Beyond Comprehension

Alexander Nehamas and Jonny Thakkar

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Alexander Nehamas recently retired from Princeton University, where he was a professor of philosophy and comparative literature for over thirty years. In his 2007 book Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art*, Nehamas presents a vibrant and distinctive account of the value of beauty both in art and in human life more generally. It's that rarest of things, an original and challenging work of philosophy that is also a highly quotable page-turner. This May, I met with Nehamas in Princeton to discuss the ideas in that book and how they relate to his vision of philosophy more generally.*

—Jonny Thakkar

Jonny Thakkar: *What led you to write about beauty in the first place?*

Alexander Nehamas: Well, when I'm not thinking directly about philosophy, much of what I do is to read novels or look at pictures or listen to music. I spend a lot of my time on this. I watch television too. It struck me at one point that unless I did something with all those things, I would have wasted a large part of my life. So I started thinking about them. And I realized that they were really worth philosophical attention.

When I looked around, I noticed that two philosophers who couldn't have been more different from each other, Richard Rorty and Martha Nussbaum, were both urging philosophy to start paying attention to literature again on the grounds that reading novels makes one a morally better person. And I couldn't believe that. I also thought it was very strange that two people with such different views would end up with the same justification for reading. That made me realize that every philosophical discussion of values was limited to the values of morality or politics. And it seemed to me that appealing to such values was not the right way to bring literature and art back into philosophy. Instead of subordinating them to the interests and categories we were already familiar with, we should use them to develop new interests and categories based on values more proper to the arts. At about the same time Elaine Scarry had published *On Beauty and Being Just*, which, from a different point of view, fell more or less in line with Rorty and Nussbaum and argued that beauty was deeply connected to justice, one of the paradigmatic values in ethics and politics. I was also reading Dave Hickey, a critic whose two books at the time, *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* and *Air Guitar: Essays on Art and Democracy*, paid serious attention to the value that, in my opinion, was most crucial to art—to beauty. And that gave me what seemed like a different way to approach the issue.

JT: *Why do you think we have the impulse to subordinate beauty to morality or justice? Or to align it with other values? Why is it that we can't see beauty as its own value? Or at least why do we have a hard time doing that?*

AN: There are different reasons. One, I think, is a consequence of the philosophy of the Enlightenment, which, despite the doubts many have expressed, is still part of

our thinking. One of the great accomplishments of the Enlightenment was its essential emphasis on equality, which implied that moral and political positions should not be based on the various categories that were central to the ancien régime, that is, one set of rules for aristocrats, another for plebes, yet another for priests, etc. If what you care about the most is equality—the fundamental identity of all human beings—your values are going to reflect and promote that concern. Accordingly, by far the greatest bulk of philosophical attention has centered on moral and political values, which depended on the essential similarities of all people and applied equally to all. And that has continued on to this day.

Another reason is that modernism, or some versions of modernism, claimed to have done away with beauty. The idea that beauty was what brought about the First World War, for example—that was the position of much of Dada. Beauty became suspicious to artists and critics, and historians of art and literature, who identified it as purely a feature of appearance. But if beauty is exhausted by what something looks like, then things that look beautiful or wonderful or attractive can hide great danger and evil within. And sometimes that is, in fact, true. Beauty does mislead in that way. I mean, its attraction can lead you to things that turn out to be profoundly wrong or harmful.

So there was a double-barreled attack on beauty: one was philosophy's neglect of beauty in favor of ethical rightness and political equality, and the other was modernism's turn away from aiming at beauty. And then, of course, there was the Frankfurt School, which thought of beauty in political terms, as an essentially conservative and retrograde feature of the bourgeois arts.

JT: *It seems like what you're describing on a pretty large canvas, of the last 250 years of Western history, has also been seen to some extent in the last ten to twenty years, where there's been a kind of movement within intellectual life and the world of letters, it seems to me, to reject the desire for beauty as aestheticism, as a kind of self-indulgent, bourgeois concern that doesn't reckon with the serious injustices of the moment.*

AN: One problem is that, for a variety of reasons, art has been seen—at least since art became Art with a capital A—as a side activity. Not by artists themselves, and not by the people who enjoy it, of course, but by philosophers, who've seen it as merely a sophisticated kind of entertainment and therefore unfit for the "serious" subjects that philosophy should supposedly be addressing. However, this notion that if you're dealing with beauty you're not dealing with real issues is misleading, if only because a large part of today's philosophy, which addresses moral and political—not to mention metaphysical and epistemological issues—also often makes no difference to anybody. So why single beauty out?

