

JUST ASKING

Is Agnes Callard Making You Uncomfortable?

In the philosopher's world, provocation and controversy are inseparable from the examined life.

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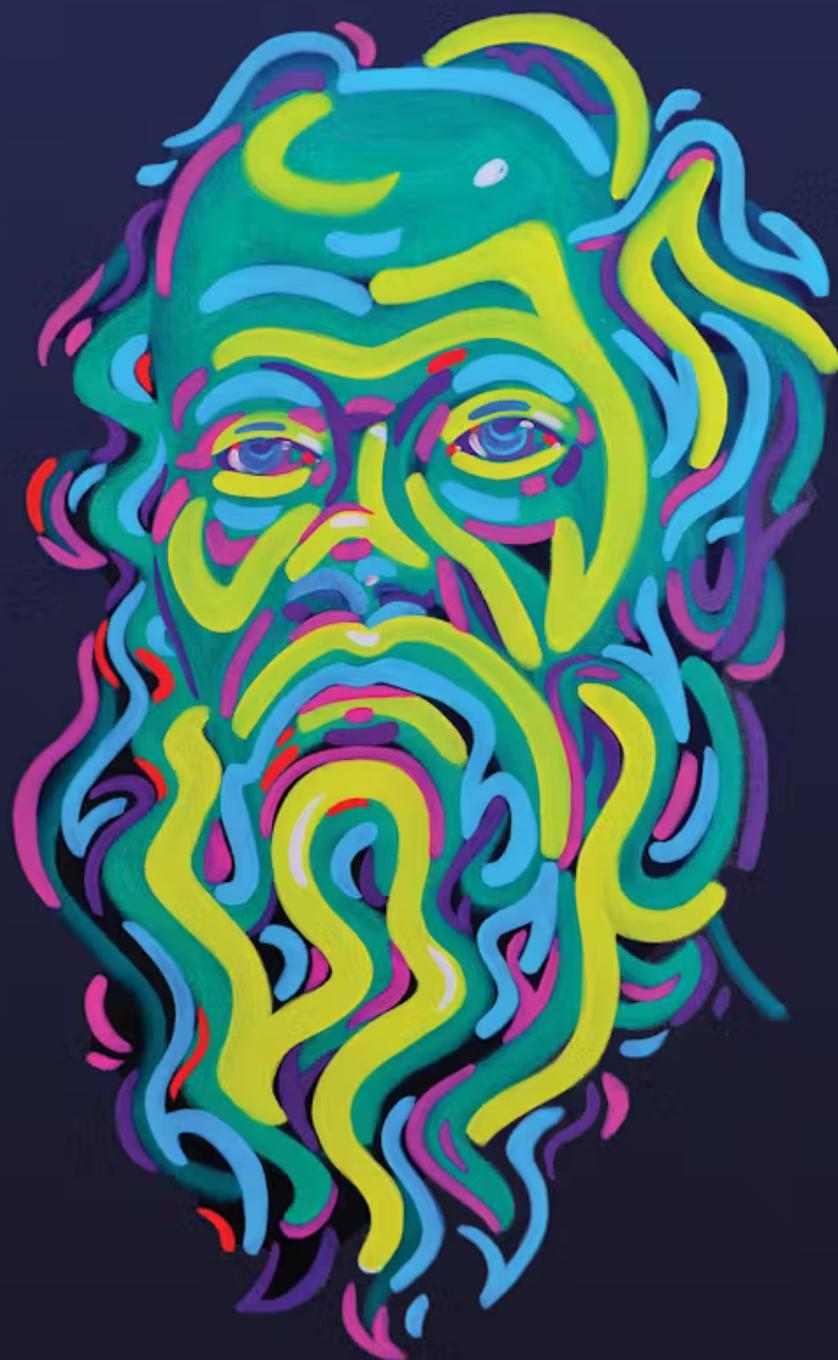
Laura Kipnis / January 30, 2025

Agnes Callard doesn't just admire Socrates, the philosopher forced by his fellow Athenians to drink hemlock in 399 BCE; she wants to be him. Entirely conscious of himself as an icon, Callard writes, Socrates "presented himself as a person one can become." Following in his path, she styles herself as the sort of philosopher who doesn't just do philosophy at work, but strives to live philosophically. Even as a college student, Callard tried to be a public philosopher in the Socratic mold, setting up shop on the steps of the Chicago Art Institute, the city's most agora-resembling locale, inviting random museumgoers to engage in philosophical conversations. Those who accepted her invitation were grilled with questions about the meaning of life.

