

BEAUTY, INTERPRETATION, AND THE EVERYDAY:  
AN INTERVIEW WITH ALEXANDER NEHAMAS

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**I. THE SEMANTICS AND ONTOLOGY OF BEAUTY**

**ROBBIE KUBALA:** Many philosophers of art who identify with the analytic tradition tend today to think of beauty, when they do think of beauty, as one aesthetic quality among others. In a recent book on *Functional Beauty*, for example, the philosophers Glenn Parsons and Allen Carlson claim that the “avoidance of ‘beauty’ is generally a wise practice because the word is often taken to suggest a somewhat narrower notion than the term ‘aesthetic’ suggests.”<sup>1</sup> Why focus on beauty as opposed to the aesthetic more broadly?

**ALEXANDER NEHAMAS:** I don’t think that beauty is a single specific quality. There may be such a thing – we could call it ‘prettiness’ or ‘good looks’, though such a feature changes with time and culture. Beauty, by contrast, is the most general quality that applies to everything—object or person—to which we are attracted and connects with objects and persons to whom we are attracted, where the attraction can range from a mild appeal to the most passionate love. Beauty, as Plato put it, is the object of love, and I

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<sup>1</sup> Parsons and Carlson (2008), p. xii.

think that the most salient feature of our relationship to the arts and beauty in general is that all of us love something or other in the world. Everything that we love is something we find beautiful, and since what you and I find beautiful is bound to be different, it's unlikely that beauty represents a single quality.

As I just said, prettiness and good looks change over time, and each epoch and culture has its own paradigms at different times of what counts as such. Beauty, though, in this very broad sense of being the object of love, is always the same: it's always been there and it always will be, as far as I'm concerned. That's the difference between Parsons and Carlson's view and my own: I believe it doesn't help to think of beauty as a specific quality, and in general I am greatly suspicious of the notion that aesthetic qualities in general are a distinct class of qualities that are relevant to the aesthetic value of an object, in contrast to another class that isn't. I think it's much more productive to speak not of aesthetic qualities but of the aesthetic *function* of qualities, such that any quality can, in certain circumstances, function as an aesthetic feature of an object—and, for that matter, that any object can function as an aesthetic object, for better or worse.

**RK:** In *Only a Promise of Happiness*, you wrote, “Instead of a special class of aesthetic terms or qualities, we should be thinking of an aesthetic use to which every part of our language can be put.”<sup>2</sup> Might it be the case that for you ‘beauty’ just names what the ‘aesthetic’ names for other philosophers?

**AN:** Perhaps—if by ‘beauty’ they understand prettiness, which is definitely much narrower than the aesthetic, or if by the ‘aesthetic’ they understand, as I do, the range of features and values that have to do with individuality—which is much broader than prettiness. But I am not sure they do, and so I refuse to separate beauty from the aesthetic, as they do. In fact I think that one of the reasons that aesthetics has languished in recent philosophy is that it has consistently not considered beauty to be relevant to its effort to isolate an ‘aesthetic’ attitude from everything else and to distinguish what is categorically aesthetic from what isn't. That belongs to an attitude that places beauty, as Clive Bell or R. G. Collingwood did, in the domain of ‘life’ and the aesthetic in the domain of ‘art’.

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<sup>2</sup> Nehamas (2008), p. 50.

But the two are not nearly as distinct as many believe; as T.S. Eliot remarked, in a passage I quote in my book, it is not a matter of art as opposed to life but of art as opposed to that part of life that is not art.<sup>3</sup>

**RK:** It seems that your very generous construal of what beauty is might lead us into some *prima facie* linguistic infelicities. For example, I'm fascinated by, and very much drawn to, the work of Francis Bacon. I've learned a lot about his paintings, I've bought books about him, and I think that my life will be better if I can come to terms with the violence of desire as expressed in his painting. Am I committed to saying that I find his work 'beautiful'?

