

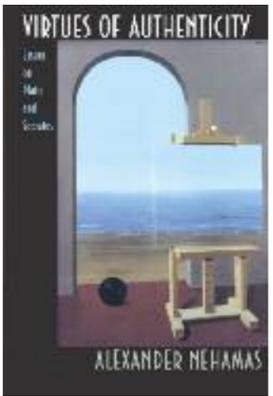
Alexander Nehamas

The Art of Philosophy by a Real Philosopher

Alexander Nehamas is one of the most accredited and notable philosophers in the United States. An Edmund N. Carpenter II Class of 1943 Professor in Humanities, Professor of Philosophy, and Professor of Comparative Literature at Princeton University.

Ever since he was little, he was fascinated by Ancient Greece: by its literature, its art, its philosophy, and its politics, which formed the center of his education. As he says, “the legacy of the ancients, though, crucial as it has been to our sense of ourselves as individuals and as people, is a double-edged sword. Naturally, it makes us proud. But pride is itself a double-edged sword. It makes it easy to convince ourselves that we are special not because of our own accomplishments but because of those of our ancestors. That can lead to complacency, a sense of entitlement to which we are not in fact entitled.”

Prof. Nehamas is also a very busy administrator and he has published and lectured widely on topics spanning classical philosophy, philosophy of art, literary theory, friendship, popular culture, and television, and when



he is asked how hard it is to carry on all of these different fields of interest, he answers “someone once characterized philosophy as study of how things, in the broadest sense of the term, hang together, in the broadest sense of the term. Philosophy is for me the antithesis of specialization. That was, and continues to be, one of my main reasons for pursuing it. Although I realize that specialization is often necessary (and although it is sometimes, unfortunately, overemphasized in today’s universities), it is important not to lose sight of the fact that philosophy is concerned with human life in all its aspects. And human life is too complex to comprehend from one and only one point of view.

“As a philosopher, I try to look at things with different eyes and from different points of view; as an educator, I must involve myself in teaching, lecturing, and writing. I must try to do all that, and help maintain and improve the structure and goals of my institution, while avoiding the great danger of spreading myself too thin and being satisfied with superficialities. That is the great difficulty here.”

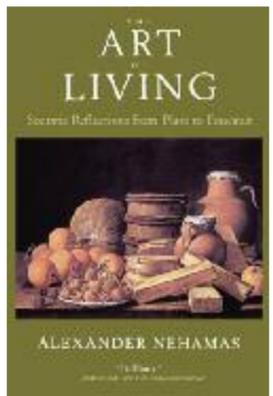
ON SOCRATES

It is really very interesting the way Nehamas evaluates Socrates’ place in the Western philosophical tradition and the importance of Socrates for contemporary writers. According to Nehamas, “Socrates is, of course, by and large Plato’s incredibly lifelike creation – we know very little about the historical person. But the Socrates Plato has given us is without doubt one of the most fascinating and mysterious figures in the western philosophical tradition. And he is fascinating exactly because he is mysterious: he believes that only if you know what the right way to live is will you live well and be happy. He also believes that he doesn’t himself know the right way to live; and he believes that those who do know what the good life is can explain it to him and enable him to live well. So, he is constantly asking people who think they know the good life to tell him what it is. Unfortunately, it always turns out they only think they know: in reality, they are ignorant. That, Socrates says, makes him wise that they are: at least, he knows that he ignorant while they don’t even know that. And here is the mystery: although, as he says, he doesn’t know the right way to live, Socrates always does the right thing anyway, and seems to be as good and happy as anyone has ever been. “How is that possible? What makes a life good? What makes Socrates possible? Did he after all have the knowledge he thought he didn’t? What inspired him to be as he was? That is the mystery Plato has bequeathed us and, despite our many efforts to resolve it, it remains as intractable today as it was for Socrates’ own contemporaries.”

Nehamas has published several books such as: Nietzsche : Life as literature (Harvard University Press, 1985), which has since become a classic, Virtues of Authenticity: Essays on Plato and Socrates (Princeton University Press, 1998), The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault (University of California Press, 1998) and Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in the World Art (Princeton University Press, 2007).

