

# Alexander Nehamas

## A good life: Friendship, Art and Truth

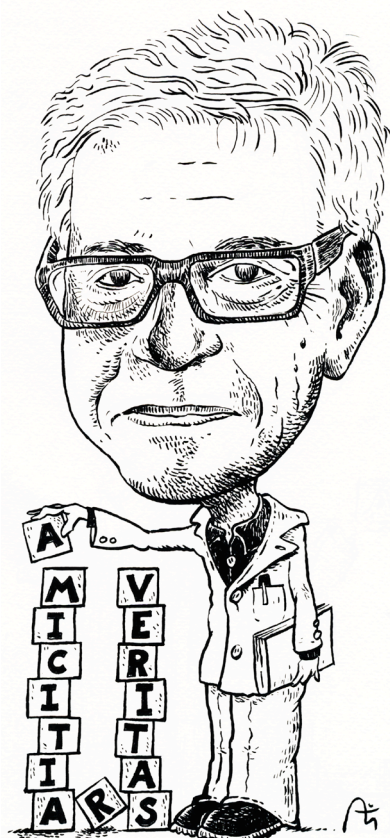
### Interview

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In September 2017 Alexander Nehamas<sup>1</sup> kindly accepted our invitation to have a meeting in Athens in order to discuss several issues of philosophical interest; with his latest publication *On Friendship* (New York: Basic Books, 2016) as a starting point we soon moved over to a multitude of topics Nehamas has so far dealt with. The whole conversation spirals around the probably most challenging and demanding issue as far as practical philosophy is concerned – yet one every moral agent needs to provide an adequate answer to during his lifetime: Values. Do they exclusively belong to the domain of morality? Nehamas claims that “although moral values [...] are important [...], they are not the only values that determine whether a life is or is not worthwhile”. This view inevitably shifts the focus from individual values - even fundamental ones such as friendship, art and truth - to the real issue: **What is a good life, after all?**



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**CONATUS:** Your interest in art and friendship is based on your belief that morality is not the only thing that matters for a truly good life. To what extent and for which reasons do you think that morality is crucial for a life to be worthwhile? Is there a possibility for someone to live a meaningful and not absurd life without any moral values or standards?

**ALEXANDER NEHAMAS:** To say that morality is not the only thing that matters for a truly good life is not to say that it is completely irrelevant to such a goal. It is only to say that moral principles -the principles that govern our relationships to society, or humanity, as a whole- are only part of what makes a life a good one. It is also to say -and here where the claim becomes controversial- that such principles are not overriding: that they do not necessarily take priority over every other value that makes life good. Sometimes, when morality and art or morality and friendship come into conflict, it is morality, contrary, for example, to the view of Immanuel Kant, that must give way.

**CONATUS:** Beauty, in classical terms, was aligned to the moral good, in other words, aesthetic values were not self-contained. Are aesthetic values an Erfindung of modernity?

**ALEXANDER NEHAMAS:** The idea that aesthetic values may not be directly connected with morality arose when the fine arts began to be considered a system in their own right in the 18th century. Kant's Critique of the Power of Judgment distinguished "the judgment of taste" from both practical and moral judgments and paved the way for the "autonomy" that the aesthetic was granted in modernity. Kant himself did argue that beauty was a "symbol" of morality but the good and the beautiful had parted company by the beginning of the 20th century. Most aesthetic theorists considered the two independent of each other. Some, the Dadaists for example, went to the other extreme and thought that they were directly opposed: beauty (or, in my opinion, what they took beauty to be) became for them the seductive face of evil.

**CONATUS:** You claim that friendship, particularly, is not a matter of morality, but of aesthetics. Or, in other words, that friendship is more like art. Could you in brief explain this view?

**ALEXANDER NEHAMAS:** How is friendship like art (and beauty)? Moral principles are supposed to be impartial and universal. They apply equally to everyone and require us to treat anyone as we would treat everyone. Neither art nor friendship are like that. We don't treat our friends the way we treat the rest of the world and we don't all find the same things beautiful. Further, you and I can

like different people (have different friends) and different things (have different tastes) without faulting each other for our choices. Morality is based on the similarities—actual or hoped for—to one another; friendship, art, and beauty depend on and encourage our differences: they are what makes us individuals.

**CONATUS:** How important is friendship in comparison with art? Which has the most decisive role for a good life?

**ALEXANDER NEHAMAS:** I believe that both are absolutely necessary. A life without either one of them is sad and incomplete.

**CONATUS:** Do you believe that artists have clear intentions that penetrate their works and that we should look for them when we react to them? Should we also look into their life and biography, as you have done in the case of Cavafy, Montaigne, and others? Couldn't we admire the work as such, disconnecting it from its creator?

