learns more and more better and better to distinguish.

**Bob:** Your model.

**Agnes:** The which are the forms of positive reinforcement that matter, right one learns to become more responsive to the signals and to pick out the forms of reinforcement that are going to reinforce you in. The right sorts. Of ways and like early in the day, you can.

**Bob:** Hmm.

**Agnes:** You have a. Very crude response, right? And you know, like you learn overtime, you learn that like, for instance, when somebody makes a good object. Action to the thing in philosophy, OK, somebody makes a good objection. That means you've been really clear and you've made a point clearly enough that somebody could object to it. That's a. Kind of success. Right. Like it takes a little while to notice to learn that that's a kind of success and that's one of the things you're aspiring to do is to learn to see that as a success, right? And so you can't. Simply take reinforcement as like a data. Because reinforcement is itself something that falls within aspiration.

**Bob:** OK, so you so. This this self, this, this you has to kind of have evolved to recognize the the truly positive, the valuable positive reinforcement.

**Agnes:** Yeah, yeah.

**Bob:** I mean, it's not totally unrelated to this aspiration of mine to care only about the opinions of people I truly respect. That's especially important online cause you get these opinions from all these people, and if you could train yourself to only care about the opinions. Of people you who? Who's you know? We believe deserve respect that would save you a lot of. Trouble. But that's. But, but that's a that's kind of a tangent.

**Agnes:** Yeah. I mean, I think that there's a complication there, right. Which is that when you care about the opinions of everyone and not only people respect, it's not always because you're trying to aspire and you're looking for feedback and how to aspire. We're just in general, open and sensitive to other people it it matters like what they think of us.

**Bob:** Mm-hmm.

**Agnes:** Because that's part of what it is to live in a social world. And so I think that, you know, the Internet means we live in a much instantly, much more social world and that we're sort of like bombarded with people, like on Twitter or something like that. And it's very hard not to care at all. I think what people think about you and you wouldn't want to be. The kind of person who didn't care. Really. You know, kind of balance.

**Bob:** No, but. But I'd be happy being the kind of person I just described who, who, who didn't, who only cared about the opinion of a select group of people who had been very carefully chosen because you value their judgment.

**Agnes:** But what if you're wrong to dismiss the judgment of the other people? I mean, you might be just a little bit open to those other people because, like, what if you, you know, what if you selected that group poorly like, I guess, I think there's, I see a value in a certain kind of openness. There's something very unhuman about fixing 100 people being old. Think what anyone else thinks of me because.

**Bob:** Right. But there's something kind of paralyzing and excruciating about being at the other end of the spectrum. And I guess what I mean is like, there are people like on. Twitter. Who I I, they are such ideological adversaries. I have so little respect for the values they represent and the and the political goals they represent that if I'm wrong about that, I should like commit suicide or something. It it? It's so fundamental. I mean, I've just wasted my life. If I'm wrong about that and.

**Unknown:** And.

**Bob:** I mean, it'd be one thing if they made I I do think I'm open when someone makes an actual intellectual objection to something you're saying. Fine. I I think I. I think I go through the routine of of addressing that no matter who. Does. It right, but as you know in the online world of negative feedback rarely rises to that level or often doesn't anyway.

## How do you become the “you” that you want to be?

**Bob:** Let me let me ask you. So there's an interesting feature of your view. There's an interesting role play. Need by this kind of future you right? Like if you imagine that you have made this progress, you've become this great concert pianist. Or you've become dislike. I don't know this great meditator or something who's tremendously mindful or whatever. Whatever your goal was, you attribute an interesting kind of significance to that future person before that person exists. And in fact, when it's not clear that they will ever exist, right? I mean, talk, talk about, talk about that.