**AN:** The first thing you just admitted—when you said that you find Bacon's work 'fascinating', that you are 'very much drawn to it'—is that you love it! And I am convinced that to love something is to find it beautiful—but remember that the beautiful and the good-looking are not to be identified. To repeat, beauty is not for me a particular quality or set of qualities. It is just what it is that each person loves. Perhaps you could say that Bacon's contorted figures are not good-looking. But is it so clear that his pictures are ugly? Somebody else might think so, but I don't think you would.

**RK:** No. Even if I could say, from another point of view, that the painting is ugly, I myself am not repulsed by the painting, I'm attracted to spending more time with the painting, to learning more about it, and that's what it would be on your account to find something beautiful.

**AN:** That's right—and generally we don't want to spend all that much time on things that are ugly. Still, I think we're more likely to spend time with things that are ugly, even if we hate ourselves for doing it, than to spend time with things that are indifferent to us, things which, in the limiting case, we don't notice at all.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

**RK:** Let me follow up on this question of what beauty is. Roger Scruton says that a Kantian approach to beauty is one that refuses to define beauty as a property of something; rather, the interest in beauty is a state of mind of a person.<sup>4</sup> The critical responses in the *British Journal of Aesthetics*, by Carolyn Korsmeyer and Berys Gaut,<sup>5</sup> seem to have taken more of an interest in the ontological question—the question of where beauty is instantiated, or what can we properly predicate beauty *of*, what kinds of objects or events in the world—rather than the phenomenological. Can you elaborate on your answer to the ontological question, or do you find it somehow uninteresting or irrelevant?

**AN:** I don't think it's particularly interesting, but I would be glad to have metaphysicians look into it, especially if they determine that, as I believe, beauty emerges from the interaction of an object with a person. I think Scruton (and Kant) are *almost* right in saying that our interest here is in a person's mental state. But that mental state is produced in different people by such different things—what you find attractive I may actually find repulsive—that you need to be interested in those objects as well and think of it as the product of an interaction between subject and object. That this is so emerges both in the arts and, even more, in connection with persons. Most people, when they look at another couple, will say, 'what on earth does she find in him?' or 'what on earth does he find in her?' And the fact is that people always find things in each other that the rest of us don't. Still, it's not *just* a matter of one's subjective impression. It takes a particular object to generate a particular attitude, and the attitude can be discussed, criticized, or justified. That's the interaction I wish I knew more about. But I think it's probably metaphysics and psychology that are going to tell us more about that.

**RK:** So the idea is that we respond to some properties of the object, even as part of what constitutes our response is the subjective range of affects and valuings that we take up in relation to that object.

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<sup>4</sup> Scruton (2011), p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Korsmeyer (2010); Gaut (2010).

**AN:** Right. The question, to which I don't know the answer, is whether those features are 'objectively' there. I don't see how that can be, strictly speaking, the case, because if they were, a suitable inquiry should in principle reveal them to all and sundry. But I don't think that's possible. It takes what we usually say: you have to *know* her, you have to *know* him, you have to see it for yourself. That suggests that there's something else going on, rather than that *I* just happened to notice something that you didn't happen to notice. There's a parallel here with the idea that critics point out things that we haven't yet seen in a work. If you actually examine carefully what critics points out, you'll see that although their accounts often manage to get us to pay closer attention to something that we wouldn't have otherwise, it's rare that what we find is exactly those features they describe. Rather, paying close attention (sometimes) results in finding something you interpret for yourself, through *your eyes*, rather than the critic's, because the critic's 'eyes'—that is, the critic's sensibility and taste—are not yours. So the kind of interpretation that beauty involves also has a historical dimension—it has to do with who you are and who you have been. It's not just the object, and it's not just the person either.

## II. BEAUTY AND UNDERSTANDING

**RK:** Let's discuss the relationship of beauty to learning about the beautiful object. Some critics have worried that this over-intellectualizes the experience of beauty: you can love something without having any desire to learn about it.<sup>6</sup> How would you respond to this?