**ALEXANDER NEHAMAS:** A work of art, like a work of philosophy, is, first of all, a work. And it is not possible to understand a work without knowing what it was meant for, which means that we must look into the intentions with which it was made. Unfortunately, most thinking about intention takes to be a mental state that exists before the work is made—a “design or plan in the artist’s mind” that precedes, causes, and explains the work. But it is impossible for an artist to have such a clear design or plan before the work is actually finished (if I knew what my poem would be before I wrote it, I would have written it, at least mentally, already!). What the work is, and what it was intended to be, come into being as the work itself comes into being. But we don’t need to look into the artist’s or the philosopher’s mind in order to know the intention with which a work was created: to the extent that the work is successful, the intention with which it was created is fully within it. As to whether we should look into the biography of the work’s creator, my view is that we can appeal to anything -anything- that is relevant to the work’s interpretation. But I don’t think that we can tell in advance, or in general, what is and what is not relevant to such a process: we can only make such a determination in particular cases. For example, certain aspects of Michel Foucault’s life are essential to understanding his work; that is not true in the case, say, of Aristotle -at least, not as far as we know at this point. But that too, unlikely as it may be, may change.

**CONATUS:** Is it possible, in philosophy or any other discipline, for an individual to think or write without any other part of her / his individuality to interfere, except for her / his intellectuality? For example: does Plato’s theory of Forms or Kant’s

view of phenomena and noumena speak of its author in a veiled way? Can we detect in these theories something that comes directly from their very creators' character?

**ALEXANDER NEHAMAS:** The question presupposes that one's intellectual aspect is in principle distinct from other facets of one's personality: but is that really so? Doesn't one's "intellectuality" itself form part of one's character? Nietzsche says somewhere that when he tries to understand a philosopher's views, he always asks: "At what mode of life does all that aim?". That is, every important philosophical theory contains, implies, or serves a particular way of life. And, like every way of life, it too must involve every aspect of one's personality.

**CONATUS:** Taste in art seems to be something arbitrary and subjective. But, as Immanuel Kant put it, "we hope that the same pleasure is shared by others". Does that mean that art is meaningless without friends, or "de gustibus non est disputandum"? Is it, eventually, important for taste to be a matter of agreement, and especially an agreement among friends?

**ALEXANDER NEHAMAS:** Kant says something stronger: that we hope that the same pleasure is shared by everyone. But that can't be right: I want my taste to be different—interestingly different—from the taste of others, since identity of taste is, in the end, identity of character, and human beings rejoice in their differences from one another: we are not ants! On the other hand, it is equally wrong to think that taste can't ever be shared. We expect our friends, and people we respect or admire, to share (at least but also at most) part of our aesthetic choices. If, for example, someone very close to you despises something you like, you may come to doubt either that person or, perhaps, yourself; by the same token, if someone you despise likes something you like, you may face the same dilemma! We do want to share our tastes—with some people, some of the time.

**CONATUS:** As a thinker who is inspired by the arts and the creations of culture, how do you understand the term "mass culture"? According to your view, each individual judges something as aesthetically valuable with her/his own eyes. Also, the criteria to be used to evaluate beauty are utterly subjective, since beauty is a promise of a personal satisfaction. And what about "mass culture"? Would you apply the same criteria?

**ALEXANDER NEHAMAS:** "Mass" or "popular" culture refers to widely accessible cultural institutions that seem easy to understand and appreciate. In fact, I believe that even those who enjoy it (usually neither intellectuals nor the socially privileged who tend to maintain their distance from it) are much more

sophisticated in their appreciation of popular works than they seem to be to those who are unfamiliar with them. In any case, the popular culture of one time period often becomes the high culture of the next. In my view, classical Greek tragedy in antiquity was closer to today's popular culture than we might think if we have in mind its place in the culture of the contemporary world. The same was true of the novel in the 18th century, when it had its modern beginnings, of photography in the mid-19th century, or of film, jazz, and television in the 20th. But I don't agree with you that the criteria for evaluating beauty are "utterly subjective". As I have already said above, although such criteria are not universal, that does not make them subjective. They are, rather, intersubjective or, as I prefer, personal (person being individuals who are anchored within several larger groups, with all of which they must negotiate their judgments). There is a huge open space between the subjective and the objective and taste, judgments of beauty and art, and friendship fall within it.

**CONATUS:** You say that Foucault's care of the self is an act by which we try to invent ourselves, to produce by means of improvisation our own selves; it is in a way a matter of artistic creation. Do you believe that this interpretation of care of the self bumps against Foucault's views during his "archeological period", in which he sees the possibilities of creation and knowledge restricted by a latent system of rules of a particular era (*épistémè*)? In other words, is it possible for the care of the self, as a matter of art, to surpass its historic *a priori*?

**ALEXANDER NEHAMAS:** I believe that Foucault changed his views radically at least twice, perhaps even more often, in his life. The main distinctions are between his "archaeological" period, his "genealogical" period, and the period of the "care of the self". During all these periods, he envisaged the existence of what you call "latent rules" but he gave progressively more room for the manipulation, reformulation, and transcendence of these rules by individuals. Don't forget that "invention" or "improvisation" always occurs against a background of rules and principles, which inventors or improvisers use for their own purposes. Unless, for example, an object followed some of the rules that dictate what counts as a work of art during a particular period, it could not be recognized as a work of art in the first place. All invention and improvisation begins with what is given and, if successful, produces something that becomes given for those who follow. In short, "surpassing one's historic *a priori*" means going beyond it but only on the basis of emerging from it and, necessarily, preserving an overlap with it.

