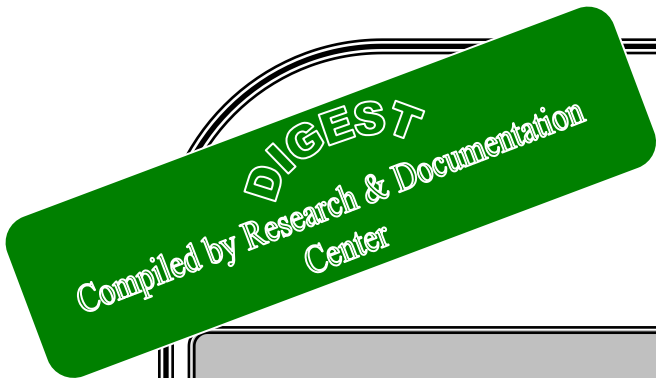




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Contents

- 1. **BRICS Seek to Rebalance the Present Global Order**
Martine Bullard, Lemond Diplomatie, October 2023..... 1
- 2. **Is the West Escalating the Ukraine War?**
Arta Moeini, UnHerd,18 February, 2023.....6
- 3. **Black Iraqis have been invisible for a long time. Their vibrant culture and struggle must be recognized.**
Sarah Zaaimi, Atlantic Council, March 24, 2023..... 10
- 4. **Agnes Callard’s Marriage of the Minds**
Rachel Aviv, The New Yorker, March 13 ,2023..... 13
- 5. **Will ChatGPT replace human writers? Pinker weighs in.**
The Harvard Gazette, February 14, 2023 26

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BRICS Seek to Rebalance the Present Global Order

The BRICS group began as an economist's catchy acronym for four emerging economies. It's now a growing international organization that many states are eager to join. What's its agenda?

Martine Bullard, Le Monde Diplomatique, October 2023

There was an unusual flurry of diplomacy this summer, with two international summits particularly noteworthy for being hosted by South Africa and India, neither part of the Western world. Hard on the heels of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) summit in Johannesburg (22-24 August) came that of the G20 in New Delhi (9-10 September). This accident of scheduling pointed up the differences between the two bodies and the world views they represent.

Before Johannesburg, observers said the BRICS summit was doomed to fail, or would be paralysed by disputes between India and China, but the group showed its vitality by announcing six new members from January 2024 — Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Some commentators saw this enlargement as a historic turning point, others merely as a PR coup. Neither reaction may be quite right, but what is certain is that more than 20 further countries are currently hoping for admission.

The G20 summit was expected to see the West make a comeback after the recent challenges to its dominance from the countries of the global South. But it failed to impose its worldview, and in some respects lost ground. The final statement of the 2022 summit in Bali had deplored the 'aggression by the Russian Federation against Ukraine', but the Financial Times noted that the New Delhi declaration 'refers only to the "war in Ukraine", a formulation that supporters of Kyiv such as the US and NATO allies have previously rejected as it implies both sides are equally complicit ... a blow to western countries that have spent the past year attempting to convince developing countries to condemn Moscow and support Ukraine'. The South condemns the war, but rejects the Western narrative.

The 2023 G20 summit did see the admission of the African Union (on the same footing as the EU), which may signal greater openness. But it's unlikely to change the balance of power. To distract from the disappointment of the New Delhi summit, the White House and its friends in the media focused on US president Joe Biden's unanimously welcomed proposal to create a trade corridor linking India to Europe via the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Israel, which will include a railway, a submarine cable and a hydrogen pipeline. European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen enthusiastically described it as 'much more than just a railway or a cable. It is a green and digital bridge across continents and civilisations.'

The corridor's route is uncertain and its funding yet to be secured. At last year's G20 summit, Biden floated the idea of a Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII) to counter China's Belt and Road initiative, but the money expected to flood in has been a trickle at best. Meanwhile, the rest of the world has come up with its own corridors, including the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), linking notably Russia, Iran and India, soon to be joined by Turkey, Oman and Kazakhstan. The success of the Johannesburg summit is further proof that the West's development promises are not enough to recruit poor and emerging countries to its cause.

Making the acronym a reality

To gauge how far the BRICS have come, it's worth remembering the term was coined in 2001 by Goldman Sachs economist Jim O'Neill. He didn't include South Africa, and the final small 's' merely indicated a plural. The BRICs were not yet a formal group and O'Neill's aim was simply to highlight their rapid economic growth. As his colleagues Dominic Wilson and Roopa Purushothaman later put it: 'If things go right, in less than 40 years, the BRICs economies together could be larger than the G6 [the world's six richest countries]'.

The original four BRICs, then in talks with Western countries aimed at rapid liberalisation of trade across all sectors, decided to make the acronym a reality and met for the first time in Russia in 2009, then in Brazil in 2010, and China in 2011, when South Africa became a full member. The BRICS are now a formal group and this year's summit was their 15th such event.

The BRICS group is not run-on conventional lines, with a permanent director, secretariat etc. The country hosting the annual summit assumes the presidency for 12 months; an advisor and deputy advisor from each member country plan it; and decisions are taken by consensus. In other words, whatever the members' opinions of each other, the decision to admit the six new members in January 2024 was unanimous.

Americans are shocked by the idea that China is not taking the place that the US has assigned it in the America-led international order... most nations refuse to choose between a US that is essential for their and a China that is essential for their continued prosperity.

The criteria for admitting new members are unclear. Algeria believed its membership was a done deal thanks to Russia's support, and was sorely disappointed not to be admitted. It's likely that its long-running diplomatic disputes with Morocco outweighed the strength of its economy.

Economic interests are naturally important in the choice of new members. It's clear that Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Iran and, to a lesser extent, Egypt can contribute much on the energy front: the

11 members of what will be known as the BRICS+ control more than 54% of the world's oil production, which gives them clout. Brazil, China, Russia and South Africa also have some of the world's largest deposits of rare earth metals, vital to high-tech industry, and China already accounts for more than two thirds of global production. Argentina is one of the world's largest producers of wheat, soya and beef.

High-value agriculture sales

Researcher Sébastien Abis notes that with Russian grain, Iranian saffron and pistachios, Ethiopian coffee and sesame, and Egyptian oranges and onions, the group will 'account for 23% of global agricultural sales (by value), compared with 16% at the beginning of the century'— which gives it significant weight on the markets and enables it to provide food aid to poorer countries, boosting its influence.

Geopolitical considerations are never far from the BRICS group's minds. This applies not only to China but also Brazil, whose president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva 'plead[ed] for [his] Argentine brothers to be permitted to join' with the aim of helping his counterpart Alberto Fernández (struggling in the run-up to the presidential election on 22 October) and at the same time strengthening the mutually profitable development of Brazil's fourth-largest trading partner (after China, the EU and the US).

Lula's efforts may fail, since both of Fernández's main opponents have made it clear that they would not take Argentina into the BRICS if elected. Javier Milei, rising star of the far right, even said, 'I will not talk to the communists [China and Brazil], under any circumstances.

In the Middle East, it's no surprise that Iran (a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (since 2021) and Saudi Arabia are to be admitted. Early this year, under the auspices of Beijing, the two countries resumed diplomatic relations, which Saudi Arabia had broken off in 2016. It's easy to see why Xi Jinping was keen to have them in the BRICS. But Indian prime minister Narendra Modi, who met Iran's foreign minister in New Delhi last year, was also positive about its admission.

India already has close economic links with Iran and, moreover, has no intention of allowing China to occupy centre stage. As mentioned earlier, the countries are linked by the INSTC corridor, and trade between them, though still modest, is growing rapidly despite US pressure. Last year India's exports to Iran rose by 44% and the total value of trade between the two reached \$2.5bn.

Egypt now a key player

The surprise admission of Egypt may be due to Cairo being the base of the Arab League — which Xi Jinping wants to honour because it supports his policy (on the Uyghur Muslims) in Xinjiang — but there is also the fact that Egypt controls the Suez Canal. Egypt is therefore a key geostrategic player. Moreover, China has close links with Ethiopia, an important staging post on its new silk

road (the Belt and Road initiative), and may be hoping to score another diplomatic success by helping it resolve its dispute with Egypt over the Renaissance Dam, which Ethiopia has built on the Blue Nile. China wants to establish itself as a peacemaker, while accusing the US of sowing division and war across the world.

Is the BRICS enlargement the start of an antiliberal, anti-Western political bloc? The Johannesburg declaration is unambiguous. It does not promote an alternative economic model. Just like a Western organisation, the BRICS group sings the virtues of free trade agreements (and of public-private partnerships, though it's well known that the public sector pays while the private sector reaps the rewards) — two examples among others.

The BRICS are not creating an anti-Western front in geopolitical terms either. Nor any kind of united front. Indeed, the group's two giants, India and China, regularly clash militarily on their Himalayan border. And no sooner was the Johannesburg summit over than China's natural resources ministry published a map laying claim to disputed land on that border. The claim was not entirely new, but is totally unacceptable under international law. Meanwhile, India is taking part in the US-led Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or 'Quad', intended to counter China's rise. In the Middle East, the UAE and Saudi Arabia host US military bases, while Egypt — the second-largest recipient of US aid after Israel — has further strengthened its security partnership with Washington. No one wants to overturn the international order, but they do hope to change it.

