

BOOK REVIEW MARCH 7, 2025

Socratic Wisdom for a Lonely Age

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Agnes Callard provides a dose of contrarian provocation in the service of the most fundamental questions.

THE ELKS, THE SHRINERS, AND THE BOWLING LEAGUES ARE too far gone to be mourned. Even [our dining has become solitary](#) if our cultural commentators are to be believed. Office communities breathe on life support, as do many churches. Face-to-face interaction of any kind, much less substantive conversation, is increasingly hard to come by. But who mourns the decline of philosophical conversation? It has virtually disappeared, even at colleges and universities, and its vigor is diminished even in its designated departments. Agnes Callard's new book, *Open Socrates: The Case for a*

Philosophic Life, seeks to revive philosophical inquiry not only as a hobby or a decoration but as something central to a life worth living.

Socrates is, as far as we know, the great inventor of the philosophical conversation, and his conversations, as recorded in Plato's dialogues, stand as both models and invitations. As Callard sees it, shared inquiry into deep questions provides a solution to life's most intractable difficulties. Paramount among those is the dangers of an unexamined life, a life where one has already begun to rely on thinking that has not yet been thought through. Callard coins the lovely catchphrase—"untimely questions"—for inquiries that get to the bottom of one's life, to the principles I rely on as I live and act.

Callard argues that, left to oneself, it is impossible to recognize one's own wrongness. According to a paradox by philosopher G. E. Moore, it is logically impossible to believe that one is right and wrong at the same time. The claim seems too strong. If Moore refutes skepticism about the external world by saying "Here is one hand," I refute his paradox every time I catch myself in a mistake. I can agree with a weaker claim: Recognizing a fault in one's fundamental commitments is extremely difficult. Likewise, if collaborative conversation is not the sole way out of the difficulty, it is certainly extremely useful. We do not always know what we believe until we open our mouths to speak. Others often see and hear us better than we can. Words and slogans become dead and stale when they are not reformulated for one friend's ears or another. We need help to see our way in life.

Callard lives what she preaches. I report from experience; we are friends of long standing. Her appetite for philosophical conversation is bottomless. Moreover, she is a highly effective evangelist for the life of the mind. Her nocturnal conversational gatherings, called Night Owls, draw Chicago's young people in droves, many of them newcomers to philosophy.

Callard's previous writing is provocative in the best way when she holds banal clichés to the fire. Are middle-class vacations transformative? No, travel is in itself pointless and it is silly to get grandiose about it. Should

we “forgive and forget”? No, anger has no natural limits. So Callard shatters the illusions of watery “niceness,” strayed a million miles from its historical origin in fiery charity. Such essays should provoke reflection on how we live, in accordance with their intention. Like her hero Socrates, by her earnest inquiry, Callard has provoked more than her share of defensive and hostile reactions.

Callard’s contrarianism is on full display in *Open Socrates*. So far as plausibility is concerned, the results are mixed; but for provocation, Callard can’t be beat. In the last third of her book, Callard applies her version of Socratism to contemporary life. Callard argues that “fighting injustice” is incoherent, seeking the results of a refutation through symbolic acts rather than reasoned argument. In a process she calls “politicization,” ideas that should be the object of shared inquiry become zero-sum games where victory can only imitate the victory of truth over falsehood. Such games are at best a distraction, at worst a source of wanton harms.

Social justice warriors are not Callard’s only targets: free speech defenders come under fire as well. Is freedom of speech a crucial principle for lovers of inquiry? Callard says no. Where freedom means freedom to be persuaded, i.e. to have one’s mind changed in a set direction, there is nothing free about it. She asks, “If persuasion is not hypnotic mind control, then what is it?” As Socrates argues in the *Gorgias*, persuasion relies on an illusion of expertise and produces a mere appearance of knowledge. It is not consistent with open-ended inquiry, in mutually acknowledged ignorance. The only free speech is inquisitive.

I found the chapter on equality particularly insightful. We think of ourselves as status-seeking creatures. But in conversation, Callard argues, we seek equality as well as status. We long to be a part of the conversation; it is one way we exercise influence on our environment. Callard is dead right. She brings to light an aspect of liberal education that is rarely noticed in our conversation-starved age: we are schooled in equality from learning together, taking others seriously, and being taken seriously ourselves.

My college teacher, Mera Flaumenhaft, would fix her eyes on you and ask what you thought about, say, whether free will was possible. She'd wait for you to answer until you wanted to die. To be taken seriously is the quickest way to become serious. In my own teaching, I find no sight more splendid than the face of a student who has been taken seriously as a thinker for the first time.

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Elsewhere, Callard is less convincing. Yes, our thinly symbolic political struggles are often incoherent. But we cannot convert every dispute into shared inquiry. Shared inquiry, however precious, comes to an end somewhere. We all reach points past which inquiry is impossible. We make up our minds, whether faced with practical necessity or with truths that strike us with overwhelming force. Settled minds mark the territory of politics and form the real nitty-gritty of community life. Moreover, resistance to inquiry is not commonly overcome.

When shared inquiry comes to an end or breaks down, a set of habits and talents beyond inquiry are needed: the prudent division of labor and power, the ability to speak and hear criticism, and the unsung love with which we come at last to accept one another as we are. There are missed opportunities for Callard here. Face-to-face conversation is most joyful when we exercise mutual influence, working together on a shared project. Yet as I see it, conversations matter even more when the chips are down, the minds are made up, and progress is impossible. I can seethe in fury at my colleague or my boss, in the absence of a conversation. The conversation brokers peace, even if absolutely nothing changes.