**Agnes:** Yeah. So that's actually key to my. Solution to the self creation problem, right? So there's a here's a paradox. Or here's one way to put a paradox about self creation. Suppose that my earlier self is going to like create the values of my later self. OK in that sense create my later self that earlier self you might think either needs to already have some commitment to those values and some understanding of why those

are the right values. Have or not? If they do. It looks like, well, the question we really need to answer is how did that earlier self come into being? Because it already has all the resources for, you know, being that person, right? And it's like, yeah, that person then follows the later self follows from the earlier self in this. Kind. Of almost like logical way as like a rational extrapolation. But that doesn't look. Like self creation, it just looks like a rational. Appalachian and it looks like we need to we push the story back one step and then we'll just have to retell the story. Right. OK, here's another possibility. The the those values were not in there earlier. Self right the earlier. Self had no comment to those values. Well, now it looks like OK, so like you randomly decided to acquire some values, right? Almost like you flipped a coin like here these values and it looks like that's not really self creation. That's some kind of like random, totally whimsical act even worse than readiness. You know where we're not going to really count. Something as an action, unless you had some grip on why you were doing what you were doing. So it looks like either way, self creation is impossible cat's dilemma. And I think something really right. About this dilemma that. Is it the dilemma doesn't get at some kind of like standards for what? Something. Would have to be in order to count.

**Unknown:** As a case.

**Agnes:** Of self creation. But I think the thing of the dilemma. Gets wrong is. That it presupposes that the attitude of the earlier self to the later self has to be 1, like creating or shaping or making or. Fashioning as opposed to something like looking up to aspiring, trying to become trying to live up to doesn't really different words, right? Really different kinds of attitudes. So I think the aspiration presupposes the possibility of having a conception of yourself that is a better version of the you that is now right. So the way that philosophers have traditionally tried to understand the case of self creation and which has made them fall into the first one of that. Limit is like, well, it's kind of like making a promise. Like I make a promise now that I'll do something later and similarly, like I make a value and then I later have that value. If you have that model then it looks like the earlier self is kind of the more robust agential self and the earlier self already has all the relevant commits. That's right. And. But you know what I want to say is like, it's more like seeing a certain prospect as promising right where you're like. Ohh. I'll get it when I'm there. I'll see the full thing when I'm there. I don't fully see it yet. And so if you weren't able to do this, if you weren't able to have to stand in this kind of relation to yourself. As something that can be in a better. Cognitive state and in a better desiderative state too. Than it currently is then. I think you couldn't aspire. But of course, to be in that state, it doesn't. Follow that that actually will happen cause you could just die or something.

**Bob:** So on the one hand, you're obviously not the person that you imagined in the future, because then you wouldn't have to aspire. You'd already be this, you know, if not perfect, much improved person. On the other hand, you understand enough. About what it means to be them, then you can use them as a kind of yardstick. You can imagine what? Like what they would think of.

**Agnes:** Yeah. Team.

**Unknown:** Yeah.

**Bob:** Go ahead, we're.

**Agnes:** Gonna. Yeah. And I I I guess I think it's not. You can't do that perfectly. If you could do it perfectly. You already be the person, but you have some sense of what it would be like. Say you're trying to appreciate classical music, OK? And say you do appreciate it somewhat, but there's this, you know, you'll listen to this piece of. Music and you're distracted. And you don't feel like listening anymore? But you can tell that the person who you're trying to become would be. The person who could listen. Like that. And you know, maybe you don't know exactly how they would listen, right? Like that person is gonna have a mode of attention that you don't have. And so you can't fully visualize yourself for yourself how that person would listen to this piece of music, what they would pay attention. But you can tell. Yourself that they. Would walk out the. Room, right. And so you have a kind of you can use them as a rough.

**Unknown:** Side.

**Agnes:** And it using them as a rough guide is supposed to move you a little way along so that like. Just getting yourself to sit. Through it, you might then. Be a little better at listening to it, and then the next time you're a little better paying attention. And you can. Tell Ohh that me now I have. A better conception of that. Me, that future me. And you know what she would be doing at this point is listening to the rhythm of peace or something like that. So part of what happens is that you're sort of left conception of that future. You. Guides you and allows you to engage in activities that then produce a slightly better conception of that future you until the point where you just are that you and you have a perfect conception.

**Bob:** Or not, as the case may be.

**Agnes:** You may never get.

**Bob:** There so. I mean, when you talk about this, I I don't think you mean this to be like a teleological view in the sense that the the future you is actually the future is actually causing the past to move toward it. But I I sense you almost mean something a little more than just, hey, imagine this you you'd like to be. And imagine that you passing judgment. But and try to earn the respect of this future you that you imagine, right? I mean you you almost. Mean like a little more? Than that or not, yeah.

