Alexander Nehamas on “Only in the Contemplation of Beauty Is Human Life Worth Living” (2005 Katz Distinguished Lecture)

CAITLIN PALO: Welcome to Going Public, a podcast from the Simpson Center for the Humanities at the University of Washington. I’m Caitlin Palo, Program and Events Manager at the Simpson Center.

This episode is part of a special series for 2023-2024 featuring some of our popular talks from our annual Katz Distinguished Lecture series. This month’s episode features Alexander Nehamas’s talk from 2005 titled “Only in the Contemplation of Beauty Is Human Life Worth Living.” Alexander Nehamas is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy and Comparative Literature at Princeton University. He is a champion of aesthetic values and is committed to the view that the arts and humanities are an indispensable part of human life for all people. His books, including *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art* published in 2007, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (1999), and *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (1985), have been translated into nine languages. He is also a translator (into English) of Plato’s *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* and he is a member of Phi Beta Kappa and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

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\*pronunciation notes: Alexsander Ne-ham -as [Nay – ham – ass] equal weighted syllables.

ALEXANDER NEHAMAS:

I would like to talk to you about tonight is a project I've been working for a while. What I'd like to do is to see how much that Plato says in one of the most famous passages he ever wrote, namely Socrates speech on love in The Symposium, whether what Plato says in that passage can be read not just as an inspired flight of the imagination, which of course, we all know it is, but also as something we can actually believe, and knowing and accurate description of the phenomenology of love and beauty.

What Plato says in The Symposium is to describe a very complex hierarchy of people of different kinds of love that people feel, and of different sorts of beauty that attracts them. The lowest form, which is here at the bottom of your page, are people who are attracted to the beauty, as he says, the beauty of the body. And those-- I mean, he's talking about men, of course, but what I'd like to do as I go on is to suggest that what he says needn't be specifically applied to men only.

So first, the lowest kind of lover, so to speak, they are attracted to the body. They are attracted to women. And what they want to accomplish in life is to have children, actual children, biological offspring.

Then there is a higher kind of person, those whom he calls the participants in the lower mysteries, who are actually attracted and drawn to fame in general. That's the lower mysteries. And these people are pederasts of some sort.

They are lovers of boys. And in connection with the boys they love, they create beautiful works like laws, poems, and other such creations, which they bequeath to the world behind them. That's the kind of children they leave behind, not human children but ideas and laws and poems.

And finally, there is a very select group of people whom love leads to wisdom, rather than fame or simply procreation. These are the higher mysteries. And those are also lovers of boys who ultimately become philosophers.

Within this last and higher stage, there is again another complex hierarchy Plato describes that begins with the love of the physical beauty of a single individual, then moves on to the love of the beauty of all human bodies, then proceeds on to the love of the human soul, from there to the love of culture, institutions, laws, and practices that account for the beauty of the soul, from laws and practices from culture to science, and from science finally to the form of beauty, the essence, the nature of beauty itself. That is the ultimate object of all love, and which turns out for Plato to be what people really have been loving all along.

So this is what he says there. The question is, does this make any sense, or is it just the ravings of a mad Greek? OK, let's see. Let's begin with some problems.

If, as Plato says, every lover is ultimately drawn to the form, the nature of beauty, which is glimpsed obscurely through everything else in the world that is to any degree beautiful, then it would seem that nothing below the form in this ladder of love, so to speak that Plato has constructed here, nothing below it, whether it's a person, an institution, a science, nothing else is ever actually loved. If the form of beauty is the only real object of love, at least, not love as we like to say today for itself, and not for the hint of the form, for the trace, so to speak, of real beauty that is present within it.

Now, that might be why Plato seems to say that, and I'm going to be telling you things that he says in this text. I know that some of you don't have it in front of your mind right now, but I'll try not to be too esoteric about it. He says that when a lover understands that a kind of love is higher than whatever it is, a kind of beauty is higher than whatever beauty he's been attracted to so far, he immediately seems to give up the lower form of beauty and move on to the higher.

So when a lover realizes that the beauty of body in general is higher, more valuable than the beauty of an individual body, he seems to say-- Plato seems to say he abandons the boy and goes on to the higher stage. And then as soon as he realizes that maybe the love of the beauty of a soul is higher than that, he gives that up and goes on to the higher beauty.