**AN:** I acknowledge the criticism and I am sometimes worried about it. After all, I am an intellectual, and my attitude to lots of things that I like is to spend a lot of time with them. Admittedly, there are many things that I find perfectly attractive but which I don't particularly want to learn about—one must always make choices. But what do you do when you actually spend time with something? Don't you inevitably learn things about it? If you spend a lot of time, a serious part of your life, with a particular piece of music, for example, you *learn* how the piece of music is constructed, you learn to recognize its themes and their developments, and so on. I don't see how you can avoid that. The

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<sup>6</sup> Budd (2011), p. 82.

process may well be less explicit than I make it out to be, and my making it as explicit and scholarly as I do may be over-intellectualizing it. But I think that anyone who spends time with something learns, whether explicitly or not, more things about it. It's inevitable.

**RK:** In his book *Pictures & Tears: A History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings*, the art historian James Elkins writes that historical understanding has undermined his passion for painting. Although he recognizes that his knowledge of art history has deepened his experience of paintings, he also experiences his knowledge as a loss: he is “slowly corroding [his] ability to address paintings with full emotions and an open heart.”<sup>7</sup> Do you agree that there can be a sense of loss that comes with learning more about a beautiful object, or do you think that increased knowledge always improves our aesthetic experiences?

**AN:** That's a good question—which means, of course, that I don't know how to answer it! It's certainly true of some people that learning distances them from things. And sometimes finding out how something works is in a way like learning how the magician does the trick. In that case, though, you don't really stop being moved. You're moved by different things: not by wonder at a seeming miracle but by admiration for dexterity, say, which may be less passionate. But perhaps we should be slightly Stoical about emotions and passions and say that maybe emotions and passions are our first reactions to things that we don't really understand and that our all-considered reactions are less emotional in that sense, but not for that reason less valuable or intense.

**RK:** Let me approach the question from the other direction, as it were, from the worry of fully understanding the object. It seems that there is a delicate balance between wanting to understand a beautiful object further and yet preserving a sense of mystery by not fully understanding it. As you write, “The art we love is art we don't yet fully understand.”<sup>8</sup> But it seems that there's a difference between understanding art in the sense of learning more facts about it and interpreting art to learn more about ourselves. I can continue to

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<sup>7</sup> Elkins (2001), p. 107.

<sup>8</sup> Nehamas (2008), p. 76.

love a text like the Bible, for example, without learning more about the text as I read it over and over in a devotional manner. What I do is I use the text to learn more about myself and the nature of my responses to the text.

**AN:** But are you responding to the *same* thing as you learn something new about yourself? Are you not seeing this thing in a new way as well? I think these are probably different ways of expressing the same fact—that as you learn new things about yourself by looking at the text, the text acquires a new dimension that it didn't have before. And maybe you see this new dimension because you have changed in the meantime. But I see what you mean, especially with the Bible, which is a text people read very slowly, finish, and start over again: there's something almost incantatory about reading it. But I don't think that incantatory reading does teach you very much about yourself. When a text teaches you something new about yourself, the text has become something new as well.

**RK:** It may be the case that we can never fully understand a work of art, in the way that some of your critics seem to think. Malcolm Budd, for example, says that “a thing of beauty can be a joy for ever, even if its beauty is well-understood.”<sup>9</sup> But that doesn't mean fully understood.

**AN:** ‘Well-understood’: what does that really mean? Surely not the same as ‘fully understood’. Full understanding is logically impossible. It would mean, I think, to know all a thing's properties and their interrelations—but the notion of ‘all a thing's properties’ is ill-defined. There is no such set as the set of all the features of a thing, especially when the features of a thing also depend on how they are related to the features of other things. So I think ‘well-understood’ is fine and presents no problem for my view, since it can always become better. A thing is ‘fully understood’ only when I no longer want to learn more about it. Understanding is exhausted not when the object but when *I* am exhausted.

### III. BEAUTY AND THE EVERYDAY

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<sup>9</sup> Budd (2011), p. 85.