To take an interest in beauty, to celebrate and also to criticize its role in life, is not to deny the essential importance of politics and ethics—but these don't exhaust the full range of human life, and they certainly don't exhaust the full range of the values that permeate our world. Beauty directs our attention to a different and crucially important aspect of life that we have to think about as well.

JT: *What is beauty? What are we actually talking about when we're talking about beauty?*

AN: I never ask, "What is beauty?" I don't think that's a good question. What I ask instead is, "What is it to *find* something beautiful?" And that's a very different question because it carries no implications about, so to speak, the ontological, metaphysical or real structure of beautiful things—it's a question about our reaction to the very different things each one of us is moved by. I think that's a much better question to ask. Because every attempt to define beauty I know of is flawed in very serious ways. We could all agree, say, that beauty is some kind of symmetry—a view as old as the Greeks and crucial to St. Augustine, but it is very difficult to agree on what counts as symmetrical. So I say, look, let's forget the "facts" of beauty—if there are any—and instead ask what happens to us and what we do when the beauty of something or someone attracts us.

JT: *And that's where you draw a contrast between Kant and Plato.*

AN: Right. For Kant, to find something beautiful, pleasant as it may be, is to have no genuinely practical use for it. For Plato—though I don't agree with the final direction of his thought—beauty has an immensely important practical consequence. For him beauty gives rise to eros, the love that is the spark of philosophy. Think, for example, how often it strikes us that loving something or someone tends to bring out the best in you. If, like Plato, you think that the best in us is our reason, and that the only way to cultivate your reason is philosophy, beauty might lead you to devote yourself to philosophy. But if you don't think that, as I don't, you will say, Yes, beauty leads to *something*, but that something does not need to be, as reason is supposed to be, common to everyone. There are ways of living one's life that are not philosophical, but are also perfectly good.

For Plato, there was a hierarchy of lives, with the life of philosophy at the top and all others valued according to how close they came to it. For me, it's not like that at all. But I do think Plato's absolutely right to insist that when you love something, you always want to go further into it, you always want to know more about what it is and what makes you love it. His thought was that as you learn more and more about what you love, you recognize higher levels of beauty, and gradually, if you are the right kind of person, you finally reach the highest level of beauty, which for him is what he calls "Beauty itself," which also constitutes virtue and gives genuine happiness. I prefer to think that this process of going further and further into something is to see yourself as trying to understand what that very thing is. And what is it to understand what something is? It's to see how it's similar to and how it differs from everything else that it's related to. You move not higher, as Plato thought, discovering other beauties, but more broadly, connecting what you love to everything else and having greater insight into its *own* beauty. And since, in the end, everything is connected to everything else, to love something is, in a way, to love the world.

JT: *That remains quite a Platonic view.*

AN: Very much so. At least if we understand that for Plato "the world" is here, it's what's around us, not in a separate domain, not in another life. He argues that once philosophers reach Beauty itself, they are capable of creating, as he says, genuine virtue. Well, who acquires that virtue? First of all, of course, philosophers themselves. But also the young people who follow in their footsteps. Virtue is for him, too, an accomplishment in this world. It's not an abstract, purely theoretical activity, which we might caricature as "grooving on the Forms."