But that, you see, is a cold and cruel kind of love, especially when the lover abandons a human being for an abstract, unfeeling object, like an institution or a culture or a science or whatever. That is something that seems to be extraordinarily inhuman in some serious way. And it prompted one of the great scholars of Plato in the 20th century, Gregory Vlastos, to criticize Plato for forgetting that love is first and foremost the love of individual persons.

And Vlastos' criticism of later has sort of more or less set the stage for discussions of Plato's views on Eros, or the Greek word for love. And I'd like to begin just with a little bit of discussion of what Vlastos said because I don't agree with his criticisms, and I'd like to say very briefly why and then go on to try to give you my own view of the situation.

What Vlastos says Plato believes is that what-- and I'm quoting now, "what we are to love in a person is the image of the form in them." That is, we love them only to the extent that they are good and beautiful. But since he says none of us is perfectly good or beautiful, love cannot be directed at us as we are.

As he puts it, the individual and the uniqueness of his or her individuality will never be the object of our love. Yet, I think, human imperfection is not enough to show that love can't be directed at the imperfect individual unless less Plato believed that if you love someone for their beauty or their goodness, what you love is not them but their beauty or goodness.

The beauty instead of the person, and Plato doesn't seem, to me, to believe that. Maybe he does, but we can't just assume that he believes that. In fact, many, many people and even some philosophers among them believe that we love each other for particular reasons without thinking that on that account we don't love them for themselves. That we love the image of a form in a person does not mean that we love the form of which it is the image and not the person who bears that image within him.

So that is one reason I'm doubtful that Plato really is so negative about the love of individuals. But Vlastos gives another account of Plato, and that is the following. And I'll quote him again. "Persons," he says "evoke Eros if they have beautiful bodies, minds, or dispositions. But so do quite impersonal objects, social or political programs, literary compositions, scientific theories, philosophical systems, and best of all, the form of beauty itself.

As objects of platonic love, all these are not only as good as persons but distinctly better. Plato signifies their superiority by placing them in the higher reaches of that escalated figure that marks the lover's progress, relegating love of persons to its lower levels."

Yet, I want to say that that may be perfectly true, but even if the love of individuals is inferior to the love of abstract programs or scientific theories or political institutions, that is not to say that you can't love individuals. All it says is that it's better to love and to engage in political activity, scientific activity, than to be attached to a single individual human being.

That, of course, would not have been news to Plato's Athenian audience. And Plato is certainly not the first philosopher either in Greece or anywhere else to rank human lives on a different scale and to say that the life of the private individual, the "idiotes" in Greek, the private person, is by no means as valuable as the life of a person who engages in creative activity, political deeds, or military deeds, or whatever. That would not be a very peculiar thing.

All it would say is that if you end up simply living a private life, you're not going to have as great a life, and for Plato, as happy a life as you would have if you ended up engaging and devoting your life, say, to philosophy or to culture or whatever.

So again, Plato, it seems to me, is by no means as negative about the love of individuals as he has often, very often been accused of being. It's true that Plato believes that the form, the very nature of beauty is the most beautiful thing in the world, and that the intensity of the philosopher's love for it, because the philosopher is the person who loves true beauty more than anything else, that the intensity of philosophic love may dwarf our everyday feelings.

But since, as he says, Eros is nothing but the desire for beauty, and since everyone in the world feels Eros at some point or another, beauty, I think, is not the exclusive feature of the form. It may be best found in the form, but not only there. It is, as both everyday experience and The Symposium itself testify, a feature of the world around us.

The philosophic lover does not, I think, reject the beauty of what as he goes up toward the form he leaves behind as he rises toward it. Although he finds beauties that exceed anything he has seen before, the beauty of what he leaves behind does not disappear. Only its brilliance is diminished as the moon's radiance, for example, wanes in the light of the sun.

For example, when the lover discerns the beauty that is common to all bodies after having loved an individual boy, Socrates says he must look down on it and think little of his passion for one boy or one body only. But it is, notice, the intensity of that passion, not the boy, on which he looks down. Nor does Plato suggest that once a lover has realized that the beauty of soul is more valuable, as he puts it, than the beauty of body, he will also realize that he was wrong to have loved the body in the first place.