Today's global governance structure reflects yesterday's world... They must reform to reflect today's power and economic realities, as UN secretary-general Antonio Guterres put it. The Johannesburg declaration also calls for greater representation of emerging market and developing countries, in international organisations and multilateral fora in which they play an important role'. It lists the major issues to be addressed and calls for a review of the weight assigned to each country on IMF bodies ('quatas') and reform of the UN, including its security council, to allow developing countries 'including South Africa, Brazil India' to play a great role, something China has until now opposed.

But the 'old world', led by the US, won't hear of it, horrified at the thought of sharing power with previously subordinate countries. Graham Allison of Harvard University says, 'Americans are shocked by the idea that China is not taking the place that the US has assigned it in the American led international order'. China long accepted this position, but has realised since the 2008 financial crisis that it would never be treated as an equal. It is not alone in feeling the injustice of the present international order, but it has the economic and financial means to take others with it — which explains the success of this year's BRICS summit.

The Johannesburg declaration underscores 'the importance of encouraging the use of local currencies [instead of the US dollar] in international trade and financial transactions between BRICS as well as their trading partners'. This is already up and running, even if dollar-based transactions still dominate.

The mechanism for mutual aid in case of a crisis (the Contingent Reserve Arrangement) has also been strengthened and membership of the BRICS group's multilateral development bank (New

Development Bank) has been extended to countries that can contribute funds, such as the UAE. The BRICS are arming themselves financially.

In other words, the Johannesburg summit shouldn't be viewed through the lens of the past. The BRICS group is neither a diplomatic courtship dance, nor an alliance on NATO lines, but reflects the ability of emerging countries to enter into pacts according to their national interests — not just because they are members of an ideological camp, as during the cold war. In fact, as Allison explains, 'most nations refuse to choose between a US that is essential for their security and a China that is essential for their continued prosperity.' But their differences don't rule out working together for a new global order. That's already happening.

Is the West escalating the Ukraine war?

Arta Moeini, UnHerd, 18 February, 2023

Barely a day had gone by from Ukraine's successful request for German Leopard-2 tanks when the government in Kyiv called on NATO countries to yet again prove their solidarity by supplying it with US-made F-16 fighter jets. While military experts doubt these vehicles will significantly alter the situation on the battlefield, Kyiv touts them as important symbols of Western political resolve.

"War is a continuation of policy with other means," wrote Clausewitz in 1832. A year into the Russo-Ukrainian War, what is that policy where Ukraine is concerned? Or America, Germany, and other NATO allies? Are Ukraine's repeated calls for more support and the West's accommodating response a case of leveraging "strategic publicity", performative diplomacy, alliance solidarity, or something else entirely? After all, as much as the Ukrainians are fighting Russian forces and suffering massive casualties to protect the territorial integrity of the Ukrainian state, today NATO is openly engaged in a proxy war that risks spiralling into a catastrophic conflict between the West and Russia.

Although foreign policy realism can help sketch, even predict, the general contours of the war and explain policy in Moscow and Kyiv, this mainstream realist position, as represented by the likes of John Mearsheimer, provides an incomplete account of the behaviour of most Western allies, especially the United States. To understand *Western* decision-making and the peculiar inter-alliance dynamics of NATO, we need a more radical realism that takes seriously the non-physical, psychological, and "ontological dimensions" of security —encompassing a state or an organisation's need for overcoming uncertainty by establishing orderly narratives and identities about its sense of "self".

Still, "structural" realist accounts — centred on systemic anarchy, physical security, the balance of power, and political dimensions of strategy — can help explain aspects of Ukraine's strategic decision-making. In a recent study for the Institute for Peace & Diplomacy, which I co-authored, we investigated the structural reasons that drive Ukraine's strategic calculus. We suggested that, as a "regional balancer", Ukraine took a massive risk in defying the Russian redlines about Kyiv explicitly rejecting NATO overtures and stopping any military integration with the West. This was a maximalist gambit that presupposed Western military support and risked actively provoking Moscow to its own strategic disadvantage.

In choosing the riskier, zero-sum strategy aimed at thwarting the historical and geopolitical sphere of influence of a neighbouring regional and civilisational power, Ukraine was perhaps imprudent — but by no means irrational. As we wrote: "Practically all of America's security alliances today are asymmetrical arrangements between the United States and regional balancers — a class of smaller, more peripheral regional states seeking to balance against the dominant middle powers in their respective regions. As a great power, America possesses an inherent capacity to encroach on other regional security complexes (RSCs). In this context, it is reasonable for regional balancers to attempt to coax and exploit American power in the service of their particular regional security interests."

Setting such a lofty objective, however, effectively meant that Kyiv could never succeed without active NATO intervention shifting the balance of power in its favour. By virtue of its decision, Ukraine, along with its closest partners in Poland and the Baltic nations, became the classic “trojan ally” — smaller countries whose desire for regional clout against the extant middle power (Russia) is predicated on their ability to persuade an external great power and its global military network (here, the US and, by extension, NATO) to step in militarily on their behalf. As we noted in our study, “this comes at great risk to the regional balancer and at great cost to the external great power”. For ultimately, the arrangement depends on “the threat of the use of force and military intervention” by that external great power, without which the regional balancer would fail.

Ukraine’s strategic ambition is to overcome Russia once and for all and break away from Moscow’s historical control. Putting aside the specious and facile Russian justifications for the invasion that seek to lampoon NATO’s military intervention in Yugoslavia, it is crushing this larger Ukrainian ambition that motivates the Kremlin. This explains Moscow’s 2014 annexation of Crimea, its aspirations for the Minsk agreements, and this final resort to military action.

Once the Russian invasion began, Kyiv’s goal of thwarting Moscow *and* keeping intact its territories became impossible without Western military intervention. Ukraine’s future as a sovereign state would now hinge on its ability to successfully engineer an escalation. From Ukraine’s perspective, therefore, the desire for supplies of ever more sophisticated weaponry from the more powerful Western nations is not primarily motivated by their immediate practical and tactical impact — after all, the delivery of and training for these systems will still be months away. No, Ukrainian demands largely stem from what the introduction of these weapons would represent politically, as well as their long-term geostrategic consequences for the next phase of the war.

For it is in Kyiv’s interests to steer NATO into becoming more closely entangled in the war. Ukraine has resorted to a combination of tactics — including information warfare and exploiting historic Western guilt — to instigate an informational and reputational cascade among NATO members that would assure accedence to Ukrainian demands. Given its clear long-term weaknesses in quality manpower, artillery, and ammunition, the Zelenskyy government has shrewdly fought a hybrid war from the start, knowing that Ukraine cannot defeat Russia without NATO fighting on its side. The question now is whether the West should allow itself to be entrapped into that war and jeopardise the fate of the entire world in doing so.

In the materialist framing of security offered by most realists, there is little upside for America and western Europe, and certainly no genuine national or strategic interest, in getting dragged into what is essentially a regional war in Eastern Europe involving two different nationalistic states. From an ontological standpoint, however, an Anglo-American foreign policy establishment that strongly “identifies” itself with US unipolarity has been heavily invested in maintaining the status quo, and preventing the formation of a new collective security architecture in Europe, which would be centred on Russia and Germany rather than the United States. As geopolitical analyst George Friedman observed in 2015: “For the United States, the primordial fear is... [the coupling of] German technology and German capital, [with] Russian natural resources [and] Russian manpower.”

Perhaps following a similar logic, the US establishment has worked to destroy any possibility of a Berlin-Moscow axis forming by aligning itself with the Intermarium bloc of countries from the

Baltic to the Black Sea, repeatedly opposing (and openly threatening) Nord Stream gas pipelines, and deliberately rebuffing Russian insistence on a neutral Ukraine. In relation to Ukraine, the initial objective for an ideological Western alliance that is skewed toward “shared values”, as NATO has become with the dissolution of the USSR, was to turn that country into a Western albatross for Russia, to bog down Moscow in an extended quagmire to weaken its regional power and influence, and even to encourage regime change in the Kremlin.

If one were to accept the logic of this strategy, then a limited Western military support of the Ukrainian war aims — directed towards creating an attritional, frozen conflict — seems plausible. Yet, even in such a scenario, any expansion in scope and degree of that support to include advanced weapon systems, such as F-16s or long-range missiles, is not only unwise but increasingly suicidal in any cost-benefit calculation. Such explicitly hostile support could escalate the proxy war into a direct, conventional war — a World War III scenario, which President Biden insists he wants to avoid. Moreover, in the unlikely event that such expansive military assistance is successful in driving Russian forces out of the Donbas, let alone Crimea (where Russia holds a large naval base), it would dramatically increase the likelihood of a nuclear event, given how Moscow regards protecting its strategic stronghold in the Black Sea as an existential imperative.