**CONATUS:** Returning to friendship: You claim it is a mechanism of individuality, but couldn't it be, under certain circumstances, a way to selflessness? Is there a thick self before the relationship, which remains persistent through it? Are there

extreme doings, which we do for the sake of a friendship that can lead to loss of our self?

**ALEXANDER NEHAMAS:** If you mean that a friend may act selflessly for a friend's sake, then I fully agree with you. But such selflessness is perfectly compatible with individuality: those who make great sacrifices are distinguished individuals who accomplish something that few others are capable of. My own view—which, I admit, is controversial—is that there is no such thing as a single “thick” self that persists throughout. We change and develop not only diachronically but synchronically as well: who we are with one of our friends is not the same as who we are with another. You and I can have a common friend but, as we say, we may like our friend for (perhaps only slightly) different reasons: but that is to say that the friend we both like is a (perhaps only slightly) different person for each one of us.

**CONATUS:** Ancient *philia*, and in particular Aristotelian one, in distinction from modern friendship which appears exclusively in the private realm, is a public matter. Do you think that Aristotle wrote about friendship in a purely political sense? Is there place for friendship during *vita contemplativa* (*bios theoretikos*)?

**ALEXANDER NEHAMAS:** The question of the social dimension of the theoretical life that Aristotle praises in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is extremely difficult to answer. He insists that the theoretical life, which he may identify with happiness (*eudaimonia*), is self-sufficient but he also issues a qualification. He says that the life of the wise person, who engages in *theoria*, is the most self-sufficient of all in that it needs others the least in order to be lived, but he concedes that it might be better, or easier, if one engages in it with others, whom he describes as “collaborators” (*sunergous*). In any case, I don't believe that we should identify *philia* with friendship. *Philia* is a general term for every relationship that is, so to speak, ethically salient—every relationship with someone who matters to us. That is why Aristotle can speak of “civic” *philia*, a relationship based on self-interest—that is an instrumental relationship, which by definition can't be a friendship—that binds the members of a single political unit to one another. I do think that the *philia* of the virtuous, which he identifies with *philia*'s perfect form comes close to what we might describe as friendship today. But the general relationship *philia* refers to is much, much broader and more public than friendship as we understand it today.

**CONATUS:** Life for Socrates is meaningful only for the sake of searching the truth. What happens then if after Nietzsche and Foucault there is no truth or knowledge; what happens if truth and knowledge is only a matter of subjection

relations and of supremacy and by all means an invention among relations of power? What does it mean for us to still seeking the truth?

**ALEXANDER NEHAMAS:** We should be very careful about saying that either Nietzsche or Foucault claimed that “there is no truth or knowledge”. Nietzsche, in particular (followed in most respects by Foucault), never denies that some views are true and some, false. What he does deny—and that, I admit, is a dangerous thought—is that the truth is not always valuable, as he believes our tradition has taught us to believe. In other words, something can be true and yet bad for someone to believe, while something may be false and yet good for someone to believe: one example of what he has in mind would be the Christian worldview, which he definitely rejects. But he doesn’t infer from that rejection that no one should accept it. Nietzsche -wrongly in my opinion- divides human beings into two exclusive sorts, the strong and the weak and believes that the weak would be unable to survive without the consolations of Christianity. He believes therefore that it is good for these people to believe in Christianity despite the fact that it is false, while it would be bad for them to give up their religious beliefs and try to live their lives as the strong do. His view is arrogant and perhaps elitist but it is not a denial of truth. Truth is not relative for Nietzsche; but value is.

**CONATUS:** Do you agree with Hannah Arendt’s statement: “I have never in my life 'loved' any people or collective group, neither the German people, the French, the Americans, nor the working class or anything of that sort. I indeed love only my friends, and the only kind of love I know of and believe in is the love of persons.”? Can we love impersonally and impartial, or in other words, can we really be philanthropoi? And in the sphere of art, can we love art in general, can we be philotechnoi?

**ALEXANDER NEHAMAS:** I think Arendt is absolutely right. It is impossible to love a collective group, because love is essentially addressed to individuals. Loving a group is the other side of hating a group: it is a kind of racism. It is, in my opinion, equally impossible to love art in general, especially since most art, like everything else in the world, is very, very bad. We tend to think only of its highest exemplars when we think about art, but these are only a disappearingly small part of all the works of art that have been, and will be created. Bach and Mozart, Proust and Jane Austen, Velasquez and Manet are only the crest of the iceberg, most of it underwater, that art constitutes. And you may love them or some other artists (even bad ones, if you have no taste!) but never, in my opinion, art as a whole. Only the individual can be loved. Even the most accomplished philotechnos will dislike or be indifferent to most of the art in the world.