In fact, there is a wonderful passage in Plato's Republic that suggests that it's exactly the opposite. And I'd like to take a moment to talk about that. It's a very important passage because it's the passage where Plato, for the first time, systematically introduces the notion of a philosopher. And he defines the philosopher as a-- "philosopher" in Greek of course, means "lover of wisdom." And he says that a real philosopher is somebody who loves all wisdom without exception, not just one part or that part, rather than everyone.

It's a new notion because it's a notion that really is to a very great extent one that Plato himself establishes. And he introduces that point. And it's not an easy notion to understand. So he tries. He's trying to explain.

And he turns to-- he has Socrates turn to the man he's talking to, who is in fact Plato's half-brother. And he says, now, you are a [? philopais, ?] a lover of bodies-- of boys, he says, and an erotic man. Now, you people, he says, you lovers of boys, you love all boys whatsoever.

If a boy has a snub nose, you call it pert. If it has a hooked nose, you call it regal. If it has a straight nose, you say it's beautifully proportioned. If it's light-skinned, you say it is a child of the gods. If it's dark-skinned, you say it's swarthy and sensual. And so on and so forth.

Similarly, he says, for people who like wine, philonoi, they like all wine. People who like fame, philodoxoi, they like all fame, not just the fame-- they like all reputation, whoever it is who admires them. And finally, philosophers are the ones who love all wisdom.

Now, the reason that I want to stay with that is actually twofold. One is that it suggests that somebody who likes all boys or all body does not thereby abandon anyone. He just loves all of them. It's not that you give up the one boy to love this abstract beauty of the body; you just like boys altogether.

And second reason I want to talk about this passage is that it may remind some of you of a very, very famous song, an aria in Mozart's Don Giovanni. In Mozart's Don Giovanni, and Don Giovanni of course, is a man who is constantly seducing people throughout life, his servant sings a very, very famous catalog aria, where he says he has a list of all the women his master has actually conquered.

And one of the things that he says there is that he loves all women. If a woman is dark, he praises her constancy. If she's blonde, he praises her sweetness. In the winter, he likes fat ones. In the summer, he likes thin ones. And so on and so forth.

Now, here's an interesting idea-- Mozart's Don Giovanni coming out of Plato's Republic. And in fact, it does. Not only are they connected, I know-- I don't know that other people know, but I know how they're connected. They're connected because Plato's little bit on boys in The Republic appears in the poem of the great Roman philosophical poet Lucretius transformed into a disquisition on women now, no longer on boys.

And we know that Lucretius would have had either Plato or some version of Plato available. He says things like, for example, the black-skinned girl is tawny like the honey, the filthy and the fetid's negligee; The cat-eyed, she's like a little pallas; the sinewy and wizened, a gazelle, and so on and so forth. Now, who translates Lucretius into French? Moliere.

In The Misanthrope, one of Moliere's great plays, and also in Don Juan, which is the place where Lorenzo Da Ponte, Mozart's librettist, took the libretto, where he took the libretto for the opera. We have this piece for example.

Lovers think their lovers' faults perfections and invent sweet terms to call them by. "The pale one vies with a jessamine in fairness. Another, dark enough to frighten people, becomes an adorable brunette. The lean one has a good shape and is lithe. The stout one has a portly and majestic bearing." And so on and so on.

So we have a direct line between two of my favorite writers and artists in the world-- Plato on the one hand and Mozart on the other are directly connected in a way that I find absolutely amazing. And this I must now tell you is my most solid contribution to the stock of human knowledge.

[LAUGHTER]

I never expect to do better. OK. Anyway, here's a philosophical point. The philosophical point is that those who love the beauty of boys, like the philosophers, love all boys, the beauty of every single boy, not just the beauty of some abstract entity, as I was saying above.

So if a lover loves a kind of beauty, he loves every kind, every instance of that kind of beauty altogether. When we leave, as philosophers do, one kind of beauty for another, we don't leave it behind thinking that we are mistaken to have loved it. I know what it is to feel that I have loved someone and that it was a terrible mistake. That is not the feeling Plato attributes to the philosophic lover.

Now, what unites these three kinds of lovers, body lovers, fame lovers, and wisdom lovers for Plato, is, he says, not simply their desire to possess beauty but the desire, as he puts it, to give birth in beauty, to give birth in beauty. Everyone, he says, every human being is pregnant, both in the body and in the soul. And wanting to give birth is part of human nature.