Why, then, does the West continue to oblige Ukraine and give in to reputational pressure and arm-twisting from NATO’s newest members in the Intermarium corridor? There are a number of causes, ranging from the private and institutional interests of the liberal internationalist establishment to the spread of a Manichaean worldview in the alliance. Most important, however, is the phenomenon of group compulsion toward escalation aggravated by ontological insecurity — which happens when abrupt and tragic world-historical events such as the Russian invasion disrupt one’s unified sense of order and continuity in the world.

Exacerbated by NATO’s enlargement and transformation into an institutional behemoth of some 30-odd nations with differing perceptions of threat and security, this compulsion has shaped and reinforced a unified “identity” among Western nations — a narrative of *us* against *them*. Under the condition of ontological insecurity, socio-psychological and emotional undercurrents enable reputational cascades, enforce conformity in the name of Western unity, and empower “group polarisation” around the riskier choice, which ensures the more extreme and escalatory policies are ultimately adopted. And, crucially, trojan allies understandably use these dynamics to advance their very real national and security interests from within the alliance, giving them a far more prominent role in decision-making than their relative power might suggest.

A closer inspection of the inter-alliance discourse within NATO also reveals an activist psychology lurking beneath the political and ideological signalling. Given that ideology —namely liberal humanitarianism and democratism — plays a key role in the maintenance of the alliance, its decision-making process is predisposed to the action bias fallacy: the idea that doing something is always better than doing nothing. This sort of reciprocal, mutually reinforcing mentality among alliance peers who profess an activist “ethic of care” reflexively interprets *responsibility* as taking action, while rebuking hesitation and restraint as inhumane. The dynamic recalls Nietzsche’s observation in *The Birth of Tragedy* that “action requires one to be shrouded in a veil of illusion” — here, that “veil of illusion” is provided by the ontological process of identity-formation and the shared narratives of “collective responsibility” and “Western unity”.

Within the context of inter-alliance decision-making, such an ethic cannot help but indulge any demands put upon it, especially since the loudest peers can dress up this compulsion under the allegedly moral imperative of advancing Western unity, defending “our values” and fighting reactionary evil. The ontological security-seeking of a global and hegemonic great power such as the US foregrounds the need for an ideology that can offer it a sense of coherence, make its actions appear to itself meaningful and justified. The same phenomenon applies to NATO, which — despite not being a state but an institution — is today practically an alter-ego of the US.

Now, this may seem to indicate an inherent tension between the desire for an anchoring tale about “who we are” and the more traditional material security that is based around physical self-preservation. But while this is true in some cases, especially in relation to ideological great powers such as the US, whose idealistic self-narrative of American exceptionalism often collides with its real interests, ontological and physical security-seeking are more congruent in smaller and middle-tier states for whom both interests and identities are more rooted, localised, and real.

In the Anglosphere, perhaps owing to the legacy of imperialism and the historical reality of unipolarity, there is currently a disconnect between authentic national interests, narrowly and concretely defined, and the behaviour of its liberal internationalist foreign policy establishment that prioritises ontological security-seeking with global ramifications.

This fact needs rectifying. Thankfully, there are early signs that President Biden and at least some of his advisors, including the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley, have sensed this dreadful reality and its potentially dangerous fallout, and are now beginning to speak of the need for negotiations and diplomatic settlement in Ukraine.

As we begin the second year of the war, it has finally dawned on many in Washington that the likely outcome of this tragedy is stalemate: “We will continue to try to impress upon [the Ukrainian leadership] that we can’t do anything and everything forever,” one senior Biden administration official said this week. For all the talk of Ukrainian agency, that agency depends entirely on NATO’s commitment to continue to support Kyiv’s war effort indefinitely. Such a maximalist desire for “complete victory” is not only highly attritional and suggestive of yet another endless war, but it is also reckless; its very success could trigger a nuclear holocaust.

Moscow has already paid a high price for its transgressions in Ukraine. To prolong the war at this point in an ideological quest for total victory is both strategically and morally questionable. For many liberal internationalists in the West, the clamour for a “just peace” that is sufficiently punishing to Russia suggests little more than a thinly-veiled desire to impose a Carthaginian peace on Moscow. The West has indeed wounded Russia; now it must decide if it wants to let this wound fester and conflagrate the entire world. For unless Moscow is provided with a reasonable off-ramp that recognises Russia’s status as a regional power with its own existential imperatives of strategic and ontological security, that is the precipice towards which we are heading.

Black Iraqis have been invisible for a long time. Their vibrant culture and struggle must be recognized.

Sarah Zaaumi, Atlantic Council, March 24, 2023

When roaming the streets of Hila or Baghdad, it is almost impossible to tell who is Sunni, Kurdish, Baha'i, or Mandaean. One community, however, stands out in the intricate cultural, religious, and ethnic mosaic of Iraq due to its largely visible ethnic origins: Black Iraqis. Concentrated in the outskirts of Basra and Zubair in southern Iraq, this community is linked to a dark historical era when Basra was once a prominent center for the slave trade in the Islamic Empire between the ninth and nineteenth centuries. Visible traces of structural racism and xenophobia persist today and can easily be identified in the power relations governing Black Iraqis and the rest of society.

Black Iraqis are not only living on the geographical margins of urban agglomerations but also on the margins of society and its structures, with no political representation, no tribal umbrella, locked social mobility, and the constant stigma of being called *abd* ("slaves"), *fahma* ("piece of coal"), or other ethnophaulisms in everyday interactions. The community witnessed a short-lived political revival following the 2008 election of Barack Obama as the first black president of the United States and, more recently, with the Black Lives Matter movement, as media articles rushed to document this newly witnessed awakening. However, activists in Iraq calling for Black Iraqi rights continue to face violent oppression as members of the community and its activists have become targets of radical groups in recent years and have, unfortunately, opted to tone down their demands.

I was lucky enough—through an ethnographic project carried out with other Iraqi researchers—to penetrate the secretive world of Iraqis of African descent and discuss their positionality as a group in Iraq today and their unique Afro-Iraqi memory with local activists, performers, and academics from within the community, as well as with a few United Nations agencies. The observations and information I have included in this piece emanate directly from these fascinating first-hand encounters and debates.

Twelve centuries of disgrace

Black Iraqis are the descendants of immigrants and enslaved people from Sub-Saharan and East Africa. Their presence in Iraq dates back to the Abbasid empire, starting from the ninth century when some newcomers came to the region as sailors, workers, captured slaves, or enslaved soldiers. They largely originated from the coast of modern-day Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, Zanzibar, Ethiopia, and other African countries. In the absence of formal statistics, their community leaders estimate their numbers today to be as high as 1.5 to 2 million inhabitants. Black Iraqis are scattered across diverse regions of the country, concentrating in the governorates of Basra, Maysan, and Dhi Qar. There are also a few families in Baghdad, Wassit, and other cities. However, the largest community resides on the outskirts of the cities of Basra and Zubair.

Despite slavery being officially abolished in the nineteenth century and supported by Article 14 of the 2005 Iraqi Constitution, which stipulates "equality without racial-based discrimination," Black

Iraqis still endure systematic discrimination, marginalization, and structural racism embedded in historical stigmas and xenophobia against black people in the Arab world, according to activists I spoke to. Iraq is a melting pot of other ethnic, religious, and cultural communities. Yet, many of these groups are “invisible” and can easily fade in the crowd due to similar physical features. In contrast, Black Iraqis are the “visible others” who cannot be unseen or concealed. Hundreds of invisible cultural and social lines segregate the two communities, ostracize Black Iraqis, and reaffirm their otherness in urban design, tribal allegiances, and marriage arrangements.

One intriguing conversation I had with a group of non-black Iraqi academics, opened my eyes to the extent of denial most people feel about the subject. I was told repetitively, “We don’t have black and white in Iraq. We are all equal,” and was asked to drop the appellation black Iraqis or Afro-Iraqis and replace it with *asmar* or *abu samra*, which means tanned or brown in Arabic. Little did they know how offensive it is to deny the community its blackness and attempt to dilute it with a drop of whiteness. In contrast, the Black Iraqis I have been working with, including Dr. Thawra Yousif, Dr. Abdulkareem Aboud, and Dr. Abdel-Zahra Sami Farag, all influential figures in their community, proudly claim their blackness and celebrate it.

Structural racism and the absence of a tribal umbrella have relegated most black Iraqis to the margins of the economy and locked them into a number of small manual jobs as domestic help or performers. According to their representatives, the population also suffers from low educational attainment rates, unemployment, and poverty. Additionally, there is not a single Black Iraqi holding a high-ranking position in the government, nor do they have any political representation. Recently, human rights activists from the community have suffered assassination attempts and violence to oppress their demands, according to international reports.

A secretive African intangible heritage

Black Iraqis have maintained a vibrant cultural heritage, blending their Sub-Saharan and East African traditions and rituals with those of Mesopotamia. This distinctive intangible heritage has been dissolved or dissimulated sometimes for better integration and assimilation in the predominantly Arab and Islamic context of Iraq. Many aspects have survived and continue to flourish today. Black Iraqis possess a distinct dialect combining Swahili and Arabic, a particular genre of chanting, drumming, and tambourine performances, and continue to practice African-derived healing and exorcism ceremonies, which they practice secretly in remote huts called *makkayid*, away from the judgmental eyes of curious Arabs.