The non-modest mission of her sprightly new book, *Open Socrates: The Case for a Philosophical Life*, is to develop a strand of ethical thought that she labels "Neo-Socratic," and which departs entirely from the prevailing ethical systems of Kant, Mill, and Aristotle. Among the challenges of the project, she notes, is that Socrates was content to refute everyone else's positions while affirming nothing concrete himself, meaning that his philosophical heirs do a lot of performative contradiction, which is not sufficient. Nor is what we like to call "the Socratic method"—teaching by asking questions until students produce the correct answers—what Socrates had in mind. Such attempts to mimic him miss the point, which is that true thinking should be dangerous to your intellectual equilibrium. It should strive for answers that overthrow the terms of the questions being asked, not simply prove a point.

OPEN SOCRATES

The Case for a Philosophical Life



AGNES CALLARD

Open Socrates: The Case for a Philosophical Life by Agnes Callard

Buy on Bookshop

W.W. Norton & Company, 416 pp., \$35.00

The failure to be sufficiently or dangerously philosophical besets most academic philosophers, she charges, who take off their philosopher hats when they arrive home after teaching their classes, shielding their lives from the kinds of inquiries that might disrupt their comfortable existences. They're *afraid* of philosophy, and not actually doing it.

Callard is a University of Chicago moral philosopher with a madcap streak, and a perpetually controversial figure for making offbeat public pronouncements and unconventional romantic choices, and turning both into the subject of her philosophizing. She also hasn't been afraid to capsize her life.

When the stunningly handsome young Alcibiades propositioned his mentor, Socrates, with whom he was tormentedly enamored and desperate to get into bed, Socrates virtuously repelled his acolyte's advances, or so Plato recounts in *The Symposium*. In Callard's case, when one of her graduate students confessed his love, she decided within days to leave her marriage to a philosophy professor with an appointment in the same department, whose name she shares and with whom she had two young children.

She and the grad student married a year later; he now teaches in the same department. (Though she reported the relationship to her chair, Callard was also untenured at the time in a notoriously male-dominated discipline, to which I can only say, "*Chapeau!*") To the profound annoyance of many, the three not only lived relatively happily ever after, they all moved in together, with Ben Callard co-parenting the two, and eventually three, children, as detailed in a 2023 *New Yorker* [profile](#) of Callard by Rachel Aviv.

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In short, along with her intellectual avatar, Callard is an impious provocateur and corruptor of youth, parading her succession of philosopher-husbands around town

—or so her online accusers charge. Like Socrates, she’s been tried and found guilty by her community: A [thread](#) on the University of Chicago subreddit titled “What’s the deal with Agnes Callard?” has upward of 200 posts, debating, among other Callard-related topics, whether her recent work is or isn’t definitely just “one giant justification for leaving your spouse for a grad student.” (The grad student himself says something similar in the Aviv profile: “Your entire philosophical career is a discussion of our marriage, in one way or another.”)

A self-described “over sharer” who publishes nonacademic and personally revealing essays on subjects like love, jealousy, and marital erotics in venues like *The New York Times* and *The Point* (where she has a monthly [column](#)), Callard sometimes seems to be reverse-trolling her haters. An insouciant, fast-talking philosophical whirlwind, she staged, along with her affable ex-husband, Ben, a three-hour, standing-room-only seminar on “The Philosophy of Divorce” on campus ([available](#) on YouTube), where the two probed each other on questions such as “What is trust and why is it important in marriage” and whether divorce is bad for children, while fielding questions from a knowingly chortling audience on *Divorce Court* subjects like monogamy and promise-breaking.