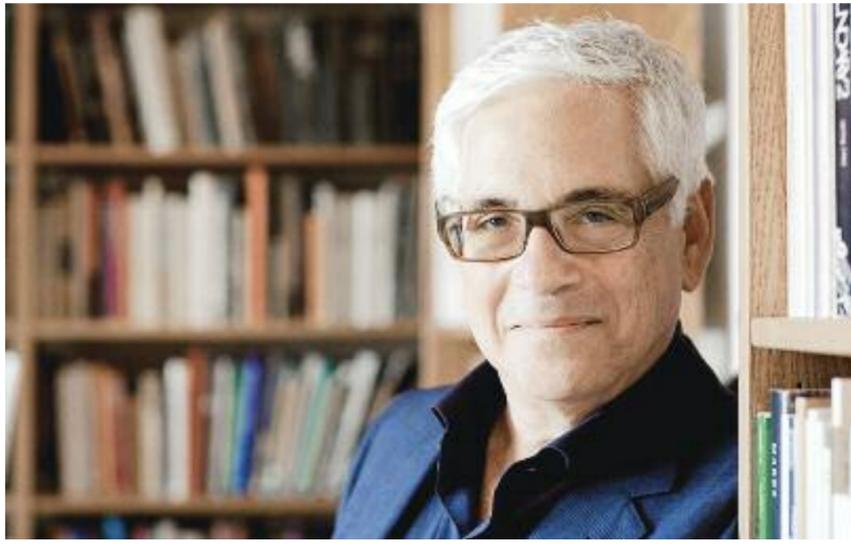
ON FRIENDSHIP

His latest book “On Friendship,” is forthcoming from Basic Books in April 2016. The reason Nehamas has chosen to elaborate on this topic is because he thinks that in both philosophy and public life people have taken it that the only important values are the values of morality. As he contends, “morality depends on the assumption that all human beings are in some basic respects the same and that this requires treating everyone the same way, without special preference to nationality, gender, ethnic background and age. Morality treats people simply as people, and society couldn’t exist without such an understanding. But people are also different from one another, and difference is often a reason for admiration. That is, we admire people who have a distinctive character, who stand out among their peers, who live their life in their own manner: When we love someone we love them because no one else is like them, because they can give (or take from) us something that no one



else can. Art and friendship belong to this domain. They depend on values that themselves depend not, as in the moral case, on our similarities but our differences from one another. The art and the people we love, the friends we keep close to us, the things we find beautiful—all these mean something to us that they can’t mean to anyone else, and their value consists exactly in their difference from everything and everyone else in the world. I believe we need to think about such values much more seriously than we have done before, and much of my philosophical work aims at articulating their role in life.

Marcel Proust said “we are able to find everything in our memory, which is like a dispensary or chemical laboratory in which chance steers our hand sometimes to a soothing drug and sometimes to a dangerous poison.” Nehamas believes that the same can happen also with literature. “It is never clear where an interaction with literature, or any art form, will lead. We like to think that reading books, look-



ing at paintings, listening to music makes us better people – and in some sense they do: but what sense is that? I think it makes us more complex, more idiosyncratic, more unusual.

ON MORALITY

“But does it make us more moral? Sometimes, perhaps. In general, no. Well-read villains, sensitive outlaws, tasteful criminals, and elegant torturers are everywhere about us. It is true that literature makes it possible for us to see the world as others see it. But how we use that ability is another question: do we use it to help or hinder, to benefit or harm, to liberate or to oppress? That is not something that literature, or any other art, can tell us. Art does not often lead to morality. But we must remember that the values of morality, important as they are, are not the only values there are in the world. Beauty, friendship, tastefulness, loyalty, are values in their own right as well, even if they sometimes conflict with our moral sense. How to use the greater sensitivity the arts give us, how to put it to the right use? Well, that is, a philosophical question.”

Nehamas also maintains that “contemporary philosophy, especially in the United States, has by and large retreated from public life. That is in large part due to its professionalization. It was only in the 18th century that philosophy began to be counted as an academic discipline. Professionalization brought specialization in its train. And specialization makes it more and more difficult to communicate with people who don’t share your specific interests: it limits your audience to other specialists.

“But that makes it very difficult for philosophers to turn to the larger questions that attracted them to philosophy in the first place. In addition, the requirements of an academic career encourage work that aims to produce concrete results that can be evaluated clearly and on the basis of common standards. But that is difficult to do when issues of public significance are involved: here we don’t have ‘hard’ results, we have instead attitudes, approaches, pictures, ways of seeing the world, plans, and dreams, all connected with one another. And if you value being right above all else, you will stay away from such things: you will choose to think about less complex issues that, because they are not connected to much

else, can be evaluated on their own and in relatively simple terms.