But giving birth is possible only in the presence of beauty. And it is the only way in which mortal things like us can reach immortality. It is by perpetuating ourselves in one way or another, by leaving behind somebody, something like us.

Biological reproduction is one of the easiest and, for Plato, least admirable ways of leaving something like us that perpetuates us in the future. And it indicates that one is, as he puts it, pregnant in body. But there are also people who are pregnant, more pregnant rather in soul than in the body. And their desire for immortality manifests itself as a thirst for virtue and fame.

These people don't go to women. They turn to pederasty, as he says, and in the company of a beautiful boy or a beautiful young man, produce beautiful logoi, which is a very difficult to translate Greek word. It means word, sentence, argument, idea, account, advice, and I think the products of good advice. And I'll say something more about as we go along.

And especially logoi, or ideas and discussions, discourses on virtue and how the city or society should be organized, these, he says, are the children they are happiest to leave behind, more beautiful and more divine than any biological offspring and clearly preferable. They are the legacy, he continues, of the great poets and the great legislators, Homer and Hesiod, Lycurgus, the great legislator of Sparta, and Solon, the great legislator of Athens.

But while these people are motivated by their desire for glory, to leave a great reputation behind them, the philosophic lovers pursue wisdom instead. Now, the form of beauty, as I said, may be the final, the highest, the purest, the most beautiful object of Eros, of love. But that does not mean that nothing else is beautiful.

Every lover here loves beauty, and every lover secures some sort of immortality, but only the philosopher's vision of real, genuine beauty gives beauty and goodness to every one of their actions, and by permeating every aspect of their lives, makes them truly happy. So Plato actually believes that only a few people, and those are the philosophers, are truly beautiful, truly good, and truly happy. It was a happy time for philosophy when people believed that.

[LAUGHTER]

Now, this connection between beauty, goodness, and happiness is made by means of one of the most radical and difficult turns in Plato's argument in his gradual but startling transformation of Eros from an urge to reproduce to the practice of philosophy. His shift, that is, from taking Eros as the desire to possess beautiful things, to have beautiful things, to the desire to create them, from the desire to possess beauty to the desire to give birth in beauty and produce beautiful things.

That comes with a transition from the-- well, I'm just repeating myself. I'll skip that. And because he has that, he also makes that transition from possessing the beautiful things to creating beautiful things, Plato argues in the end that the philosopher who gives birth to real beauty gives birth not to images, since he is not in touch with an image, but to true virtue, since he is in touch with the truth.

And it is because of those offspring, the philosophic logoi, the philosophic accounts of goodness and virtue and beauty, that the philosopher becomes, as he says, truly dear to the gods, and, as far as possible for a human being, truly immortal.

There is a real problem, and I'll come back to it, in the connection between beauty and goodness that Plato is so committed to. He believes that if you love someone, you can only benefit them. You can't do harm to someone you love.

[LAUGHTER]

But his transforming love from the desire to possess to the desire to produce, from desire something external to bringing forth something from within, that is very baffling, very obscure, and extremely, I think, important. Now, the very idea of possessing the object that one loves is suspect. It calls to mind a wish to dominate, to exploit, and manipulate, a lack of respect and regard that reinforces commonplaces about Greek moral thought or Greek ethical thought being egocentric and self-centered, and so on and so forth.

One might say that the desire to possess a person belongs to the consumer, to desire to possess anything. It belongs to the consumer, not to the lover. It reveals not love, but on the contrary, its very absence. We can't desire to possess what we love, because we cannot possibly want to own what we value for itself.

You may want to own a copy, perhaps a first edition of your favorite novel, but not the novel itself. While the desire to own a person is a pathological desire of the kind that perhaps some of you remember John Fowles dissects in his novel The Collector, where a person is trying to really own a person in the way he owns butterflies.

Possession, though, I want to suggest to you is not the same thing as ownership. Or if it is, it is ownership of a different sort. When I want to possess something I love, whether it's a person or a work of art, something I do not want to treat merely as a means to an end but as an end in itself, I want that possession to be mutual. I want to make it mine as much as I want to be its own as well.

I don't take all that I want as given and hope to have this other thing meet my existing desires and satisfy what I already know I want and want to get out of life. To treat something as an end in itself, to love something for itself, I think, is at the very least to be willing to change what I want and value as a result of interacting with it and with its desires and values.