JT: *One of the things you write in your book is that "when I find a work of art beautiful, I feel there's more about it that I would like to know," and that "the art we love is always a step beyond our understanding." Why is it that if you find something beautiful, you have to have something that you don't understand about it? Why can't it be the case that you have now perfectly understood this particular thing and therefore you appreciate its beauty?*

AN: Well, first of all, you can never perfectly understand *anything*. What usually happens is that one gets to the point when it seems that the effort to get more out of something has become too costly. If I can speak in terms of cost-benefit analysis, the marginal utility, so to speak, of whatever you are likely to learn next is not worth the cost of the effort it takes to learn it. That's how I feel, for example, about *The Magic Mountain*, which I've read many, many times. When I recently tried to read it again, I failed. I am sure I might have learned more about it, but it would have required going over things that I've already gone over many times. But that doesn't mean I am indifferent to it. It's very much like what Aristotle says about friends: even if you are no longer directly involved with them, you still love them because of your history together, of what you have both become through your friendship. But you no longer have the passion for them that you have for someone you still have an active relationship with. You have affection and respect and perhaps a kind of nostalgia, and all these are very good things. But you won't necessarily interact with them in the same direct way.

Can I give you an example? I love Manet's *Olympia*. At one point, I felt I understood it as well as was possible, and I stopped spending so much of my time with it. But I happened to be in Paris, and I went to see it again, and I noticed something new: the model, Victorine Meurent, who is lying in bed, is holding the edge of a silk coverlet. And suddenly, I was struck by a question: Is she about to lift it, and cover her nakedness, or has she just pulled it down, revealing herself? And all of a sudden, I had a crush on her again.

JT: *Your reading of that painting, in your book, is a kind of virtuoso detective story. It provides an interpretation of what this mysterious painting—which so shocked observers at the time, but has subsequently become canonized—is really doing with respect to the viewer. It's a painting that's set up as an erotic puzzle, something that makes you feel that you have to know more.*

AN: That's right. It's a mysterious work. I mean, it's not a painting that tells a story.

JT: *And that's your theory of it, in a way.*

AN: That there is no story.

JT: *Exactly. It's deliberately set up to defy comprehension at a certain level, or at least to frustrate the natural first look.*

AN: Yes. Manet knew the sort of paintings his audience liked and painted something that went against most of the conventions of the time. The *Olympia*—to say the least—shocked them. After the exhibition's opening, it was moved way back from the front and way high up on the wall, making it almost impossible to see. Olympia, who today seems both beautiful and sexy, was described as a "gorilla" and a "spider." To return to an earlier point, it's not that you find something or someone beautiful and then become perplexed by them. The two come indissolubly together; the feeling of love is generated at the very same time as the feeling there's you want to know more about it. Those who didn't like the painting had no desire to understand it.

JT: *You might wonder, though, whether you're conflating love and beauty. You might certainly think you no longer feel a kind of passionate desire to get to know this particular object because you've exhausted it, or there are diminishing returns, or it's just too familiar. It could even be that other people have unraveled the mystery for you. But why can't you say at the same time, I do believe that it is the most beautiful thing, I just no longer feel that passion for it?*

AN: There's a sense in which finding something beautiful involves an ongoing relationship with it. If you want a list of the things that I believe are beautiful, it will include things I believe others are likely to find beautiful. But if you want a list of the things that I actually find beautiful myself, the list will be smaller. What I want here is for beauty not to be a purely contemplative affair. That's a Kantian view, in a way. And I don't want that. I want beauty always to have this behavioral component.

JT: *That makes a lot of sense. And that's what's exciting and invigorating, I think, about your book: it resets the question, making it much more about our own relationship with the beautiful object, rather than objective criteria or a contemplative stance. I suppose I just wonder whether we couldn't make space for both of them by recognizing the experience of knowing that something is beautiful so that somebody who is approaching it for the first time could go on a passionate journey of discovery toward it, but at the very same time knowing that you've exhausted that journey yourself, at least for the time being.*

AN: I don't know what is beautiful and what isn't. I only know what things people find beautiful. With something you feel you have exhausted, your relationship with it is going to be a way of holding on to your past, holding on to your history, having respect for something you consider having been important to making you what you now are. Unless you become dissatisfied with yourself—in which case, you could blame that thing for doing that—and the question then becomes, if you blame something for having misled you, do you also decide that it wasn't beautiful after all? And my answer is: no. Because beauty can mislead, and people who are suspicious of it are right to be.

JT: *You could say to someone, perhaps, I think you will find this beautiful, even if I no longer do.*

AN: Or even if I never do.