“But another factor has also contributed to philosophy’s relative isolation from the public: that is the 20th century’s ideal of a ‘scientific’ philosophy,” which, like much of our science, aims to understand the world objectively but not, or at least not directly, to change it.”

ON THE GREEK CRISIS

Nehamas’ opinion about the escalating political and economic turmoil in Greece is that is not only political and economic, but also, and primarily, cultural. As he says, “Greece is a Balkan country in two senses. First and most obviously, of course, because it belongs to the Balkan region. Second, though, and most important, because it has become internally Balkanized. There is no nationwide sense that what really matters, especially during a crisis that could have become a great opportunity,



is the common good. Every professional and political group believes that it has been treated unjustly and, unconcerned with what would help Greece itself, acts unilaterally on behalf of its own, and only its own, interests.

“As a philosopher, I have relatively little to say about economics or politics. But I do think that the only path that can bring us to where we should be, as individuals and as a country, is a radical cultural change: a shift from a culture of individual advantage to a commitment to the good of Greek society as a whole. A shift from an exclusive concern with the short term and a will-

ingness to sacrifice immediate, and often temporary gains, for long-term prosperity. A sense that we all have a common aim, which should prevent us from thinking of those who disagree with us as traitors or anti-Hellenic.

“My political engagement has been so far limited to efforts to reform the Greek higher-education system, which, like every educational stage, from kindergarten on, needs to be radically overhauled. The cultural changes I think are imperative for Greece can’t possibly be brought about unless our children are educated into them.”

ON GREEK EDUCATION

To the question if he thinks that the crisis has affected the Greek education, Nehamas says it was in trouble “long before the crisis began, although the situation was made even worse by our current difficulties. To begin with, what students learn in high school is, incomprehensibly, un-

related to the material they need to know in order to take the national examinations that determine the university and the department they will be assigned to. That has made it necessary for Greek students to prepare for these examinations in addition to their regular schoolwork. So, children of wealthy families usually have private lessons and the children of the not-so-wealthy attend a private institute, an after-hours parallel school that prepares them for the examinations. You can imagine the intellectual pressure these students are under and the financial pressure their parents must face. And all

that, in order to learn, mostly by rote, what will get them into university only to be forgotten as soon as university actually starts.

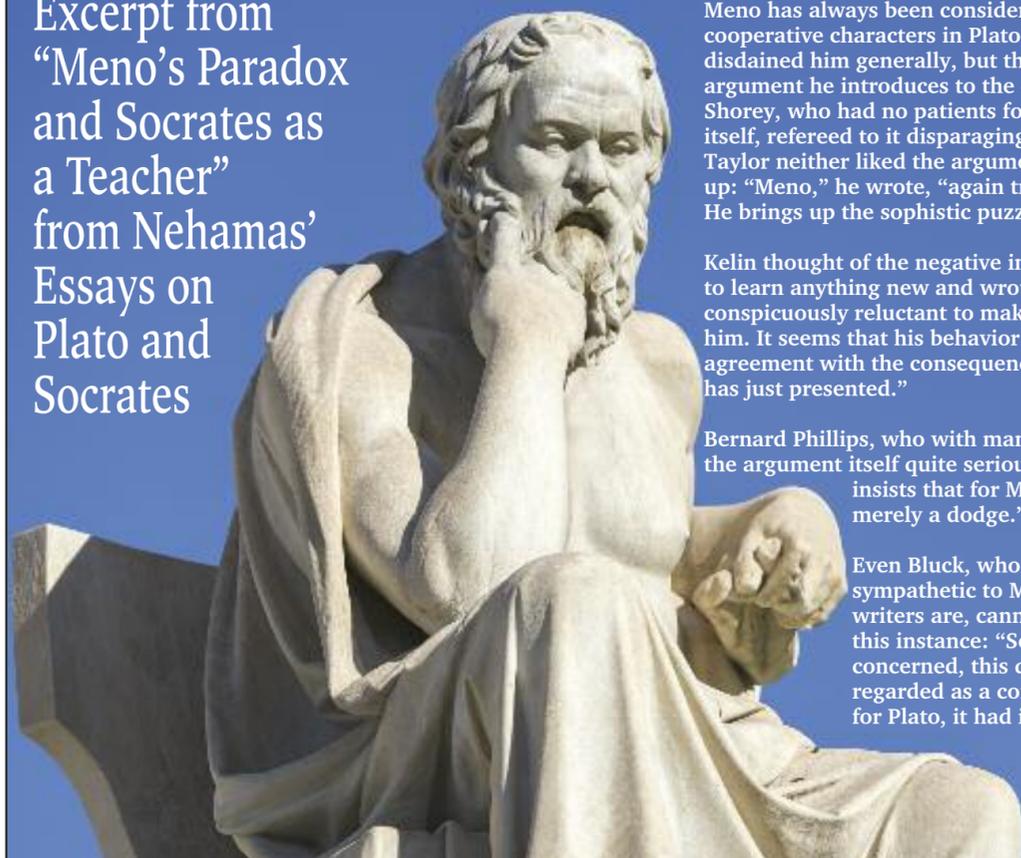
“And what happens once the students pass their examinations and enter a university? Have you taken a look at the physical plant of our universities, the ramshackle buildings, the broken or stolen equipment, the garbage strewn all over the campus, in corridors and classrooms, the constant strikes, the physical attacks on professors by various political organizations, the ‘occupations’ of buildings by groups of students and administrative workers, the constant stealing of ballot-boxes in contested elections, the holding of faculty hostage for hours on end and the destruction of the their offices?”

