

Care of the self: An Interview with Alexander Nehamas

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1. May I say in a simplified way that your academic career has developed from analytical interpretations of Plato's metaphysics to the approach to the philosophy as the art of living? In my view these are two different conceptions of philosophy: analytical which is separated from life of individuals and ethical which is connected with our lives. Can you try to explain how or why you have changed your understanding of philosophy?

<A. Nehamas> Given the emphasis on Plato's metaphysics and epistemology, in which I still have a deep interest, it took me a while (and in this Nietzsche was a great help) to realize that Plato's "systematic" philosophy is not a goal in its own right. That aspect of his philosophy is, of course, crucial to his project and requires serious study. But in the end it is subordinated to the search for the good life, which for Plato includes an understanding of these subjects, not for their own sake but for their contribution to the correct attitude toward how one can live well. Once this became clear to me, I turned to what I now think is the main concern, not just of Plato but of all ancient philosophy.

2. The main stream of contemporary interpretations of Ancient philosophy is analytical in its character. We are publishing a lot of extended readings of Plato's dialogues without an effort to find a therapeutic signification of the Socratic dialogues. Likewise we prefer Plato as "more philosophical" to the other writers of *Sokratikoi logoi* (e.g. Phaedo, Aeschines, Antisthenes, Xenophon, or Dio of Prusa, Maximus of Tyre, Libanius etc.). Do you think that the art of Socratic dialogues consists more in the meaning of philosophy as *therapeia* than in theoretical analysis of ethical issues? And how we can show it to analytical interpreters of the Socratic dialogues?

<A. Nehamas> The understanding of the Socratic dialogues as incitements to "the care of the self" is important for everyone who tries to come to terms with Plato and his fellow Socratics. It is a mistake to think that the arguments of these works and their practical concerns are irrelevant to one another. Even if philosophy is thought of *therapeia*, part of the "medicine" that brings that *therapeia* about includes, as an essential part, the dialectical and argumentative

structure of the dialogues. My own sense is that it is impossible to understand or appreciate either element in the project of ancient philosophy. I am as dissatisfied with approaches that ignore the ethical goals of the dialogues as I am dispirited by efforts to show that the arguments are of no significance and even designed to mislead their audience into a “shallow” understanding of Plato’s real purpose. Argument may not be philosophy’s exclusive concern but the sort of investigation they involve is essential to its purpose.

3. Michel Foucault says in his lectures at the Collège de France, 1982-1983 (*The Government of Self and Others*) that “philosophy finds its reality in the practice of philosophy understood as the set of practices through which the subject has a relationship to itself, elaborates itself, and works on itself. The work of the self on self – that is the reality of philosophy.” Late Foucault as we know perceives philosophy as *askēsis*, and he tries to transfer very Ancient concept of philosophizing to his own work (as it is noted by Paul Veyne). Surprisingly (surely for some rigorous Platonists) Foucault reads Plato by this way when he interprets his comprehension of *pragmata*. Do you think that we can read Plato’s dialogues as instigation to the permanent labor of the self on itself without endeavor to confirm the truth of being generally valid and normative for all reasonable individuals?

<A. Nehamas> Michel Foucault was a great reader of Plato. In my opinion, however, he overemphasized an individualist account of Plato’s philosophy. I suspect that such an individualist account is a *possible* interpretation of his Socratic dialogues but not of works like the *Phaedo*, the *Republic*, or the *Laws*. In these works, Plato, I believe, is engaged in a much vaster, socially situation, project. Still, Foucault’s reading of the Platonic Socrates is exciting, productive, and inspiring.

4. One of your favorite philosophers, Friedrich Nietzsche is not very friendly to Socrates in his writings. On the other hand Socrates is important example of how to live an examined life for Ancients similarly as Nietzsche is important figure for contemporary intellectuals. Tension between Socrates and Nietzsche follows maybe from differences between Ancient and Modern worlds. Do you think that Nietzsche is more important figure for our speculations about philosophical life than Socrates (interpreted by contemporary philosophers)? What can we learn from Nietzsche about living as an art? Of course if we are aware of the art of living as an ability to become different which cannot be taught at the end.