That is, to make myself very vulnerable to that other thing or that other person, vulnerable in that I am allowing it to steer me in directions that are new to me and that I don't know already. I am willing to change in ways I can't anticipate as a result of our interaction. That involves an essentially prospective component, a guess at the future if you want, and a desire to get to know the beautiful thing that attracts me, that is also in each case, the object of love, since love, as Plato, says is always of beauty.

I know, and we've talked about that in our course. I know of only one case in world literature where somebody insists, not just admit but insists that he loves a person knowing that that person is ugly. And that is the speaker in Shakespeare's Dark Lady sonnets, who of course, admits that his love is a pathology and makes it impossible for Shakespeare's critics to come to terms with that particular sonnet sequence.

And I would be glad to discuss that in the discussion if you'd like. But that's the only case I know of somebody who says, ah, "I love you, and yet thou art foul. In loving thee, I am forsworn, for I have sworn thee fair while thou art foul. More perjured I too have sworn against a truth so foul a lie."

To love someone, I believe, not as a Christian loves [? God ?] children, but as an individual, is inseparable from finding them beautiful. Love has already died when one day I am no longer moved by my lover's beauty, when I can look at her face dispassionately, and measure, so to speak, the quality of her features.

Love can survive the most bitter hatred-- Catullus the Roman poet already knew that-- but cannot live for a moment with ugliness. Hate is not the opposite of love; indifference is. It's when you no longer care one way or the other how much pain you're causing the other person.

That beauty, the beauty that love is of, is always, always manifested in a lover's appearance. And we're only making things easy for ourselves when we say that some people love each other not for their looks, but for their kindness, for their sensitivity, for intelligence, for their personality, and so on and so forth.

If indeed we do love people on account of such features, the psychological, the mental, the ethical qualities that attract us to them are always apparent in their faces and their bearing as far as we are concerned, literally in how they look at us-- they look to us.

The inner cannot be separated from the outer. And there's a lot of interesting evidence about that from movies, from books, from Isabel Allende's memoir Paula, where she says when her mother brought home the man she had been saying was the most beautiful man in the world and that she totally adored him, he thought he was like a frog, horrible, ugly. But 10 years later, after he brought her up and treated her well, she came not only to respect him, but to think he is the most beautiful man in the world.

It also is exactly the same with Emma Bovary in Flaubert's novel Madame Bovary. Remember, she is married to this very stupid doctor. And at one point, the doctor thinks that he has discovered a new mode of operation, a new operation that will make him very famous, and he will perform the operation. They will go and live in Paris and be happy, and rich, and everything.

So they are sitting there one night before he is about to perform the operation. And they are talking about it. And all of a sudden, Emma notices, with some surprise, that his teeth were not at all unsightly. Of course, he botches the operation, naturally. And at that point, she finds that everything about him exasperated her-- his face, his clothes, what he did not say, his entire being, his very existence.

I think it's one of Plato's most startling insights, most startling and original insights, to see that while love impels us forward, beauty is constantly beckoning us toward it. But since it is impossible to in advance what beauty promises to yield, when I act on the sense that I might have something here, I am taking a very serious risk. For I don't In what ways I will change as a result, and whether those changes will be for the better or for the worse.

And so part of what I undertake when I try to make something mine, when I am attracted by an object or a person and I want to spend part of my life with it, is to come to know it as well as I can, to understand what it is, and to see how it will affect me, and what it will be able to give me. To love something is always in part to try to understand what makes it beautiful, what drew me, and, as long as they love it, continues to draw me toward it.

Consider, for example, a work of art. In class, we talked about Manet's Olympia, but I could say the same thing about Proust's In Search of Lost Time. It's a book I'm overwhelmed by. But when I say that, when I say that it's maybe the greatest novel in the world as far as I'm concerned, I'm not just saying that I have certain feelings while I'm reading it. I'm saying much more than that.

I'm saying that I want literally to devote part of my life to it. Not just to read it, although of course I will be reading it too, but also to come to know it better, to understand it, to see what its point is and what its accomplishment is. And to do that, I need to learn, as I have tried to, more about Proust generally, more about the social, cultural, and political situation in Paris between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. I need to improve my French to understand more about the Dreyfus affair, about anti-Semitism and homosexuality.