Callard claims she tries to stay out of trouble. The problem is that symbolic traps cluster near the culturally interesting topics. Romantic life aside, she’s stirred controversy by questioning verities on matters that include crossing the picket lines of striking grad students ([she did](#)) and slavery ([polling](#) her Twitter followers about whether they’d prefer to be slaveholders or slaves if they could go back in time), or by [discussing](#) with a roomful of people at a philosophy conference where she was a panelist whether, having found herself unexpectedly pregnant, she should have an abortion. She even managed to create an online shitstorm by [posting](#) about throwing out her children’s Halloween candy while they were asleep, which prompted (online) accusations of child abuse.

Callard admits she can be a bit much for some people: She’s a flashy person who makes herself the center of every conversation, with a propensity for dressing in loud, childlike patterns paired with clashing clown-color tights. She [documents](#) these vivid outfit assemblages on social media and has shouldered an outpouring of criticism for them in the replies. She also appears to track her haters as closely as they’re tracking her, quoting some of the more unkind reactions to Aviv’s profile in an *Atlantic* [column](#); in a *Times* opinion [piece](#) titled “If I Get Canceled, Let Them Eat Me Alive,” she advises friends and associates not to speak up in her favor the next time the pitchfork brigades come for her.

Knowing some of the Callard backstory makes reading *Open Socrates* interestingly

complicated. If a willingness to upend your life is what it means to live philosophically, is she proposing her own as a model? When she writes, “If you are on trial for your life, and you have the chance to tell the jury one story about yourself, then you will take great care to select the right one,” is she referring to Socrates’s trial or recounting the story of his trial in her own defense?

We’re not born with the knowledge of how to live, yet we want to live lives that make sense—that’s what it is to be human, Callard and Socrates believe. But we spend most of our lives floundering around, improvising stopgap solutions. Philosophy is the answer to this need.

The method Callard proposes to achieve the requisite self-knowledge to lead a meaningful life is the “untimely question.” “There’s a question you are avoiding,” is the book’s opening line. “Even now, as you read this sentence, you’re avoiding it.” The good news is that the resistances we organize our lives around are actually the paths to truth and wisdom. The bad news is that we assiduously evade taking them, feigning busyness and obligations as avoidance strategies. “You appear to be afraid of something,” Callard observes with a characteristic bit of wicked glee. These fears map our inner worlds; these unasked questions define us.

Premature answers to untimely questions are worse than no answers. Yet the need to know how to live subjects us to a desperate logic, deforming our answers. If we need to believe in the choices to which we’re committing at the very minute we’re committing to them, the impossibility of the untimely question is that, by definition, it comes too late: You’re already using the answer to lead your life. The only way to freely answer the untimely question is to saw off the branch on which you’re standing.

Adding to this impossibility is that such questions largely concern our relationships with other people. Asking whether you still love your spouse or are merely habituated to your life—what Callard calls “load-bearing” answers—can cause pain and trouble. As anyone who’s ever asked an untimely question knows, once it’s asked, there can be no going back. It’s only easy to perform such a procedure when you don’t deeply care about the answer.

In an engagingly quirky move, Callard enlists a second intellectual avatar to explicate the problem: the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy, who becomes her anti-Socrates and foil, notwithstanding that she clearly loves his novels. Despite the acclaim his books received, despite his riches, health, and happy marriage, he suffered a major existential crisis and prolonged depression at around age 50, as he recounts in *A Confession*. Suddenly nothing seemed to matter. “And then what?” he

sat around asking himself. If he didn't know what his life meant, why not kill himself? Religion provided some relief, but that was a salve, not an answer. He eventually concluded there wasn't an answer.

That's not good enough for Callard, who names this enthusiasm for premature answers "the Tolstoy problem." In contrast to Socrates, Tolstoy evaded the important questions. He didn't try and fail to find the answer, as per his account, he failed to try. He confused his failure to press the question with the conclusion that there wasn't an answer.