Contrarian as Callard is, I find her Socrates is too tame. The Socrates I know suggests that the world is fundamentally upside down. At issue is what Callard calls “the Socratizing move”: the claim that no matter what you think you want, what you really want is to practice philosophy. The great power-loving interlocutors, Thrasymachus and Callicles? What they really want is philosophical inquiry. Greed without limit? Lust without bounds? The ambition to rule the world? Vengeful bloodthirst? All of it at bottom amounts to a longing for philosophy.

Callard is right to recognize the Socratizing move as central to Plato’s depiction of Socrates. The question is how to interpret it. To me, it sounds close to a condemnation of the way most people live. In Callard’s optimistic picture, it is a sort of praise: Everyone is seeking the right thing, but they don’t know it yet. In her view, Socrates earnestly tries to help

hard cases like Euthyphro, Meno, or Callicles. Not only that: he is succeeding. Thanks to Socrates' examinations, his interlocutors are on the way to seeing that shared inquiry is what they really want. I find that this view sits poorly with the all-too-visible vices of these characters. Socrates's silence on the evident limitations of his speaking partners is one reason why Socrates' earnestness is usually doubted. By contrast, Callard seeks to unseat Socrates' reputation for "irony"—coy understatement and hiding his true views.

Callard's interpretation puts a wholesome pressure on those who claim Socratic irony. After all, in his most difficult conversations, Socrates does at least two things at once. On the one hand, in his apparent earnestness, he insists on the ideal conditions for philosophical conversation: Don't make long speeches. Don't repeat phrases learned from others. It only matters what you think. There is nothing worse for a person than a false opinion on the most important things. Callard gives an admirably clear and compelling account of this ideal.

Still, I think we must be invited—by Plato, if not by Socrates himself—to see that Socrates has ridiculed and humiliated Polus and Callicles, Thrasymachus, Meno, and Euthyphro. They are held out to the reader as negative exemplars, lives gone wrong, not as earnest seekers of insight. Nothing guarantees that we ever recognize what would be most ultimately satisfying to ourselves. Philosophy might bring them hypothetical happiness, but in possible worlds far distant from ours. Most likely, the vicious will die miserable. Later Platonist interpreters judged that the dialogues with wicked interlocutors taught readers the art of public humiliation so far as sophists are concerned. I think those interpreters were correct.

Asking untimely questions—questions about the foundations of the choices one is already living by—is extremely difficult. But why is it difficult? Callard thinks it is the difficulty of making oneself vulnerable to an interlocutor like Socrates. It is the loss of autonomy when one opens the conditions of one's life to someone else. So much might be shared by the virtuous and vicious: Callard's Socrates is not a moralist. Yet, as I see it, a complete account of resistance to Socratic inquiry must take into account basic facts of human nature: our appetites for pleasure, power,

and status, and the obstacles our appetitive habits place in the path of understanding.

Plato provides us not just with arguments, but with immortal images that stick in the mind and shape our longings: the cave, the ladder of love, the charioteer.

Socrates, in his autobiographical moments, discusses his early life as a natural scientist (*Phaedo*) and the possibility of spending time in historical literary criticism and the debunking of myths (*Phaedrus*). He judges the account of causes implied by natural science as inadequate, and he thinks the pursuit of self-knowledge is more worthy than the trivialities of rational criticism. Yet he never describes himself as a former hedonist or someone once ambitious for political power. The power of inquiry to free us from the passions is evidently limited; that may be why, in the ideal education described in the *Republic*, Socrates limits dialectic to a few vetted fifty-year-olds.

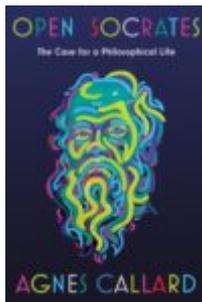
We never see in the dialogues any conversion from greed or ambition. Callard points to Alcibiades in the *Alcibiades I*, but as she notes, his conversion lies under the shadow of paradox and failure, if we take Thucydides' account of his life seriously. He never renounces his ambition to rule the world, and it is not obvious that his actions reflect deep inquiry into justice. What benefit has Socrates done him? If there is none, what use should we expect from Socratic inquiry in general?

When Alcibiades makes a drunken entry in the *Symposium*, he looks to be doing the opposite of Socratizing. Rather than turning his erotic desire for Socrates toward wisdom and knowledge, he tries to reduce his admiration for philosophy into a plain old sexual affair. It is a category mistake. You cannot gain someone's wisdom by having sex with them. When Callard refers to Socrates' multiple conversation partners as a type of polyamory, she risks a similar error.

As I see it, entrenched choices and habits, even though they drive us to ends that cannot satisfy us, can only be undone by something more than rationality, something closer to a conversion or a change of heart. Plato provides us not just with arguments, but with immortal images that stick in the mind and shape our longings: the cave, the ladder of love, the charioteer, and most of all, the image of the man who loved wisdom even

unto death. We can be freed from the bonds of devotion to the goods of appetite and ambition by falling in love with something else instead.

Readers of Callard may find themselves frustrated by arguments that swing from the deep to the superficial, from the profoundly true to the evidently false. Yet we live in a faceless age of governance by policies, algorithms, and other rigid mechanisms. We absorb pat formulations from machines, rather than learning with and through one another. We all need a dose of contrarian provocation in the service of the most fundamental questions. Let a thousand gadflies buzz, and let us join them in earnest inquiry, never tiring of the search until the days for searching are done.



REVIEWED

Open Socrates

by Agnes Callard

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