The body of literature documenting the diverse aspects of this culture remains sparse, as most studies solely focus on human rights concerns affecting the community rather than its ethnographic, cultural richness, avowal, and ascription of self and group. There are also few, if any, efforts to examine the stereotypes surrounding Black Iraqis through advocacy or education programs in an already highly contentious and fragmented social and political context, which widened the gap and emphasized disparities and stigmas regarding this community living in Iraq since the ninth century.

This dire economic and social situation contrasts with the community's rich contribution to the cultural and artistic diversity of southern Iraq. Black Iraqi folklore and musical heritage have been transferred throughout the generations, maintaining original African names, such as the musical genres of *bib*, *ankroka*, *gonbasa*, *al-liwa* and the *nuban*, according to Dr. Abdelkarim Abdulkareem of the University of Basra and Abdel-Zahra Sami Farag. They also continue to use original drum and wind instruments with African ties like *amsondo*, *kikanka*, *bato*, and *sarnai*, while the performers hold mixed-gender dances dressed in vibrant embellished garments and animal skin belts. These traditional spectacles clearly set black Iraqis aside from the rest of the Iraqi gender-segregated society and are a strong staple of their African origins and identity. Abdel-Zahra Sami Farag, a local activist and performer, also revealed to me that members of the group regularly gather in the *makkayid*, where they perform folkloric and exorcism rituals.

Social cohesion is one of the main challenges facing Iraqi society today. Post-2003, many ethnic, cultural, and religious communities found themselves without state structures or a tribal umbrella that provides kinship support and protection that both Arabs and Kurds enjoy—both highly tribal societies. Black Iraqis are among these communities without tribal safeguards, legal status, or political representation. While other communities have received extensive media and academic attention after the invasion, Iraqis of African descent remain in the margins as an under-documented, under-studied, and highly visible “other” within.

Agnes Callard's Marriage of the Minds

Rachel Aviv, *The New Yorker*, March 13, 2023

Arnold Brooks, a graduate student at the University of Chicago, came to Agnes Callard's office hours every week to talk about Aristotle. At the last session of the quarter, in the spring of 2011, they discussed Aristotle's treatise *Metaphysics*, and what it means to be one—as opposed to more than one. “It was the sort of question where I felt it would be reasonable to feel ecstatic if you made some kind of progress,” Arnold told me. Agnes was the only person he'd ever met who seemed to feel the same way.

Agnes specializes in ancient philosophy and ethics, but she is also a public philosopher, writing popular essays about experiences—such as jealousy, parenting, and anger—that feel to her like “dissociated matter,” falling outside the realm of existing theories. She is often baffled by the human conventions that the rest of us have accepted. It seems to her that we are all intuitively copying one another, adopting the same set of arbitrary behaviours and values, as if by osmosis. “How has it come to pass,” she writes, “that we take our selves to have any inkling at all about how to live?”

She was married to another philosophy professor at the University of Chicago, Ben Callard, and they had two young sons. To celebrate the end of the term, Agnes had made cookies for her students, and she gave an extra one to Arnold, a twenty-seven-year-old with wavy hair that fell to his shoulders, who was in his first year of the graduate program in philosophy. As Arnold ate the cookie, Agnes, who was thirty-five, noticed that he had “just this incredibly weird expression on his face. I couldn't understand that expression. I'd never seen it before.”

She asked why he was making that face.

“I think I'm a little bit in love with you,” he responded.

Agnes had felt that there was something slightly odd about her weekly sessions with Arnold, but she hadn't been sure what it was. Now the nature of the oddness became apparent. “I think I'm in love with you, too,” she told him. They both agreed that nothing could happen.

They leaned out her window and smoked a cigarette. Then Arnold left her office.

The next day, Agnes and her sons flew to New York to visit her parents. Ben had gone to Philadelphia to see his mother, who was recovering from surgery. On the plane, Agnes said, “it felt like I was having a revelation in the clouds.” For the first time in her life, she felt as if she had access to a certain “inner experience of love,” a state that made her feel as if there were suddenly a moral grail, a better kind of person to be.

She realized that within her marriage she didn't have this experience. If she stayed married, she would be pretending.

When she landed, she told her parents that she had to get divorced. “We didn’t think it made any sense,” her mother, Judit Gellen, said. “We had seen Agnes and Ben a couple weeks earlier, for a long weekend, and it seemed like everything was great.” Agnes’s sister Kat Gellen, a professor of German studies at Duke, said, “I love Ben—who is really generous in every sense of the word, an impossible person to dislike—and I just felt like No, this can’t be right.” Of her marriage, Agnes said, “There were no problems. We never fought. We just got along really well. We talked a lot about philosophy.”

The next morning, she took a train to Philadelphia to tell Ben, who specializes in the philosophy of mind, language, and mathematics, how she felt. “We talked for an entire day,” she said. “I was approaching him with, like, ‘Here’s what happened. What should we do?’ ”The conversation felt so honest that she realized she had probably never felt so close to Ben in her life. He encouraged her to take time before making a decision; she agreed to try therapy. But the next morning Ben called and said that she was right: they should get a divorce. “I think we both trusted each other enough in that crisis moment to listen to the other person and take seriously what they were saying,” Ben told me. “So, to that extent, it was connected to millions of other conversations we’ve had. She was just showing me the same things she had seen. Once I saw them, it sort of clicked, and everything became very clear.” He described Agnes as “the least complacent person I’ve ever met.”

Agnes was extremely upset that the divorce would harm their children, but she felt that the alternative was that she would become a badperson. “I thought that I would become sort of corrupted by staying in a marriage where I no longer felt like I was aspirational about it,” she said. Her friends and relatives suggested that she just have an affair, but that felt impossible. “It’s like you have this vision of this wonderful, grand possibility, and then you decide to just play at it, treating it like a vacation or something. It seemed like a desecration of that vision.”

Agnes and Ben shared a divorce lawyer, and their divorce was finalized within three weeks of her introducing the idea. Ben said, “I think to an unusual degree Agnes sort of lives what she thinks and thinks what she lives.”

Agnes and Arnold struggled to do their work. Almost every day they went out for coffee together and had long conversations about philosophy—which felt like the real work. (In accordance with university guidelines, they had declared their desire to have a relationship to the chair of the philosophy department, and Agnes recused herself from academic authority over Arnold.) Sometimes it seemed to Agnes that the universe had been prearranged for her benefit. If she and Arnold were taking a walk together and she craved a croissant, a bakery would suddenly appear. If she needed a book, she would realize that she was passing a bookstore, and the text she wanted was displayed in the window. She thought that this was now her permanent reality.

Arnold said that, the first time Agnes’s sons came to his apartment, “I remember watching them play on the furniture and suddenly realizing: this is the point of furniture. And with Agnes it was the same sort of thing: the world of a relationship has all sorts of furniture in it—the things you do and say and all of the conventions. But with Agnes, for the first time, I felt like it had some kind of point.”

“To make it roadworthy again, you’re looking at fifteen hundred. To just get it back to where you can ignore it and live in a state of constant, low-frequency fear, four-fifty.”

News of the divorce reached her students, and Agnes worried that they would feel disoriented or betrayed. That term, she had been invited to be the keynote speaker at an undergraduate conference for philosophy students. She decided to give her talk about what had happened to her. It was titled “On the Kind of Love Into Which One Falls.” Ben read drafts of the talk in advance and gave her feedback. He and Arnold sat next to each other in the front row.

“Six and a half weeks ago, I fell in love for the first time,” she began. “You did not think I was a person who would subject her children to divorce. You did not think I was a person who would be married to someone she had not fallen in love with. You are not sure whether you know me anymore.” She told her students that she felt she had a professional obligation to clarify the situation. Philosophers often describe love from the outside, but she could provide an inside account. Her experience had prompted her to reinterpret a famous speech, in the Symposium, in which Socrates, whom she considers her role model, argues that the highest kind of love is not for people but for ideals.

She was troubled by Socrates’ unerotic and detached view of love, and she proposed that he was actually describing how two lovers aspire to embody ideals together. True lovers, she explained, don’t really want to be loved for who they are; they want to be loved because neither of them is happy with who he or she is. “One of the things I said very early on to my beloved was this: ‘I could completely change now,’” she recounted. “Radical change, becoming a wholly other person, is not out of the question. There is suddenly room for massive aspiration.”

After the talk, a colleague told Agnes that she was speaking as if she thought she were Socrates. “I was, like, ‘Yeah, that’s what it felt like,’ ” she said. “I felt like I had all this knowledge. And it was wonderful. It was an opportunity to say something truthful about love.”