JT: *You have this great sentence about the non-universality of beauty, a rejection of the thought that if you say something is beautiful, you are saying everybody should find this beautiful. You say that "the groupings beauty establishes are less like Christian churches, and more like the pagan cults of ancient Greece, which recognize their common concern with the divine, despite the different forms in which they worshiped it, and acknowledge even foreign practices they had no desire to follow as forms of religion."*

AN: Herodotus does that in India. He says, Yeah, I recognize that's religion, but that's not something I would like to be involved with. [*Laughs*] I mean, look, there are various Christian churches, but they think the others are heretics. [*Laughs*] The Greeks didn't. Before monotheism came in, the idea was that you could be a devotee of Artemis, and I could be a devotee of Aphrodite. And unless Euripides comes between us, we can get along perfectly well: the divine has different forms. Even with the advent of monotheism, remember what the Stoics think: there is one god, Zeus, but he appears in all these different ways. There's that fantastic little line in Gore Vidal's *Julian*, where Julian says, *It's you Christians who are the polytheists! Because we believe in Zeus, but you believe in the triple monster.* Great line. But it's true. If you were doing extremely broad cultural theory, you would say that the current dominance of ethical and political values in philosophy are a remnant of the monotheistic view.

JT: *And then there's this monotheistic philosophy of beauty as well, which says, Well, if it really is beautiful, everybody should find it beautiful, so we should all worship the same god in that sense. Whereas you're saying, No, the phenomenon of beauty in human life naturally carves us off into different groups, to some extent, where those groups are organized around the different gods we worship, as it were, the different things we find beautiful. And that in turn creates different kinds of community for us.*

AN: That could be said on a positive note, or it could be said on a negative note. Somebody like Bourdieu would say, Yes, this is precisely what it does. It distinguishes people socially. You know, the rich bourgeois like this mediated, analytical approach, whereas the poorer people like immediacy and all that. In fact, somebody went and did a sociological study of this in the New York area, and found that the only correlation that actually works was that people who live on the Upper East Side have more of a liking for abstract art than others. But everything else is mixed up. It's not that the poor people like landscapes and the richer people like portraits, or whatever it is.

JT: *One way of putting the Bourdieu point, though, is to say, Suppose we accept that beauty creates communities of the devoted. You might want to be devoted to something just in order to be part of that community. So in that case what's doing the work is not the beautiful object, but social climbing.*

AN: I think he's right about that. But I don't think it *exhausts* what happens.

JT: *It goes to some questions about the concept of aspiration. Aspiration can be read in two different ways. The more standard one is the sociological one, where we*

say, for example, these families or these individuals are aspirational, where that means something like, they would like to rise in the social world—

AN: What used to be called improving oneself.

JT: *Exactly. And certainly, art can play a part in that process. There can be a form of pretentiousness which involves pretending to be a cultured person, by going to the opera, for example, or drinking fine wine. Even though I don't myself particularly like it, the people that I want to be like tend to like it. That's the social-climbing kind of aspiration. But then there's the sort of aspiration that Agnes Callard has highlighted, where I can see that somebody's devotion to this or that art form gives them access to a kind of good that I don't yet have access to. And it's clear that there's some kind of entry cost that one needs to pay—let's call it an apprenticeship—that I'm going to undergo by doing the things they do, reading about the subject, experiencing it for myself, asking questions and so on, knowing full well that the goal is to change what I actually consider to be beautiful. And I can want to do that for perfectly good reasons that have nothing to do with social climbing.*

AN: I want to add another possibility, which is that even if you don't enter the process because you respect some particular person or group of people, but just because you're a social climber, even then you can still change in that way.

JT: *Absolutely. So you can't just dismiss it through sociology. Changing tack, though, another thing that's very striking about your book is that for you finding people beautiful is continuous with finding artworks beautiful. And that seems to be quite radical—at least in the sense that people don't generally think about it that way in the philosophical literature. Does that seem right to you?*

AN: Yes, though I'm occasionally worried about this—after all, even Frege was worried about his theory of number! The issue is sex. And people say, Look, first of all, there's a difference between people and art. Because you can have sex with people, you can marry people; you can't have sex with works of art and marry works of art. My answer to that is: that's not because the *love* is different. That's because the *kind of thing* that you love is different. So what you want, in both cases, is to get to know what you love better, but one way to get to know a person better is to get to know them sexually as well. Whereas with a work of art, that doesn't really help very much.