**RK:** You have famously defended television. Can you elaborate on how your interest in television has made you a “better philosopher?”<sup>10</sup>

**AN:** Actually, I can’t judge that; it’s a matter for other people to determine. Still, when I first realized that there were television programs that reward what I call ‘serious watching’, I also realized that the arguments that people make against television—the kind of arguments now made more about the Internet or video games—were part and parcel of Plato’s arguments against epic and dramatic poetry in the tenth book of the *Republic*. In fact, Plato’s criticisms are the beginning of all criticisms of popular culture. Seeing that gave me a completely different way of understanding Plato. He was no enemy of ‘art’, as I had thought earlier—he probably had no idea that there was such a thing as art. But even if he did, he didn’t think that poetry was art. He certainly didn’t think of poetry as *technê*, or craft, as he clearly did of sculpture, with which he had no problem. And he didn’t criticize poetry because it was not craft. After all, he didn’t think painting was a craft either. And yet he banished poetry but not painting. The reason is that he didn’t think that painting was nearly as dangerous as poetry. Painting, he said, only deceives children and stupid people, and not about very serious things. But poetry deceives even ‘the best among us’—about something very serious: the nature of the good life for human beings. That is a danger in any art form that is (still) popular and therefore what I call transparent—transparent in the sense that we are not aware of the conventions it involves because we are participating in those very conventions. So the TV cops are off to chase the criminals, and they put on their seatbelts. Why should they? Because we think of them not simply as characters but also as models for emulation and believe that people will tend to behave like them. And perhaps they do, until they see a program twenty years later, find the acting and the staging ‘unnatural’—that is, conventional—and can no longer believe in them in that way.

By the time we’ve become aware of the conventions, we no longer think we are facing an unmediated reality, and we no longer believe our behavior will be directly influenced by it. In poetry, though, Plato saw something transparent and worried that although Agamemnon *seems* to be a king he doesn’t act like a *good* or a *real* king, who

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<sup>10</sup> Nehamas (2008), p. 128.



would never have treated Achilles as Agamemnon did (not that he thought Achilles was any better). And he was worried that because people thought of Agamemnon as a hero, they would try to emulate him. Nobody today thinks that people will act like Agamemnon by reading the *Iliad*. Why not? Because it's no longer considered to be a realistic representation. But many do think that kids will act in life as they act in their violent video games.

**RK:** It seems that part of your objection to the notion that the naïve or simple will imitate what they see on television is that over time they find programs conventional and not realistic. But is there not still a concern for people who are watching contemporary popular entertainment?

**AN:** That is definitely a concern, and that's why Plato is still relevant. He presents us with a dilemma: either he's wrong about Homer and Aeschylus, in which case we are wrong about TV or video games, which represent no danger; or we are right about TV and video games, in which case he is right about Homer and Aeschylus, and our popular media are dangerous. So there is a reason to be careful about works of popular culture, although the best defense—to use Socrates' words, if not his meaning, in the *Republic*—is to know their real nature: to realize they are representations and not unmediated reality.

**RK:** You once wrote that “reflection on ‘mass culture’ may reveal it to be less objectionable than it seems.”<sup>11</sup> Is that the sort of response you would give to a high-minded critic who says that we shouldn't bother with mass culture or popular culture?

**AN:** Absolutely. I also think that the mass audience is much more sophisticated about its entertainment than we intellectuals give it credit for. The proverbial couch potato—fat, flannel-shirted, pimply, drinking cheap beer on a couch whose stuffing is all coming out, watching 8 or so hours of TV a day—doesn't exist. The real couch potatoes are the intellectuals who look at TV for a few hours once in their lifetime and think they know enough to criticize it, although in fact they don't know what to watch for and how to react

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<sup>11</sup> Nehamas (1990), p. 34.

to what they see. Whereas someone who watches 8 hours of TV a day, if such a person exists, bears a much more complex relationship to the medium. People are not naïve or sophisticated in some absolute sense. They are more sophisticated about the media they are familiar with than about the media they have no exposure to. And many criticisms of popular culture come from people who know very little about it.