In “Parallel Lives,” a study of five couples in the Victorian era, the literary critic Phyllis Rose observes that we tend to disparage talk about marriage as gossip. “But gossip may be the beginning of moral inquiry, the low end of the platonic ladder which leads to self-understanding,” she writes. “We are desperate for information about how other people live because we want to know how to live ourselves, yet we are taught to see this desire as an illegitimate form of prying.” Rose describes marriage as a political experience and argues that talking about it should be taken as seriously as conversations about national elections: “Cultural pressure to avoid such talk as ‘gossip’ ought to be resisted, in a spirit of good citizenship.”

Agnes views romantic relationships as the place where some of the most pressing philosophical problems surface in life, and she tries to “navigate the moral-opprobrium reflexes in the right way,” she said, so that people won’t dismiss the topic as unworthy of public discussion. “If you’re a real philosopher,” she once tweeted, “you don’t need privacy, because you’re a living embodiment of your theory at every moment, even in your sleep, even in your dreams.”

Jonathan Lear, a philosopher at the University of Chicago, said that Agnes approaches every conversation as if it were integral to her life's work, as it was for Socrates. "She's attempting to live a philosophical life, and this includes taking responsibility for the very concept of marriage," he said. "Part of what I take to be her bravery is that she is looking around, asking, 'Hey, I know all these couples have gotten rings and gone to the courthouse, but are they married?' One thing you can do with that question is forget all about it and find some deadline to be anxious about. Or you can really hear the question, vividly.

That's the place where philosophy begins—with a certain anxiety about how to live the life that is yours."

Agnes's work, which won the 2020 Lebowitz Prize for philosophical achievement, searches for ways in which we can become better-selves than we are. She writes philosophy columns for *The Point* and the *Times*, and she will agree to a podcast with essentially anyone who asks, regardless of that person's politics or credentials. She also has her own podcast, called "Minds Almost Meeting," with Robin Hanson, a libertarian-leaning economist with whom she constantly disagrees. "I think you are insulting the human race in your book," she told him in one episode.

In 2018, when she accidentally got pregnant, she gave a speech about misogyny at a conference of the Eastern American Philosophical Association, then told a room full of philosophers that she was considering having an abortion. "I am pregnant, and I don't know whether I want to be," she said. "Your shock is, of course, why most of those women don't talk about it; still less does anyone confess to being, at that very moment, engaged in the deliberative activity of weighing the value of a future human life." (At a Q. & A. session with two other panellists after her talk, no comments were directed toward her. Not long afterward, she had a miscarriage.)

Arnold saw Agnes's first book, "Aspiration," which she began writing the year after they met, in part as an attempt to make sense of their experience of falling in love. In the book, which was published in 2018, she describes how philosophers have often scoffed at the idea of self-creation. Nietzsche dismissed the idea that a person could "pull oneself up into existence by the hair, out of the swamps of nothingness." But the book argues that people can embark on a path toward a destination, a new way of being a person, that they can't yet see or understand—a process that she calls aspiration. When aspirants make decisions, they are guided by the possibility of a future self that does not yet exist. They imitate mentors or competitors, risking pretension, because they understand that their current values are deficient; they haven't made room for another way of seeing themselves or the world.

Arnold came to see the idealism of the early weeks of their relationship as the first stage of aspiration. "What we had was an imperfect vision of something, but it pretended to be clear," he told me. Within a few months, they saw that in many ways they were incompatible. "Most people, myself included, would have met the realization with the thought: How could I have stepped into this with such naïveté, with such childish blindness?" he said. "But her instinct was to trust that initial experience."

Agnes and Arnold married a year after her divorce, at a chapel on campus. Ben gave the toast at the rehearsal dinner. By then, Agnes recognized that she'd oversold her understanding of love to

her students. At the time, she thought she'd achieved more than she had. Nevertheless, she said, she'd had enough of a glimpse—a “foretaste of future knowledge”—to reorganize her life in such a way that a future self would “look back and be, like, Yes, she was on her way.”

A few months into their relationship, Agnes and Arnold had a bad fight, and she came across a copy of *Cook's Illustrated* that Ben had given her for Hanukkah years before, inscribed with a loving note. She remembered that she had been happy at the time. “I was just, like, wait a minute, maybe I'm just doing the same thing again. The veil was lifted with Ben, and now it is being lifted again.” But she was consoled by the idea that she and Arnold were philosophical about their relationship in a way that she and Ben had not been. Agnes, who was diagnosed with autism in her thirties, felt that she and Arnold were trying to navigate the problem of loneliness—not the kind that occurred when each of them was in a room alone but the sort of loneliness that they felt in the presence of another person. Most couples struggle with a version of this problem, but it often feels like a private burden. For Agnes, it was philosophical work, a way of sorting out “what one human can be to another human.” It seemed to her that Arnold had come to her with a question: Is it possible to eliminate the loneliness that is intrinsic to any relationship, to be together in a way that makes full use of another person's mind?

Agnes has generally avoided speaking publicly about being autistic, in part because she worries that people will find it preposterous for her to use a label once closely associated with people who are nonverbal. But she feels that the diagnosis helps her understand her immunity to the pull of a certain received structure of meaning. In addition to the philosophical underpinning of her marriage to Arnold, there is perhaps an autistic one, too, in that most of us learn to ignore all the subtle ways in which we settle and compromise, based on our received sense that this is the way relationships work. Agnes never assumed that those social conventions inherently made sense.

The period during which she and Arnold fell in love felt like proof. It was, she said, “the first moment when the world says to you, ‘That can be possible.’ Nothing can be more important than that. Every other little wrinkle and confusion—it's, like, whatever. Forget it. Set this aside. This thing is possible. And that's amazing—you're right to be taken in. Even when you start to see, Oh, he doesn't quite live up to the ideal, you owe them the very existence of the ideal in you. You owe them your projection. They pointed you in that direction.”

Marriage takes many shapes, but a common one is a downward-sloping line. It begins at the top—the intensity of falling in love, feeling seen and heard in all your fullness—and the rest of the relationship is an attempt to hold on to the ideal without the attenuation's becoming too terrible. Joan Didion called this phase of marriage “the traditional truce, the point at which so many resign themselves to cutting both their losses and their hopes.” But Agnes saw her relationship with Arnold as a kind of ladder. They were on the bottom step, attempting to climb the ladder together, in pursuit of a shared ideal: the right kind of mental dependence. Her thoughts felt like “mushy dots,” but, through conversations with Arnold, they had started to solidify. “It was only then that I felt I could settle on things and start to complete a thought,” she said.

Agnes and Ben shared custody of the children, who moved between their old apartment and a new one that Agnes shared with Arnold. On Agnes's nights with the children, Ben would often come

over and have dinner, and they'd talk about philosophical questions together. Ben approached Arnold with openness and warmth. Arnold told me, "He could have gotten really upset and done a bunch of destructive things—perhaps I would have, and I'm quite sure plenty of other philosophers would have—but it would have been useless destruction, and Ben had the foresight to see that you shouldn't do what you will later regret."

Agnes got pregnant shortly after getting married, and she and Arnold moved back into the apartment that she had shared with Ben. It seemed unnecessarily burdensome for the oldest children to bounce between two homes, spending half their time away from their youngest sibling, a brother. "We wanted all three children to have breakfast together," Ben said.

Agnes noticed that people who had once urged her not to get a divorce were now pushing her to distance herself from Ben, to make a "clean break." But she and Ben were still dependent on each other in ways that she didn't want to ignore. They saw no reason to separate their bank accounts. They never stopped talking about philosophy. Ben took on a parental role with the youngest boy, Izzy, assuming a roughly equal share of the child care. When Agnes's best friend, Yelena Baraz, a professor of Classics at Princeton, visited, she was struck by how happy the children seemed. All of them had "genuinely gained a parent," she told me.

Jonathan Lear, Agnes's colleague, said that, when he first learned about the reasons for her divorce, he was reminded of a passage in Bertrand Russell's autobiography. Russell describes how he went bicycling one afternoon and, as he was riding along a country road, realized that he no longer loved his wife. "Something similar happened to Agnes," Lear said, but instead of bicycling back and severing ties, as Russell eventually did, "they spent their life happily together—all three of them. To my eyes, it's a beautiful, mutually supportive creation."

When I told a friend about Agnes's home life, she said that she was reminded of "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," a short story by Ursula K. Le Guin, about a utopian city where everyone's happiness depends on the suffering of one child, who is locked in a dark cellar, abandoned and starving. My friend suggested that Ben must live in the metaphorical cellar, sacrificing himself for the good of the family—an interpretation that, on some level, made sense to me. I had noticed, among my friends, that some of the most successful marriages involved inequality, and clarity about it: one person sacrificed more than the other, and it was O.K. Agnes told me that this interpretation was wrong. "That is a really common interpretation of our situation, and I'm struck by *how* common it is," she added.