**Agnes:** So what I do in the book is distinguish between causal dependence and normative dependence. So your later self is fully causally dependent on your earlier self because you can't go backwards. In time so. As a causal matter, the causal story is just the ordinary same, you know, chronological, causal story, but. In terms of women of dependence, I mean one way to think about it might be. You know, like sometimes there's a movie where if you miss the 1<sup>st</sup> 5 minutes of the movie, you're just not going to send the movie like the first 5 minutes are kind of crucial to understanding. That comes later. And then there's another kind of movie where it's only at the very end that anything makes sense. Sort of. Everything makes sense in the light of the end. The end kind of pins it all together like like like. Whose button doesn't change like

that, right? So what I want to say is that aspiration is kind of like that second kind of movie and you could call that teleological, right. But if you were to call it teleological, direct contrast term, like, what would you call the other kind of movie would be like archaeological, I mean, literally, that means the logos, the, the, the reason is in the beginning. And the ark, right? So and so there's a kind of increase of order, OK, such that like the the organization is really present at the end and it's in the light of that organization that's present at the end that we make. Sense of the whole. Process. So what that means for a case of self creation or aspiration is that. The person who makes the rules of the game is the person at the end. So the person whose opinion about whether or not you're succeeding or failing matters is the person at the end. Now that person doesn't exist when you're in the middle, right? But from the fact that they don't exist, it doesn't mean their opinion isn't. The one that matters, right? It's just that. You know, in effect you can't fully know whether you're doing things correctly or not, because the person whose opinion matters for judging you doesn't. Yeah, but it still could be true that that's the opinion that matters. It's sort of like it's then that I'll be able to say to myself it was a good decision to spend this summer doing intensive Greek. So you're sort of, you're sort of putting off or deferring the kind. Of full blame. Use of your capacity. For judging yourself. And the real full blown use comes at the end and so that's the sense in which you're normatively dependent your judgment wise dependent on the person that.

**Unknown:** MHM.

**Agnes:** You're going to. Become but that person. Is causally dependent on the work that you do.

**Bob:** So in this view, agency is related to the sheer cognitive capacity to imagine the future.

**Agnes:** Yes. So that, that that doesn't suffice, but that's certainly a necessary.

**Bob:** But if you didn't have that capacity, you would say you don't have agency like if my dog never does that and I have good reason to believe my dog never does that, then you would say my dog can't have agency. If my dog never imagines a future. Better him.

**Agnes:** Yeah, but that's also. True, not an aspirational agency of almost. Every kind that is.

**Bob:** Ohh so there is non aspirational age. Oh, I see. So people of non aspirational agency.

**Agnes:** Yeah. So remember. Suppose I'm trying to figure. Out what to have for lunch and I'm like.

**Bob:** OK.

**Agnes:** Well, I could have a sandwich, or I could have something, but I'm going to be having to say.

**Bob:** It doesn't involve like a new value. You're going to organize anything significant around.

**Agnes:** Exactly the way to think about it is that sometimes we're reasoning from our preferences from preferences we already have, and all we're trying to do is satisfy the preferences we already have. That's normal agency, but even there you need to imagine the future.

**Bob:** Right, right.

**Agnes:** Aspirational agency is reasoning toward preferences, right? It's a rational activity that ends in the having of preferences, and it's that activity that my claim is, you know, kind of definitely the place in the philosophical landscape unless we make a bunch of changes.

## Aspiration and the divine

**Bob:** OK, so the the role that this imaginary self plays psychologically is a little like the role of God in a religious person.

**Agnes:** Yes. I think that's right, I. Mean it depends so people. People understand God in a lot of different ways, but I think that for most people, like if you worship God right, then you see God as a kind of standard that you're trying to live up.