I need to understand more about the history of the French novel, the history of the novel more generally. I need to look at Vermeer with whom Proust is very taken. I need to listen to Debussy's music, and much else besides. That in turn is not something I do just sitting alone in my study.

It requires traveling. It requires meeting new people. It requires literally taking a different path through life, a path different than I would have taken had I not been interested and attracted in that particular way. It requires spending a part of my life in ways I wouldn't even have imagined without having been led to them by Proust.

I do all that as part of my love for the novel, as part of my effort to understand it, as part of my effort to see it as ultimately no one has ever seen it before, which is what making it mine finally comes to. In other words, my love for the novel is inseparable from my urge to interpret it and to continue to do so as long as it attracts me, as long as I still feel there is something more to it than I have seen already.

And as long as I'm still trying to interpret it, the more various the things to which I will relate the novel in order to understand how it accomplishes something that perhaps has never been accomplished before. And as I try to get a deeper understanding of the book, I also wander more widely into the world around it, the more, that is, I need to bring to my understanding of the beautiful object in order that I can see better what particular accomplishment it has made.

So the more I try to understand a particular object, the more I need to learn about the world in general. There is no real distinction between going deeply into an object, understanding an object more deeply, and learning more and more things about the world. The deep, so to speak, and the broad are just facets of one another.

To the extent, as I do that, I find something new and unusual in it, I have made the object mine. I don't see it as other people see it. I see it as only I can see it. And as I have also been possessed by it, insofar as being involved with it has changed my life, and to the extent that I saw something new and unusual, I have become to that extent something new and unusual myself.

And so my desire to make someone love mine, as we put it, is coupled with a desire for that person to desire to make me theirs as well. I'm willing to allow their characteristics, many of which I don't yet know but I only suspect are there, they allow those characteristics to influence who I will be. And I want that person to let features of mine partly determine their future.

More important, and here is where the risk, I think, seems greatest, I'm willing for us to influence one another by means of characteristics that none of us already possess, but by characteristics which we will come to acquire as a result of our interaction. And you can see how risky that can be.

How could possibly-- how could anyone possibly know where such a process is likely to lead? The kinds of things we love, whether persons or objects, and our reasons for loving them and finding them beautiful determine and express a large part of our character, our personality. To find something beautiful, I've been saying so far, involves a sense that my life would somehow in ways I can't specify be better or more worthwhile if that thing were to be part of it.

I have said nothing about what makes life better or worthwhile. And unlike Plato, who thinks that in all cases that is moral virtue, in fact, the moral virtue that only philosophy can obtain for us, I don't think there's anything both general and informative to say about it.

The best I can do, which is not very much, is to say that in the ideal case, the various paths through life that we have followed on account of the beautiful things that we have loved, and what we have come to understand in those things, and what we have come to do as a result will gradually transform each one of us too into something that no one else has seen before and that is itself worthy of love, attention, and admiration in its own right-- in other words, that we will transform ourselves into something beautiful as well.

That, I believe, that point, I believe, is one of the most crucial truths contained in Plato's Symposium, hinted at when Plato identifies Eros with a desire to give birth to beauty, in beauty, rather, both with a reaction to something that already exists, as I said before, and with the urge to bring something new into the world.

Now since, for Plato, beauty and goodness are identical, or at least very, very closely connected, he is not nearly as troubled by the risks of which I have spoken so far as I am. But for me, there is no guarantee that the objects I find beautiful will lead me to-- there's no guarantee that they will lead me to something that is ultimately either morally good or even good for me, or that even they will lead me to a successful life.

And even if they do, it will be always possible to say that instead of immersing myself in Proust and Plato and Nietzsche and Manet and all those highfaluting things that take money, and time, and leisure, and opportunity, and privilege, I should have been working for Oxfam. But as I was saying earlier today, yes, I could have done that, but how do you know that-- how do I know that I would not have ended up embezzling all the money and causing them to lose whatever-- to be unable to do any of the good they have done so far?

In any event, wherever love and beauty are present, there is also the effort to understand what we love or what comes to the same thing, to understand why we love it. As long as love persists, no answer will ever be complete. As long as something is still beautiful, the sense that there is more to it that is worth coming to know and that I haven't yet learned, more to see and celebrate, that there is still more to love, in other words, continues.