In an e-mail, Ben explained that he understood that people assumed that he hadn't chosen the situation but was merely enduring it, but this was false. "Agnes and I are close friends, and we have a lot of respect for each other," he wrote. "But at this point neither of us can even imagine being married to the other person. I have moved on, just as she has." He continued, "We may well stop living together once the kids leave home, but until then we are all having a blast raising three (now two) sons together." (Their oldest son had just left for college.) He said that the two oldest boys were like sons to Arnold, and Izzy was like a son to him. "I count myself very lucky to know Arnold," he went on. "A few years ago he and I camped in the Boundary Waters in Minnesota, and in the middle of a freezing night we went to a clearing in the forest and watched the

International Space Station shoot across the star-filled sky. Next year, we are co-teaching a course on paradoxes.”

Agnes hosts a popular late-night conversation series at the University of Chicago called “Night Owls,” in which she and another scholar spend up to three hours debating a single subject, like sacredness or death or organized violence. About eight years after her divorce, she and Ben held a session called “The Philosophy of Divorce,” which was attended by hundreds of students. Agnes, who always wears bright colors, wore a dress with psychedelic swirls. Ben, a slim man with a boyish face, sat beside her, wearing a gray suit and holding a typed sheet of questions.

“Is it possible for a good marriage to end in divorce?” he asked.

“I think it’s possible for a good marriage to end in divorce,” she said. “In a lot of ways, I think we don’t see our marriage as a failure.”

Ben nodded. He said that when they finalized their divorce the judge asked if there had been an “irretrievable breakdown,” and if they had tried to repair it. As if, Ben said, “there’s this thing and you were trying to do it, and it’s broken, and it’s failing, and it’s bad to fail, and so it’s bad, and so we should see if we can try to save it. And I’m worried that that’s a kind of fallacy, that we have an overly formal conception of what failure is.” Agnes listened with her hand over her mouth, as if restraining herself from jumping in with a thought. “I was going to ask Agnes this,” Ben went on, “but I’ll just throw it out to the group: Is divorce a failure?”

“A moral failure,” a student suggested. “Not living up to your promise.”

“I guess I just think more generally, like, we shouldn’t always be avoiding those sorts of failures,” Agnes said. She described marriage as “a promise not only to keep loving the person” but to “love them a lot, at any given time,” and it’s impossible to commit to that in advance.

Throughout the event, Ben seemed to recede. He kept pulling the discussion away from his own life toward increasingly academic problems. It was a testament to his generosity that although he didn’t seem to feel comfortable with the project—he told the students he was an “under-sharer”—he was doing the best he could, because Agnes wanted to show their students how philosophy could apply to the most consequential decisions of their lives. Ben told me that the process of becoming a well-known public philosopher, as Agnes has, would “ethically devastate a lot of people.” He went on, “For most of us, having fans and followers feeds terrible things in our soul.

But Agnes doesn’t have that. She’s changed very little, as far as I can tell.” She seemed immune to the damage, he said, because she saw each reader or audience member as a potential interlocutor, another person who could challenge her thinking. “It’s not that she lacks interiority,” he said. “It’s that she has a low view of the significance of that interiority.” As she saw it, thinking is not something that one person can do alone. It takes two people to have a thought.

For Christmas last year, Agnes and Arnold and the three children went to Pennsylvania to visit his family. Agnes couldn’t stop coughing and sneezing. About a week earlier, she’d had a severe allergy attack, brought on by a cat, and the symptoms hadn’t subsided. One night, she was making pita bread, coughing every few minutes, and Arnold was sitting at a table in the kitchen, grading

papers on his laptop. They were sharing the same space, but Agnes felt as if they were in two separate worlds. She was reminded of a line from the Icelandic novel “Independent People,” by Halldór Laxness, which she had just read: “Two human beings have such difficulty in understanding each other—there is nothing so tragical as two human beings.”

The next day, when I visited Agnes and Arnold at his parents’ house, she told him that, while making the pita, she had felt as if they were out of synch. She wished he had put down his laptop and talked to her. She was aware that something more purposeful could be happening, and the lack felt tragic. “He’s not paying attention to what I want him to pay attention to,” she said, of that moment. “He’s not interested in what I want him to be interested in.” She recognized that he had to grade papers, but she was still annoyed. “I’m, like, why didn’t he do the grading earlier today?” she said. “I bet there was lots of time today when he was wasting time.”

“That’s probably true,” Arnold said. We sat at the kitchen table, and he dipped the pita into hummus he had just blended. The boys were at the mall with his parents. “Also, the thing with the coughing and the sneezing is funny, because you’re clearly suffering in a pretty serious way,” he told Agnes, “and you have been for days. And, at this point, I’ve just faded it out. I just don’t hear it anymore.”

Agnes said that in moments of disconnection she repeats a little mantra to herself: “It’s fine—you can do this on your own. You can figure things out on your own.” But she knows it’s a lie. “I almost have a feeling of pleasure, like a sick pleasure, as I placate myself with the thought,” she told me.

I asked Agnes and Arnold if they still felt that their relationship gave them the capacity for radical transformation, as Agnes had told her students. “I think there was something right in that vision,” Agnes said, “but it has been so much harder than I thought it would be. To change—but also just to be in love, like, to relate in a really loving way to another person. It’s like once you start trying to do that you come up against all of your limits.” In her marriage with Ben, she hadn’t been aspiring toward any particular ideal, so her flaws didn’t feel as painful. “I think I never realized how fundamentally selfish I was before I met Arnold,” she said. “I’m just really not able to be much less selfish than I am.”

Arnold said he had never expected that he could become a new person. “For me, it was more, like, meeting Agnes was the experience of finally not going to waste.” “Nothing about you changed, but you became oriented towards what was important, in some way,” Agnes explained.

Their marriage had ended up being more asymmetrical than they had expected. “Your entire philosophical career is a discussion of our marriage, in one way or another,” Arnold said. Agnes agreed. If their marriage was a kind of play, she was the central character, and the author, too.

A common refrain in their fights was whether Arnold, who became an assistant professor in 2021, should aspire to more. Agnes felt that he could write an extraordinary book about Aristotle, but he was content to read the texts and share his interpretations with his students. “Arnold fundamentally

sees life as, like, you're supposed to find a place of contentment," she said. "And his way of doing things often shows up to me as: he's not working hard enough. And my way of doing things often shows up to him as: she's incapable of being happy."

Arnold clarified: "The source of my question is: What is the aim of work? It has to be something that's not work. Aspiration can't be infinite, as much as you would love it to be, because at some point you have to get to the value that you are supposed to be aspiring towards. And, once you're there, that's who you are."

Agnes had just finished a draft of her second book, which fills in what she considers to be a significant omission in her first book: the degree to which aspiration depends on other people. The book examines the ways in which Socrates recognized our vulnerability and neediness and incompleteness. His greatest insight, Agnes believes, was that people are intellectually lonely—they live under an illusion of self-sufficiency. Dialogue was the only way out of their natural state. And yet the people who took up Socrates' work, developing the field of philosophy, struggled to keep that insight in view.

They went off and came up with theories on their own. Perhaps they thought that Socrates secretly possessed his insights all along, that he didn't need other people to answer his questions, an assumption that Agnes thinks is misguided. "He was not doing this from a position of strength," she said.

One chapter of the book is about Socratic love, and it builds on the talk Agnes gave her students in 2011, when she first fell in love with Arnold. She repeats the argument she made about Socrates' vision of love as a kind of ladder, two lovers aspiring together to the same ideals, but she also contemplates what it means when the "company of the person one once chased with breathless abandon loses its thrill, the frequency of both sex and vigorous conversation decreases, and living together becomes a matter of routine. This supposedly 'good case' is, in its own way, also far from ideal."

As their youngest son grew older, and there were fewer urgent distractions, Agnes became aware that marriage is a thing that can die. She described the experience as "persistently ignoring the thought that there's something wrong. You just turn away from something and then keep turning away from it, and eventually you can't see it anymore."

Her parents, who emigrated from Hungary when she was four, were united by a shared sense of struggle; they were trying to adapt to a new culture, with little money or command of the language. The structure of marriage suited them well.

Agnes felt that she had imported the conventional trappings of marriage without evaluating which features remained relevant. She worried, she said, that she and Arnold were "losing the spirit of marriage for the sake of the convention." They labored under the shadow of the transcendence of their early romance. "I'll be, like, 'Why can't we get back to that?'" Agnes said. "And Arnold will be, like, 'That was never there.' He is offended by my attempt to go back in time. And I feel like he is taking away the foundation of our relationship and telling me that our lives are built on a lie."

After seven years of marriage, they watched Ingmar Bergman's "Scenes from a Marriage," a portrait of a couple as they struggle to understand the limits and possibilities of their relationship in the course of a decade. "It's extraordinary that two people can live a whole life together without—" the wife's mother says. "Without touching," the wife answers. The couple divorce, but their relationship continues, without the distance and artifice that marked their marriage.

The ending is not widely viewed as a happy one, but both Agnes and Arnold felt that the couple, through their divorce, had discovered how to be connected to each other in a real way. Agnes is planning to write her next book about the show, as well as about what she calls her "philosophical marriage." The show clarified her feelings of estrangement. Until she met Arnold, she said, "I didn't realize how lonely I was. You don't see it. It's like the air that you breathe, but when you see that you can be relieved of it there is this weird way in which the relationship exacerbates the loneliness."