**Unknown:** Yeah.

**Bob:** All right.

**Agnes:** And you think in some sense, God makes the rules. That is, he hasn't.

**Bob:** This more evolved being, whose judgment deserves deference.

**Agnes:** Right. I mean in that case, you know it's not as though it's not because he's temporarily posterior in his evolution, right? Because God didn't need to aspire. Or anything like that. But it's just that he is a more of a normative authority than you are, and the basic idea of aspiration is simply the idea of operating with. Someone with? Kind of mental avatar of someone else is a normative authority. So you're right that the case of a religious person who worships God, they would have a kind of mental avatar of God as a normative authority where they're not necessarily trying to become God. In the ancient world or some of that. Idea, but in the modern world we don't think that we think that's that's impious, but they are as nonetheless using that to assess what they're doing.

**Bob:** OK. And there are, I mean this is only distantly related, but there are conceptions of. God. In which I don't want to say God is aspirational, but I. But I think like KR day show day in this Catholic theologian said, God is more in the. Omega then in the alpha. In other words, God is in the process of becoming as the as as humankind. Progresses and advances it. That that's bound up in the process of of God's own. In a sense, evolution.

**Agnes:** Yeah. So that makes sense to me in this, the one way to think about it would be like there's actually 2. I don't have discusses in the book, but there's two basic ways of understanding how aspiration might work. They're both compatible with the same book and one of them is finite, and one of them is infinite. So the finite aspiration

would be, look, I aspired to. Become a mother. Become a philosopher. Appreciate classical music. Maybe I'm done right and now maybe for the rest of my life, I'm just doing those non aspirational actions where I am satisfying. The preferences I already have. I think Aristotle handed you a lot like that, so that aspiration might show up like in your teens and 20s. Most of all, or something like that. And there maybe still a few that you're doing later, but that but it's a. Fun night process. And then the other picture of aspiration be more platonic, and it would be no. Your whole life is aspiration, your your, you're aspiring to a kind of perfection. Even if not God. But you're aspiring to. Be a kind of perfect version of the creature that you are, and it may not even. Be possible within a lifetime to. Be that right. So I think that the divine. If you bring in the divine in that way, then. That opens up the possibility. For this kind of infinite aspiration.

## **Agnes's forthcoming book on how Socrates changed the rules**

**Bob:** OK. So is there anything really fundamentally failed to mention about? I mean there's a lot in your book, but is there just a huge missing link in what we've?

**Agnes:** I don't think so.

**Bob:** OK. OK. Well, after that amount of reflection, I think we can invest some confidence in that in that judgment. Well, thank you for taking the time. So the book is aspiration to the agency becoming published by Oxford University Press. Are you working on?

**Agnes:** Yeah, and it just came out in.

**Bob:** Paperback too? Oh, it just came out in paperback. Yeah. So it's a bargain.

**Agnes:** Compared to what it.

**Bob:** Was before. Yeah. To what it was before. Are you working on on. What are you what are you aspiring to do? Or be now.

**Agnes:** I am writing a book on Socrates and refutation, and our current cantankerous. Intellectual culture that I. Hope Socrates will shed some light on.

**Bob:** Ah, and you are. You're very much drawn to the classical, to the, to the ancient Greek philosophers, right?

**Agnes:** Yeah, I was a classics PhD student for a while and I yeah. So about half of my research is in on Plato and Aristotle, but the other half is like contemporary ethics. So this book was my contemporary ethics book. My next one will be my.

**Bob:** OK. And Socrates, would you say he was rebellious or unruly?

**Agnes:** I don't think he was either. I think that. He. It's it's wrong to describe him either of those ways, because instead of thinking that he opted out of a certain game, a certain set of rules, it's more like he made a new game so and that maybe that's what every unruly person dreams of or something, but.



**Bob:** I like that idea.

**Agnes:** It's sort of like if you think of what you and I are doing, and now we're having conversation. There are rules we're following so many rules that you're not noticing. So like when you ask me questions, I don't get, like, all offended. How could you not think my book is true? Right. I am, like, grateful to you for asking good questions about it. And I'm trying to. I'm not trying to make speeches. That will persuade you of. The truth of my view. Through trickery, for example. OK, I'm just. Trying to like, say, what's true so. All these rules that are like they're so intuitive, we don't always follow them. We don't always see them followed in all forms. Of social media. But you wouldn't. They're like, so cliched. You don't need to state them, but for Socrates and Socrates as well, they did not exist, and Socrates kind of made them up. And one thing you see in the Socratic dialogues is him teaching them to people like, literally. Like, no, look, I'm not trying to hurt you. When I make an argument against you, what we're doing is we're looking for the truth. You. Have to actually explain that in those. Words. I'll just.