That is why judgments of beauty are always at least partly prospective. When we say that-- when we say this is beautiful, we are not concluding-- we're not drawing a conclusion from evidence that we already have. We are making a commitment that it's worthwhile to spend time with that thing in order to find out what it is that makes it beautiful.

That's this prospective element that I was talking about before, and why of course, the most beautiful things always seem inexhaustible. Because to find something beautiful is to think precisely that we have not yet exhausted what there is to it.

I have described that forward looking movement, both as an absorbed immersion into a thing and also as an expanding vision of the world in which it exists. Plato, however, seems to see it as a movement, or at least, so he seems, that leads farther and farther away from the individual object, the boy with which this love begins, from a concrete particular to this abstract form of nature of beauty. Is that really what he is saying?

The philosophic lover begins, Plato says, by falling in love with the physical charms of some beautiful boy, and along with the boy gives birth to beautiful logoi. Logoi, as I said, are accounts, arguments, pieces of advice, and their results. They are to Plato's scheme what new interpretations or understanding are to mine, except that Plato is convinced that as a result of their interaction, both lovers necessarily change for the better.

The lover then comes to realize that the beauty of, I quote him, "any one body is brother to the beauty of any other, and that the beauty of all bodies is one and the same." How he comes to that realization Plato never explains, and it's really quite a mystery. We can only guess.

Well, here's one guess. The philosophic lover, unlike the lovers of the lower mysteries and the lovers of the body who may care about other things, makes a much more serious effort to understand what it is that he loves. Pressed forward by Eros, which like every desire is directed at what is not already possessed, and aware that the boy's beauty is not yet completely his, the philosopher tries to understand why the boy is beautiful, what makes it so.

What he finds for platonic reasons that I don't want to go into now is that what makes that particular body beautiful is what makes every body beautiful. And that is the point where he becomes a lover of all beautiful bodies. He loves all boys, so to speak, including the very first.

After that, Plato now continues, he realizes that the beauty of soul is superior and more valuable than the beauty of body. Well, why not? Again, Plato doesn't tell us how one realizes that. So I can only guess once again. Here it is.

Since, as I suggested before, the beauty of character is always manifested in the body, we see the character of the people we love in their face, though other people may not, and they may wonder what on earth it that we see in them.

Since that beauty is manifested, it affects the lover's perception and allows him to find the person he loves not only, say, wise or sensitive or kind, but also good-looking. And since we always think that the persons and the things we love are beautiful, that has to be the case. Although my evidence is very slight, it has one advantage. It allows the same idea to apply to the soul that earlier applied to the body.

The soul, in other words, is what explains for Plato the beauty of the body, just as the way the beauty of the body in general explains the beauty of the particular body. And the best evidence I have for that is that Plotinus, who probably understood Plato better than anyone else in the world, has the same view. I know that won't convince everyone, but there it is.

It is the soul, Plotinus writes, that makes every body that is called beautiful what it is. And the questions continue. What makes a soul beautiful? Well, what makes a soul beautiful is a well arranged society that brings people up well and teaches them how to be good.

So the lover now becomes a lover of culture. He sees the beauty of culture that is responsible for the beauty of the individuals that are members of that culture. And what makes culture beautiful? Well, Plato clearly thinks it is knowledge, the knowledge that Socrates in Plato's own Socratic dialogues is constantly looking for and couldn't find. Because Plato believes that only on the basis of knowledge can we have the right kind of society, and not by the haphazard process in which culture generally operates.

And what makes knowledge and science beautiful? The objects of which science and knowledge address and ultimately that is, of course, that final object of all knowledge and science is, in this context, the form of beauty, the most beautiful thing in the world.

So the very interesting thing to me is that as the lover goes from the one boy to this abstraction of the form, I believe he never gives up the individual person, the individual boy that was his companion. It is with the boy and maybe some others as well, just like Socrates had his own circle of young men who surrounded him, that he pursues both beauty and goodness at the same time.

It is finally when beauty itself is reached that Plato says a human being can produce only true beauty and goodness, and not images of beauty and goodness, as one has been doing all along. That is the beauty that he himself says the contemplation of which makes human life worth living. It is only when we are philosophically concerned with the beauty of things, namely when we are thinking not only what makes this thing beautiful or that thing beautiful but everything in the world beautiful that we can actually create deeds and ideas of perfect beauty.