JT: *When it comes to people, though, that's where some of the really distinctive moral and political questions come up. Because we do have a tendency to favor the beautiful in various ways—obviously with our attention, but also with rewards of pretty substantial kinds. There's a feeling that naturally occurs, I think, that finding people beautiful is a source of bias in the world.*

AN: That is a very good point, and I think it's true, but bias is everywhere. So what do you try to do? You try to get over the bias. You know, if we find out that the handsome and pretty teachers get higher grades than others, and that there is a real correlation, we'll try to figure out how to correct for it.

But I don't think you'll be able to resolve all conflicts in life. And some of those conflicts are going to be between beauty and morality. I mean, many philosophers who

accept the existence of nonmoral values still think that moral values always trump every other kind. In fact, a former colleague of mine used to think that the moral is whatever is at the end of justification. And I don't quite buy that. I think we have this desire for an end stage, when everything would fit together perfectly. It's a fine ideal, but to get it we'd have to die! [*Laughter*]

JT: *I think that one of the deepest things about Bernard Williams, and in a way it goes back to Isaiah Berlin, is that idea of life being structured by ineradicable tragic conflict, and that facing up to that requires us to write about our own lives in a way that isn't always moralistic and isn't always vindicatory, that doesn't always make us look pure and good. And that's one thing that I find in your work: it's a project of examined life that's not there to let us off the hook, but rather to deepen our appreciation for what kind of beings we really are.*

AN: The idea being that, to some extent, when you realize that, you'll probably have a better life—if nothing else at least a more interesting life. I mean, you may end up finding it extremely depressing if you find out that you're really not what you thought you were at all, you're something else—if I were to find out, let's say, that I never really liked Manet, I just wanted to be a social climber. That would not be a nice thing to find out. It's a project of understanding and it's a project of refusing to separate understanding from pleasure. I think that one of the pleasures that we have in life, or at least some people do, is the pleasure of understanding. Is it good in itself? I don't know.

JT: *This has something to do with your writing style too, right? It's essayistic, I would say, it has a circling, digressive quality. It can be more declarative sometimes than you find in a lot of academic work, and therefore more interesting, to be honest.*

AN: More interesting to some.

JT: *Would you say it is difficult to produce this kind of work within the constraints of academic philosophy?*

AN: Very generally speaking, there are two different ways of writing philosophy. There is a way of writing like Aristotle or Kant, where you more or less suppress your personality. And then there's another way of writing, whose representatives include, say, Montaigne and Pascal and Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, where self-expression becomes as important as anything else. And these people need to write in a style that's distinctly their own because they want to distinguish themselves from the other people who are doing the same thing. That can happen outside the walls of the academy, absolutely it can, but I want to say it also should happen *within* those institutions as well.

But the writing, as you pointed out, is not going to be like the writing you have in general philosophy, because we're trying to do different things. The people who write primarily for philosophy journals, they need to adopt a style that is impersonal. Because what matters to them is the problem and its solution. On the other side, what matters is not only the problem and the solution, what matters is also, "What is it like to find this a problem? And what is it like to give it a solution? What kind of person does it make me to want to give this solution to that problem?" So there is

a difference in style, yes. And if you identify academic style with the former, you're going to exclude the latter.

JT: *Do you try to make your work beautiful in order to draw in a reader, in other words? Does beauty play a role internal to your own process as a writer?*

AN: I think it does. It matters to me that my sentences are elegant, that they are worthy of thinking about. I don't always succeed, of course, far from it. But the presentation has always seemed to me very important. You want people to like what you're doing, not necessarily to agree with it, but to think that it is worth spending a little more time with. That can sometimes be identified with mere interest. But it's better if the interest is coupled with liking as well. I'd like to see philosophy as an object of love rather than just as an object of respect.

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