<A. Nehamas> Nietzsche’s attitude toward Socrates goes through several changes: an early period of passionate attacks (mainly in *The Birth of Tragedy*) is followed by a truce in works like *Human, All-Too-Human* and *Daybreak*, disappointment in Book IV of *The Gay Science*, praise in *Beyond Good and Evil* and a vicious attack in *Twilight of the Idols*. To me, this ambivalence indicates that Nietzsche felt too close to Socrates to be comfortable either simply

rejecting him or accepting him wholly. Socrates was for Nietzsche, as he makes clear in *Beyond Good and Evil*, a “genuine philosopher” and a true individual, but his message, as he reads him through dialogues like the *Republic*, was addressed and intended to be binding on everyone. Nietzsche could not come to terms with these two aspects of Socrates’ personality and influence—he was both too close to and too far from him. Not to mention the fact that Socrates, who wrote nothing, was immortalized by the greatest philosopher of all time, while Nietzsche himself, who wrote without end, could find, while he was alive at least, no readers, and had to be Plato to his own Socrates and Socrates to his own Plato—both author and character—at the same time.

5. Foucault and Nietzsche are apologists of individualism. I think that Socratic ethics is likewise individualistic in its nature. Do you think that philosophical life as an art (accurately *technē tou biou*) is essentially connected with certain forms of individualism? And what is the status of philosopher in society then?

<A. Nehamas> I don’t think that the art of living is essentially individualist. I tend to distinguish three versions. One we find in Plato’s Socratic dialogues, in which Socrates seems to urge that everyone follow his lead and practice “the care of the self” but has no method from proving that they should do so. A second is in Plato’s *Republic* and the dialogues surrounding them. Here, Plato seems to believe that he does have the right considerations to convince everyone that the care of the self, now codified as the training of the philosopher-kings and the rest of his educational system is best for all. And a third, which I am eager to defend, is the approach of philosophers like Montaigne and Nietzsche, who believe that there is no single way of living well and no method for convincing everyone that they should make an effort to do so, if they are not so inclined. Taking the metaphor of art seriously, no one has an obligation to be an artist—and certainly not to obligation to be a good one.

6. One of the main themes of late Foucault is the care of the self he studies in the texts written by Greco-Roman philosophers. Foucault’s death made impossible to continue his study of contemporary meaning of the care of the self. What do you think about the possibility of the care of the self of the subjects living in modern societies in comparison with the work on the self of ancient intellectuals?

<A. Nehamas> I am afraid we don’t know enough to make such a direct comparison. One difference is that I am not convinced, as the ancient philosophers were, that philosophy is the only way of leading a good human life. We also don’t share the ancients’ disdain for manual

and productive labor (the life of the *baunasoí*) so that modes of life that the ancients would have excluded implicitly from the art of living can now be included among the ways in which human beings can lead lives of worth and accomplishment. Conversely, the professionalization of philosophy has reduced its role from the central, indeed unique position to which they ancient had elevated their practice. There is all the difference in the world between a ancient School and a modern Department of philosophy.

7. What does it mean for philosophical thought if we say that to think philosophically is to live philosophically? Do you think the philosophical thought cannot be separated from the life of the philosopher? What is the sense of such areas of inquiry as epistemology or logic?

<A. Nehamas> There have always been aspects of philosophy that are not directly linked to its practical interests, though they may have implications about them. Much of science, in fact, has begun as philosophy. Consider physics, from the Presocratics to Aristotle, and its present place in the center of the natural sciences. Consider psychology, which was not separated from philosophy until the end of the 19th century, in great part because of the work of Wilhelm Wundt and William James. Consider logic, from Whitehead and Russell's *Principia Mathematica* to contemporary computer science. And consider philosophy of language, now a central element in linguistics, and philosophy of mind, with its recent connections to psychology and neuroscience. I don't think we should focus too much on what constitutes philosophy's "essence."

8. My last question concerns the aesthetics of existence. How do you understand its meaning in relation to both art and ethics?

<A. Nehamas> Some great works of art are morally benign, others morally neutral, still others morally dangerous. The same is true is many great lives. And just as great works of art establish new ways of doing art, so great lives provide models for new ways of living. I am eager to separate aesthetic from moral criteria of success. Aesthetic values promote ideals of distinction and individuality as opposed to the shared and universal ideals of morality. But aesthetic values are still central to human lives and to that extent part of our ethical framework, which contains both universal and individual values. A main difference between these two is that whereas moral values, impartial as they are, demand that they be obeyed, aesthetic values do not. As I said, no one has the obligation to be an artist, much less a good one. Which is

why aesthetic accomplishments provoke admiration—the attitude proper to the appreciation of art—while moral goodness is more a matter of respect.

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This work was supported by the Slovak Research and Development Agency under the contract No. APVV-0164-12.