Tolstoy's supposed philosophical failure is Callard's template for "the troubling fact that each person routinely fails to confront the most important questions about their lives." Being Tolstoy, he was at least able to displace these failures onto his fictional characters—*The Death of Ivan Ilyich* is basically "the Tolstoy problem" in the form of an anguished novella—but in *Open Socrates*, Tolstoy is the name for failure.

Socrates was poor, famously ugly ("bug-eyed, snub nosed, and goatish"), prone to boastful pronouncements, and he never actually wrote anything himself, leaving the task to a retinue of adoring scribes, Plato foremost among them. He liked conducting his philosophizing in the form of dialogues, something Callard lauds him for, though a historian might point out something that Callard does not, which is that this was normal at the time: It was still a predominantly oral culture.

Where Socrates became a nuisance was in guiding these dialogues toward subjects that needled his audience and made them maximally uncomfortable—friendship, justice, piety. He saw himself as a gadfly sent by the gods to awaken sleeping Athenians from their ignorance, but also as a midwife to help others birth ideas. (His mother was, in fact, a midwife.) Callard refers to this as "the Gadfly-Midwife paradox"—how could he be both these things, if playing the gadfly meant devoting himself largely to the destructive activity of refutation?

Was thinking he could simultaneously expose people's blind spots and clarify their existences a bit of hubris? Was his propensity for asking questions designed to pull the rug out from "load-bearing" spots and reveal his victim's errors a little self-righteous? No wonder they wanted to get rid of him! Even at drinking parties, when guests were making speeches in praise of the god of love, Socrates, "ever the wet blanket," would insist on defining terms—What is love? What is a god?—instead of just joining in.

He was at least self-aware enough to realize he was "getting unpopular," as he

reported in Plato's *Apology*. But the operative question is: To what extent can we really see ourselves? Are we in some inbuilt way "self-blind"?—after all, the eye can't see itself seeing. Which is why thinking is a two-person job, in the Socrates-Callard view.

If we're thinking historically, it was the arrival of print culture and literacy that privatized thinking, not philosophical error, but Callard doesn't see subjectivity in historical terms (hence Socrates and Tolstoy can be timelessly juxtaposed). In her vocabulary, this is rather the "Tolstoy problem" in disguise—since none of us can subject our "load-bearing" beliefs to sufficient evaluation on our own, we need the help of others to clarify our beliefs: "Refutation cures normative self-blindness." Needless to say, the refuters run certain risks, especially when an untimely question is untimely for only one of the parties. If you ask someone, "Do you think that you and your spouse will stay married?" they have a lot more invested in the answer than do you.

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It turns out that people through the ages have found it insulting to be told—especially in front of an audience—that their thinking is erroneous. Socrates maintained that his procedures weren't ego-driven or fueled simply by an "eagerness to win," but his interlocutees sometimes felt they were losing face. Where others found him irritating, Callard reads his "naked vulnerability"—treating others as the source of answers—as a radical feature of his method. Thinking for her requires letting other people intrude in your private mental world to correct you. At best, it's a kind of love.

At the age of 70, Socrates was put on trial and sentenced to death. Though he argued with the jury's verdict—he hadn't been impious or corrupted any youths, as charged—he still willingly downed the cup of hemlock. He understood that his fellow citizens' desire to kill him was driven by fear: They were afraid of being asked to account for their own lives. (I wondered if Callard sees her critics similarly.) His friend Crito tried to arrange an escape, but he refused: Facing death philosophically was part of the philosopher's role. He passed his final hours inquiring into the immortality of the soul.

The reason Socratic ethics—or Socratizing, as Callard verbs it—hasn't been more widely taken up, she thinks, is that it's an intellectualist theory, and most of us are aversive to intellectualism. Though accustomed to thinking of myself as a thinker,

reading Callard I often felt as the Neanderthals must have on encountering Homo sapiens—Is all this thinking really necessary? My nonphilosopher brain began to seize from epistemological overdrive when Callard spent roughly four pages elaborating every possible implication of the question, “Where are my keys?”