#### IV. BEAUTY AND AESTHETICS

**RK:** Let me end on a very general topic. What do you think of the state of play of philosophical aesthetics today?

**AN:** That's a really complex issue. I'm not in a position to say, 'I think aesthetics is doing well' or 'aesthetics is not doing well'. Who am I to say that? Recently, aestheticians have started paying much more attention to arts and their history than they used to, as objects of interest in their own right and not just as a particular area in which to ask questions of ontology or epistemology. We still have to do more of that. We need much more detailed and richer discussions—we need genuine criticism—of the arts, the sort of thing, for example, that Berys Gaut does in the opening of his book with the paintings of Bathsheba.<sup>12</sup> Aesthetics must follow the example of the philosophy of science. There was a time when that field too was, more or less, applied epistemology and ontology. Through the work of Kuhn and others, though, it became clear that the philosophy of science requires a knowledge of both the nature and the history of the sciences. That did of course make the philosophy of science less accessible to many of us, but maybe everybody should know something about some art—everybody, if I am right, certainly knows something about beauty, which is, for me, the ultimate object of aesthetics!

We must also stop asking only the questions the journals are already asking. It seems as if every aesthetician today has to have a view on the standard of taste, the nature of representation, the nature of expression, fictional fear, etc. These are important issues, to be sure, but they seem exhausted to me—at least for now. We should try to ask questions

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<sup>12</sup> Gaut (2007), pp. 14-25.

that emerge from direct interaction with the arts. That's where complex and textured interaction with a work can help, giving rise to questions that, because of the lack of such interaction, haven't been asked before. I would like to see aesthetics journals publish, in every issue, two or three articles with no reference to the current literature. What others have said is of course relevant but not as our only subject matter.

**RK:** Which questions do you consider most worthy of investigation in aesthetics?

**AN:** One important question concerns the connection between our relation with art and the rest of our value systems, our practices of valuing. We have been wrong to separate them as we have. I don't know if aesthetics and ethics are one, but our aesthetic values are crucial to the way we live, and we need to find out what place they have in life, how they're connected to other ethical or moral values, whether some of them can have precedence over others, whether there are principles that govern whether one sort takes precedence over the other. We need to reintegrate art with the rest of life, as moral philosophy has tried to do by focusing on the more general notion of normativity. But that applies to the moral philosophers as well, not just to the aestheticians. They too need to think about art as we need to think about ethics.

**RK:** You just mentioned the connection between aesthetics and ethics. One of the claims of your book is to sever the vaunted Platonic connection between the pursuit of beauty and the acquisition of moral virtue. But you were just speaking about a need, at least on the philosophical level, to reintegrate our conception of aesthetic and ethical value.

**AN:** By 'reintegrating', I mean making them both part of one approach, not necessarily showing that they are bound up together or that they are in necessary harmony with each other. I'm on Bernard Williams' side here. Williams limited the domain of morality, perhaps he even tried to eradicate it altogether, and produced some of the most important philosophy of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. He said less about—his life was cut short—what is to be done once morality has been circumscribed. That's a project worth continuing. For me, both aesthetic and moral values are species of the ethical. One issue, then, is whether

those two species are always compatible or not. My sense is that they aren't. There is a break between the personal and the public and they can come into conflict. I can't get over E. M. Forster's well-known saying that if he ever had to choose between betraying his friends and betraying his country, he hoped he'd have the guts to betray his country. Put that in the first person, and let it sink in.

**ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEE**

Alexander Nehamas is Professor of Philosophy and Edmund N. Carpenter, II Class of 1943 Professor in the Humanities at Princeton University and a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences. He works on Greek philosophy, aesthetics, Nietzsche, and literary theory. His most recent monograph is *Only A Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art* (2008).

**ABOUT THE INTERVIEWERS**

Robbie Kubala is a PhD student in Philosophy at Columbia University. After earning his BA from Boston College, he completed the MLitt at the St Andrews and Stirling Graduate Programme in Philosophy as a Marshall Scholar, and an MPhil at the University of Cambridge in History and Philosophy of Science.

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