For Agnes, loneliness was the experience of having thoughts she wanted to communicate but felt unable to, because she knew that her words would come out wrong or be misinterpreted. Whatever she said would be a distortion of what she was feeling. "And that experience is almost a kind of madness—the experience of not being able to settle on a view about how anything is," she said.

I told Agnes that once, when asked to share an inspiring quote for a friend's wedding, I picked one from Rainer Maria Rilke: "I hold this to be the highest task for a bond between two people: that each protects the solitude of the other." In hindsight, my choice seemed silly, and I guessed she would agree. "Yeah, it feels like a way of reassuring yourself that some of the flaws in the relationship are actually really beautiful," she said, adding that this is "why Socrates thought the poets didn't know what they were talking about." The ineffable wisdom they wrote of—inaccessible to others, because it was so mysterious and private—sounded to Socrates a lot like ignorance, she said. The idea that a marriage should hold space for each person's incommunicable core, she believed, "comes from this pessimism where it's, like, Look, at the end of the day we know we can't really help one another, so the best thing we can do is not interfere too much."

Arnold aspired to rid the marriage of loneliness, too, but he defined it differently from Agnes. "For me, togetherness is something like: imagine being with somebody where it would never occur to you to say anything but the truth," he told me. "There's no strategy, no attempt to get anything." He continued, "Whereas Agnes's loneliness is a barrier between two people, for me loneliness is almost like an internal problem. How can I manage to find reasons to tell the truth? Or how can I make contact with the idea of being honest?"

Marriage is "an institution *committed* to the dulling of the feelings," Susan Sontag once wrote. "The whole point of marriage is repetition." Agnes and Arnold felt that they had entered marriage without clearly thinking through what the institution was actually for. For many couples, marriage ends up being about making a family, and, when it fails to meet other needs, the couple lovingly and generously lets it fail. But Agnes was uncomfortable with the prospect of a relationship that had lost its aspirational character. She wondered what it would look like if she and Arnold integrated new romantic relationships into their marriage.

They would all keep talking about philosophy, but with fresh ideas in the mix. They asked each other whether it would violate the terms of their marriage if they became romantically involved with other people. “We didn’t think there was any good reason other than the usual conventions of marriage to answer that question with a yes,” she said. They referred to their new agreement as the Variation.

Agnes was struck by how bound by convention she’d been when she divorced Ben. “I was almost saying something like ‘Look, I left my husband for this other man, but he’s the one person—the one and only person—and I promise I won’t do it again.’” It was as if she had been unconsciously trying to justify a kind of social dogma: that you can love only one person at a time.

Agnes said that sometimes colleagues tell her, of her relationship with Arnold, “I’m so glad it worked out.” She finds that form of thinking alien. “It’s a very narrative, novelistic approach to my life, and the only area of my life that I see in such a progressive way is the pursuit of knowledge.” The proof of success or failure is her insights, she said, not the plot of her life.

After our conversation in Pennsylvania, Agnes said Arnold worried that they’d given me the impression that their marriage was a success story. At the time, I had expressed that, if cooking pita alone felt tragic, then things seemed to be going well, but I had perhaps overlooked the way that tiny kitchen conflicts can expose relationship fault lines that feel elemental. When we talked again, I asked them about the ways in which they weren’t as happy as they appeared to be. They spoke to me on Zoom from Agnes’s office, which she had turned into a kind of magical kindergarten: bright stars, circular mirrors, and L.E.D. lights hung from ropes wrapped in yarn of different colours; the walls were covered in fabrics featuring flowery blobs; a table had large polka dots. “It’s not like this thing that we do, which is constantly talk about philosophy, is a happy activity,” Arnold told me. “It’s just as difficult and problematic and fraught an activity as what I take it many couples would do together.”

“I guess I would go even a little further than Arnold in saying that this territory is pretty often painful,” Agnes said. She was sitting at her desk, wearing a pink dress with large llamas on it. Arnold had pulled up a chair beside her. “There are certain reliable circumstances that will make it non-painful,” she went on. “I can tell you exactly what they are: it’s when Arnold is explaining Aristotle to me.” She felt that no one could explain anything as well as he explained Aristotle. He was always patient, never defensive; his interpretations weren’t tied up in his own ego. “The way we first got together was by talking about Aristotle,” she said, “and yet I just thought, Well, yeah, but that was incidental. I could have been teaching a class on anything. It turns out, no, it was actually really important that it was Aristotle.”

In her marriage with Ben, Agnes had never wondered whether the relationship was going O.K. But, with Arnold, she said, “we’ve often had the kind of stress and struggle of, like, is this working?” She continued, “In that way, it’s a less happy relationship than the one I had with Ben.”

She added that, when she and Arnold fought, they could rely on Ben to provide an objective perspective. He would try to think through the problem from both of their points of view, rather

than reflexively offering validation. (She said that she does the same for Ben when he discusses his own relationships.)

“The phrase coming to mind is ‘immaculate divorce,’ ” I said. “A divorce without grief or sorrow or pain.”

“I actually think that’s a pretty good description,” Agnes said. She had been taking notes throughout the conversation and wrote something down. “This has come up in conversations where we’ve had dark moments and Arnold is, like, ‘Look, if we have to get divorced, we’ll do it correctly.’ ” No one would feel trapped, morally or practically. She imagined marriage as a “bundle of services”: along with love, there’s security, friendship, child rearing, financial support, and assistance with one’s work. “Arnold is sort of saying, ‘Look, we can unbundle it.’ Marriage has a lot of stuff packed into it, but if you knew what job each bit was doing, then, if you lose the marriage you could still potentially reconstitute the bits.” She added, “The only barrier to our getting divorced is our wanting to continue to be married.”

In an episode of “Scenes from a Marriage,” the wife comes to ask the husband to sign divorce papers, and he, realizing that he is bound to the marriage in a deeper way than he’d known, locks his wife in his office and then strikes her in the face. Agnes and Arnold’s marriage was set up so that no one would ever feel locked in. But Arnold also identified with the husband’s blind panic at the prospect of losing the relationship that has given his life meaning. “It’s not that we live without that feeling,” he said. “It’s that we are trying to manage that feeling.”

“So it’s like we’re always breaking up?” Agnes asked.

“No, it’s like the philosophy-is-a-preparation-for-death thing,” he said, quoting one of Socrates’ most famous lines. “Maybe our marriage is a preparation for divorce. The thing we’re trying to do is approach that fact—that another person could be so deeply tied to them meaning of your life that, without the relationship, life might feel meaningless.” He was uncomfortable with how dependent this made him feel, and he thought he should somehow overcome it.

According to Aristotle, “Happiness belongs to the self-sufficient.” He was striving to fulfil that ideal. “It’s something that I’m aiming for, and it’s something that I don’t have yet,” he said. “I think a lot of our fights boil down to Arnold thinking he’s already arrived at the final condition where he doesn’t need me anymore,” Agnes said, “and me trying to point out to him that he’s not as great as he thinks he is, so that he can see that he actually does still need me.”

Arnold smiled slightly, his eyes cast down.

“And that actually is a way of understanding how marriage is a preparation for divorce,” Agnes went on. “It’s a preparation for the time when you won’t need another person in order to think.”

She said that maybe that would be the title of her book about marriage: “Marriage Is a Preparation for Divorce.” She had written the line down in her notebook. “It’s this idea that we want marriage to have a point,” Arnold said. People talk about the aim of their careers, but they don’t use that

sort of vocabulary for marriage. “When Socrates says that philosophy is a preparation for death, he’s very clear that he doesn’t mean you’re supposed to commit suicide. It’s just that there’s some way in which philosophy could stand up to the task of making you able to deal with death when it comes.”

“The corresponding claim,” Agnes said, “would be that somehow the project of marriage would make you capable of being alone.”

Sometimes, when Agnes discusses her marriage with Yelena Baraz, her best friend, Baraz gets frustrated by her philosophical approach. Agnes said, “I’m, like, O.K., what is jealousy? Am I entitled to feel it? Is there something I’m getting right in feeling this way?” Baraz wants to comfort her. “I feel like she’s treating herself as a guinea pig or a case study,” Baraz told me, “and I want to relate to her as a person I care about who is in distress.” But Agnes is impatient with the “let’s-get-through-the-next-fifteen-minutes kind of approach. The way that I think about it is: there’s no other time when you could understand this thing. Devastating problems in your life can also be *interesting*, and they can interest you as they’re happening to you and as they’re causing you intense pain.” When Baraz tries to look for a cure, “I’m, like, No,” Agnes said. “This is my chance to understand it. This is the time when we can be serious about our lives.”