Those who choose philosophy as a field, especially as currently shaped by the Anglo American analytic tradition, are people who find purpose in scraping away at sentences “until the content of the thoughts underlying them was revealed, their form unobstructed by the distorting structures of language and idiom,” as the philosopher Nikhil Krishnan puts it in *A Terribly Serious Adventure: Philosophy and War at Oxford, 1900–1960*. The ordinary mortal just wants the goddamned keys.

Callard can be funny on this culture clash between philosophers and nonphilosophers, or, as she labels it, the “primal scene” that plays out in every intro philosophy class. (A term doubly funny to someone psychoanalytically inclined, for whom it signifies the lasting horror of stumbling on your parents having sex.) I did learn from Callard that there’s a philosophical school known as “dialetheists,” who see knowledge as contradictory because the nature of the world is contradictory. This sounded exactly right to me—why not just hold one’s beliefs lightly, treat knowledge as provisional, incomplete, contradictory? To Callard, such imprecision is insufficient: It’s not the world that’s faulty, it’s your thinking.

While I admire the oddity of Callard’s identification with Socrates, it’s a dilemma for the book that she comes across as a more appealing figure than Socrates himself, who can seem like kind of a jerk. Callard dismisses this response as characteristic of first-year philosophy students, but is their (and my) failing to be as stirred by his timeless genius our philosophical naïveté, or is it a failure of Socrates to rise to the moment? Insisting that “everyone desires the good” doesn’t suggest he’s entirely the man for our times.

Something that’s always struck me as weirdly fascinating about academic philosophy is the frequently antic Laurel and Hardy quality of the examples, the offbeat little illustrations—fat men being thrown off trolleys regularly feature—that seem so at war with the aridity of its insights.

Callard’s vignettes, too, are often a little antic. She likes to draw out psychological paradoxes, taking a Martian’s-eye view on human propensities—for instance,

people's puzzling preference for speaking over listening, and impatience when forced to be quiet. Why should this be so? When cake is being handed out, and it's a yummy cake, we'd rather be the person on the receiving than the giving end, as with most goods. Why doesn't it work this way when cognitive goods are on offer?

I was reminded of Tolstoy's numerous defensive overtalkers—Levin, Pierre Bezukhov—and I wondered if, on such matters, this most psychologically shrewd of novelists might offer (feeble philosopher though he was, at least in Callard's verdict) a better caliber of insight into such foibles than the sure-footed yet psychologically obtuse Socrates. There's a subtext of aggressive neediness in overtalking that's usually absent in cake.

What if Tolstoy, not Socrates, were actually the hero of Callard's story? It's clear that she's closely read his novels, which she quotes extensively even while flogging him for failed self-knowledge. I began to wonder how much the pull toward narrative in her writing, which makes the book a more delightful read than it might otherwise have been, reflects his influence. We hear about Callard imagining herself as Socrates, but is there a level at which she might also like to be Tolstoy?

If I were writing Callard's next act, just for fun I'd send her down the path that Iris Murdoch carved out between fiction and philosophy. Murdoch, another sexually renegade moral philosopher, was part of the mid-twentieth-century Oxford crowd that included such notables as Gilbert Ryle and J.L. Austin. She's probably now better known for her psychologically intricate novels (I'm a devotee; someone needs to resume this franchise) than for her philosophy, and for the movie about her life based on her husband John Bayley's brutally candid memoirs. Some thought the memoirs had a whiff of payback, perhaps for her frequent infidelities.

None of us is born knowing how to live. If we trudge by rote through mostly unexamined lives, those who treat life as a question mark or a moral experiment may become the stuff of legend, but also sometimes cautionary tales. Veer too far off script and the haters will make their presence known, sometimes ones you've married or spawned, or attempted to elucidate. Juries will be convened, the cups of venom handed out.