“Just two years ago or so, the University of Athens was closed for a whole semester by its administrative personnel with the support of the then-rector, students were simply locked out of their classes for over three months, and a whole semester was lost!

“In 2009, a law that aimed at reforming the structure of our higher education was adopted by an unprecedented majority of Parliament in 2009. I became closely involved with Greek higher education when I was elected to the Council of the University of Athens – such councils were established by the 2009 law and include both faculty and outside members who are responsible for overseeing the functioning of these institutions. Unfortunately, however, every government since then has weakened the law, which is now in danger of being completely eliminated. Instead, we are headed for a return to the status quo established by the previous major education law, passed in 1982 and, in my opinion, responsible for most of the problems I outlined in the previous paragraph.

“We need a complete overhaul of our educational system from top to bottom but what is being done now seems headed in the wrong direction. Perhaps worse, the financial situation of our universities is absolutely dismal: their budgets have been cut by as much as 70% in the last few years, and money even for absolutely essential services, like security and cleaning, is lacking. Salaries are at an extraordinary low point, able scholars and scientists are continuously leaving for abroad, and the dedicated staff that remains is fighting a losing fight against the further disintegration of the system. We have been looking at education as a current expense and not as an investment for the future. But without a thriving school and university environment, none of the cultural changes the country needs can possibly be implemented. Unless we realize that education itself has to be thought of as a long-term issue, not to be settled by measures that don’t even qualify as Band-Aids, we will never engage in the long-range planning that is necessary if we are ever going to emerge from this crisis capable of taking the future in our own hands instead of relying on the resources of others, willing to commit ourselves to doing better than our ancestors instead of using them to avoid our own responsibilities, and dedicated to a better future for the country as a whole and not only for ourselves and our own.”

Excerpt from “Meno’s Paradox and Socrates as a Teacher” from Nehamas’ Essays on Plato and Socrates



Meno has always been considered one of the least gifted and cooperative characters in Plato’s dialogues. Commentators have disdained him generally, but their greatest disdain is reserved for the argument he introduces to the effect that all learning is impossible... Shorey, who had no patients for the view expressed in the paradox itself, referred to it disparagingly as “this eristic and lazy argument” Taylor neither liked the argument nor Meno’s reasons for bringing in up: “Meno,” he wrote, “again tries to run off on an irrelevant issue. He brings up the sophistic puzzle.”

Kelin thought of the negative influence of the paradox on all desire to learn anything new and wrote that Meno himself “was conspicuously reluctant to make the effort Socrates requested of him. It seems that his behavior throughout the conversation was in agreement with the consequence that flows from the argument he has just presented.”

Bernard Phillips, who with many other writers takes the argument itself quite seriously, nevertheless insists that for Meno personally, “it is merely a dodge.”

Even Bluck, who is slightly more sympathetic to Meno than other writers are, cannot approve of him in this instance: “So far as Meno is concerned, this question may be regarded as a convenient dodge, an eristic trick; but for Plato, it had important philosophical implications.”