Agnes eventually wants to write about unconventional family arrangements like hers, but she has also noticed that when people write about such topics they are both celebratory and defensive, as if they were trying to put a good face on it. She doesn’t want to draw conclusions until she can “grasp the real thing in all its tragic splendor,” she told me. When I asked about the nature of the tragedy, she sent me a list of sixteen points. “However many people you have, it is never enough” was the first point on the list. “One is not enough (this is part of the tragedy of monogamy), but neither is two, or three.” She went on to describe how differently she and Ben and Arnold dealt with their fears of aging and death and their unspoken wishes for their children; the realization that honesty is often brutal and intolerable; the understanding that passion is unsustainable. She felt as if she were constantly trying to open their eyes to the tragic aspects of their lives, and they weren’t seeing it. There was also the problem of equilibrium: each relationship settles into its own patterns, a set of interlocking arrangements based on each person’s insecurities and needs, which become nearly impossible to alter, even more so among three. “So many things get ‘let go of,’ ” she wrote, “rather than really resolved.”

I asked Agnes if there was a version of aspiration that takes the form of becoming a person who accepts what is good enough. Life is fragile and terrifying, and so much of it can be taken away. Can you aspire to know how to fully inhabit a relationship, a life, that feels like a plateau? “I think grateful acceptance can be loving, but I think exacting demands can also be loving,” she responded in an e-mail. “Marriage has an amazing PR team, for 2 decades it has been continuously telling me, ‘This is good, this is how it is supposed to be, this should count as enough, lots of people don’t get this much, you should accept this and move on to other concerns’—and I feel increasingly emboldened to say, ‘No thanks, I’d rather keep working and searching and striving.’ ”

Will ChatGPT replace human writers? Pinker weighs in. Harvard Gazette

The Harvard Gazette, February 14, 2023



Steven Pinker says it's impressive; will have uses, limits; may offer insights into nature of human intelligence (once it 'stops making stuff up')

Steven Pinker thinks ChatGPT is truly impressive — and will be even more so once it “stops making stuff up” and becomes less error-prone. Higher education, indeed, much of the world, was set abuzz in November when Open AI unveiled its ChatGPT chatbot capable of instantly answering questions (in fact, composing writing in various genres) across a range of fields in a conversational and ostensibly authoritative fashion. Utilizing a type of AI called a large language model (LLM), ChatGPT is able to continuously learn and improve its responses. But just how good can it get? Pinker, the Johnstone Family Professor of Psychology, has investigated, among other things, links between the mind, language, and thought in books like the award-winning bestseller “The Language Instinct” and has a few thoughts of his own on whether we should be concerned about ChatGPT’s potential to displace humans as writers and thinkers. Interview was edited for clarity and length.



"We're dealing with an alien intelligence that's capable of astonishing feats, but not in the manner of the human mind," said psychologist Steven Pinker.

Q&A

Steven Pinker

GAZETTE: ChatGPT has gotten a great deal of attention, and a lot of it has been negative. What do you think are the important questions that it brings up?

PINKER: It certainly shows how our intuitions fail when we try to imagine what statistical patterns lurk in half a trillion words of text and can be captured in 100 billion parameters. Like most people, I would not have guessed that a system that did that would be capable of, say, writing the Gettysburg Address in the style of Donald Trump. There are patterns of patterns of patterns in the data that we humans can't fathom. It's impressive how ChatGPT can generate plausible prose, relevant and well-structured, without any understanding of the world — without overt goals, explicitly represented facts, or the other things we might have thought were necessary to generate intelligent-sounding prose.

And this appearance of competence makes its blunders all the more striking. It utters confident confabulations, such as that the U.S. has had four female presidents, including Luci Baines Johnson, 1973-77. And it makes elementary errors of common sense. For 25 years I've begun my introductory psychology course by showing how our best artificial intelligence still can't duplicate ordinary common sense. This year I was terrified that that part of the lecture would be obsolete because the examples I gave would be aced by GPT. But I needn't have worried. When I asked ChatGPT, "If Mabel was alive at 9 a.m. and 5 p.m., was she alive at noon?" it responded, "It was not specified whether Mabel was alive at noon. She's known to be alive at 9 and 5, but there's no information provided about her being alive at noon." So, it doesn't grasp basic facts of the world — like people live for continuous stretches of time and once you're dead you stay dead — because it has never come across a stretch of text that made that explicit. (To its credit, it did know that goldfish don't wear underpants.)

We're dealing with an alien intelligence that's capable of astonishing feats, but not in the manner of the human mind. We don't need to be exposed to half a trillion words of text (which, at three words a second, eight hours a day, would take 15,000 years) in order to speak or to solve problems. Nonetheless, it is impressive what you can get out of very, very, very high-order statistical patterns in mammoth data sets. "For 25 years I've begun my introductory psychology course by showing how our best artificial intelligence still can't duplicate ordinary common sense. This year I was terrified that that part of the lecture would be obsolete. ... But I needn't have worried."

GAZETTE: Open AI has said its goal is to develop artificial general intelligence. Is this advisable or even possible?

PINKER: I think it's incoherent, like a "general machine" is incoherent. We can visualize all kinds of superpowers, like Superman's flying and invulnerability and X-ray vision, but that doesn't

mean they're physically realizable. Likewise, we can fantasize about a superintelligence that deduces how to make us immortal or bring about world peace or takeover the universe. But real intelligence consists of a set of algorithms for solving particular kinds of problems in particular kinds of worlds. What we have now, and probably always will have, are devices that exceed humans in some challenges and not in others.

GAZETTE: Are you concerned about its use in your classroom?

PINKER: No more than about downloading term papers from websites. The College has asked us to remind students that the honor pledge rules out submitting work they didn't write. I'm not naïve; I know that some Harvard students might be barefaced liars, but I don't think there are many. Also, at least so far, a lot of ChatGPT output is easy to unmask because it mashes up quotations and references that don't exist.

GAZETTE: There are a range of things that people are worried about with ChatGPT, including disinformation and jobs being at stake. Is there a particular thing that worries you?

PINKER: Fear of new technologies is always driven by scenarios of the worst that can happen, without anticipating the countermeasures that would arise in the real world. For large language models, this will include the skepticism that people will cultivate for automatically generated content (journalists have already stopped using the gimmick of having GPT write their columns about GPT because readers are onto it), the development of professional and moral guardrails (like the Harvard honor pledge), and possibly technologies that watermark or detect LLM output.

There are other sources of pushback. One is that we all have deep intuitions about causal connections to people. A collector might pay \$100,000 for John F. Kennedy's golf clubs even though they're indistinguishable from any other golf clubs from that era. The demand for authenticity is even stronger for intellectual products like stories and editorials: The awareness that there's a real human you can connect it to changes its status and its acceptability.

Another pushback will come from the forehead-slapping blunders, like the fact that crushed glass is gaining popularity as a dietary supplement or that nine women can make a baby in one month. As the systems are improved by human feedback (often from click farms in poor countries), there will be fewer of these clangers, but given the infinite possibilities, they'll still be there. And, crucially, there won't be a paper trail that allows us to fact-check an assertion. With an ordinary writer, you could ask the person and track down the references, but in an LLM, a "fact" is smeared across billions of tiny adjustments to quantitative variables, and it's impossible to trace and verify a source.

Nonetheless, there are doubtless many kinds of boilerplate that could be produced by an LLM as easily as by a human, and that might be a good thing. Perhaps we shouldn't be paying the billable hours of an expensive lawyer to craft a will or divorce agreement that could be automatically generated.

GAZETTE: We hear a lot about potential downsides. Is there a potential upside?

PINKER: One example would be its use as a semantic search engine, as opposed to our current search engines, which are fed strings of characters. Currently, if you have an idea rather than a string of text, there's no good way to search for it. Now, a real semantic search engine would, unlike an LLM, have a conceptual model of the world. It would have symbols for people and places and objects and events, and representations of goals and causal relations, something closer to the way the human mind works. But for just a tool, like a search engine, where you just want useful information retrieval, I can see that an LLM could be tremendously useful — as long as it stops making stuff up.

GAZETTE: If we look down the road and these things get better — potentially exponentially better — are there impacts for humans on what it means to be learned, to be knowledgeable, even to be expert?

PINKER: I doubt it will improve exponentially, but it will improve. And, as with the use of computers to supplement human intelligence in the past — all the way back to calculation and record-keeping in the '60s, search in the '90s, and every other step — we'll be augmenting our own limitations. Just as we had to acknowledge our own limited memory and calculation capabilities, we'll acknowledge that retrieving and digesting large amounts of information is something that we can do well but artificial minds can do better.

Since LLMs operate so differently from us, they might help us understand the nature of human intelligence. They might deepen our appreciation of what human understanding does consist of when we contrast it with systems that superficially seem to duplicate it, exceed it in some ways, and fall short in others.

GAZETTE: So humans won't be supplanted by artificial general intelligence? We'll still be on top, essentially? Or is that the wrong framing?

PINKER: It's the wrong framing. There isn't a one-dimensional scale of intelligence that embraces all conceivable minds. Sure, we use IQ to measure differences among humans, but that can't be extrapolated upward to an everything-deducer, if only because its knowledge about empirical reality is limited by what it can observe. There is no omniscient and omnipotent wonder algorithm: There are as many intelligences as there are goals and worlds.