**Unknown:** Mm-hmm.

**Agnes:** Explain to people and you should tell me what you actually think. You shouldn't just pair it. What? You heard someone else say because it sounds fancy. I want to know what you think so that we can test. So it's in a way, people, I mean don't notices about this script dial is how striking it is that. He has to. Be explicit about that and that people are constantly misunderstanding what he's doing because the game doesn't exist yet. So I think we're playing a game that Socrates made-up and we might play it better if we understood better exactly how we got it started.

**Bob:** OK. I mean, so he did. He did break some rules, right? I mean, he was literally unruly. But he had a he. It was in the name of a cause. I mean, I would have been inclined to think you would say rebellious because. Because it was in the interest of doing something, he had a goal in mind it. And apparently you think one of the goals was to create a whole new game.

**Agnes:** Yeah, actually, sorry I said something. You would take it. Back, I said. You broke the rules. That's. That is the point of view that almost everybody has on Socrates. It isn't the point of view that Socrates has on himself. So Socrates does this amazing thing. I call it the socratis thing. Move. OK where what he does is you're like, hey, Socrates, you're being really rude. Or hey, Socrates. You're you know, you're you're getting in the way of my pursuit of wealth and fame or, hey, faculties, you're breaking the laws of the state. Socrates. You're not doing politics. We need to do. And he's like, no, no, actually, this is the real politics. This is the real wealth. This is the real thing. This is actually good behavior. Like Socrates, you seem to be being irreligious because you deny all the stories about the gods and like, really well, this is the real religiosity. So stop what Socrates takes himself to do is to sort of reinterpret the. Rules so that they work with his game and and he thinks he's actually playing the original game better and.

**Unknown:** MHM.

**Agnes:** A. There was a time when the student came to me and said, oh, I'm thinking of getting this Aristotle phrase. Tattoo a tattoo and I said, well, you should try to understand it. That's the real tattoo. That's a perfect example of Socratic. So it's like taking the turn and giving it a new meaning in that way. So I think that that's why I wouldn't call Socrates rebellious. It's like he had an incredible.

**Bob:** Thank you.

**Agnes:** Creative power with respect to the current. Existing system and to sort. Of reinterpret it in terms that. Works for him.

**Bob:** OK. And I guess he didn't persuade all of the relevant authorities that he wasn't actually breaking the rules.

**Agnes:** But he persuaded most of the people most of the time, because the really striking thing about Socrates is how long he spent not being killed. Right, old man. By the time they killed him, he'd been doing this thing, this incredible, subversive new game that, you know, sort of transformed politics and transformed argument and conversation and supplanted. All these different forms that already for decades, right, and no one stopped him for the longest time so. I think in a way we should remark on that too. It's like, yeah. Eventually they killed him.

**Bob:** Like Tiger Woods, you had a good run. So where can people find your stuff online? They can Google your unruliness essay. Are you on Twitter or Instagram or anything?

**Agnes:** Yeah. I'm on Twitter, not on Instagram.

**Bob:** Sure. What's your Twitter handle? Agnes Kellers imagine that AG-NESCALARD and I'm actually at Robert Rider WRIGHTER. Are you on any other social media?

**Agnes:** You know, I have a university web page at the University of Chicago. If you just sort of Google me, you'll see it and you can read a lot of my papers are. Up there if you want to read my papers.

**Bob:** Including one on the across Asia and how I guess how Socrates handled it right? Or handled the concept, yeah.

**Agnes:** Yes, yes. And I have a column a monthly column at the point magazine. So my column that just came out a couple days ago is on the Devil's advocate. And why the Devil's advocate is good? It's called the Devil's advocate's advocate.

**Bob:** OK. Plenty of resources to check out. Well, thanks so much Agnes for taking the time. Congratulations on the last book and good luck with. The next one bye bye.

**Agnes:** Thank you. Bye.

The Ted K Archive

Robert Wright & Agnes Callard  
The Philosophy of Aspiration  
Recorded: September 5, 2019. Posted: Sep 20, 2019

The Wright Show

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