It is that contemplation that is, of course, characteristic of a philosopher who sees that the whole world is organized in the best way and the most beautiful way, and that far from being distant, abstract, and theoretical as we generally think Plato is, enables him to give birth not to images of virtue but to virtue itself, to make the people around him literally much better than they would have been without him, and in the process to become much more beautiful himself than he would have been had he not produced those beautiful ideas.

The philosopher's ascent, in other words, is a continuing effort to understand the beauty of all the objects of Eros, of all beautiful things, an effort to determine for what accounts for their beauty, and what produces the most beautiful and good deeds and ideas in the world. That movement, from one thing to another, constantly going forward, is, for me, the other extraordinary insight that Plato has in The Symposium.

I have said that it's provoked by feeling, that there is more to each beautiful thing than we have seen already, and sparked by the constant desire to come to know them better. But for me, beauty, which depends not only on the features of the object of love but also on the lover, on who it is that loves it, has no essential connection to virtue. Although I expect and I hope that a beautiful thing will somehow make my life better, there is no guarantee I am right.

Whether I was right or not can be determined only in the course of time. If, that is, it proves that my interaction with it and how I have changed, what I have become as a result, are themselves worthwhile. But what is and what is not worthwhile, what is valuable and what harmful is known only in retrospect, and I think sometimes provokes completely intractable disagreement.

You think that the person I have spent my life with has sucked out all that was once good in me, that my friends have debauched me, that television has corrupted my standard of taste. I, on the contrary, feel perfectly happy and justified, although it's not really quite as simple as that. And sometimes we may just have to leave the matter at that.

Has in fact television, with which I have spent a considerable part of my life, corrupted me? Well, I think it has made me-- it has allowed me to write some good philosophical essays, some pretty good philosophical essays as a matter of fact. But for you, my idea that your contempt of television is a version of Plato's own rejection of Homer, Aeschylus, and the greatest achievements of Greek poetry, is as repulsive as television itself. And my essay on the genius of St. Elsewhere, which I consider one of the best things I have ever written, is a disgrace.

How are we to decide? I know that all of you have an opinion, if you're listening. But I really want to consider how one is to decide something like that. Before I was attracted to television, I thought it was despicable. I thought that everybody who watched television weighed 200 pounds, and had pimples, and ate chips all day long. And that's all they did.

Now after all these years, I see its many good points. Not all its points are good by any means, but then the novel is mostly bad books. There are very few of them that are good.

So now I say I'm able to see why television is such a good thing, or at least contains some very good things. Or am I? I believe that other things being equal, having spent all these years with television, having thought about Plato and tragedy and how tragedy in Athens was like television today and public entertainment, and how St. Elsewhere is at least as good as trollop, say, or something like that.

So I believe I'm better off now than I was then when I was saying all these stupid people who watch television, they are terrible, and they are wasting their lives. But how can I tell? Since along with my taste for television, I have, so to speak, developed a whole set of standards of judgment that, from the point of view of my earlier self, are as depraved as watching television is.

By my earlier standards, I am now depraved, corrupt, and miserable, although I don't know it. By the standards I currently accept, my earlier standards were silly, prejudiced, and deprived me of great beauty. How do we decide which standards are right?

Plato, for whom no disagreement is ever intractable, answers the standards of philosophy, the only standards that establish when a life has been worthwhile. And what they say, what those standards say is that life is worth living only in the contemplation of beauty, which as far as he's concerned, manifests itself in moral virtue. So it's the morally virtuous life that constitutes the only life worth living for Plato.

I say that Plato believes that it's the moral life that constitutes a beautiful life, and that it consists of various actions, not just words or ideas but various actions, because when it comes to the true lover who is aware of the form, Plato tells us that he brings forth not images of virtue but genuine virtue instead. And virtue is just what he said even legislators like Lycurgus and Solon, who are much lower than the philosopher, have created. They've created great cities.

So the philosopher does something even more important than the legislator. The contemplation of beauty, then, or what Plato thinks of as the contemplation of beauty, is not at any stage a passive affair. And those of you who have read Plato, it's very easy to think of theory or contemplation later to mean that somebody is sort of dazedly looking at something hanging there in atemporal heaven, beauty and just looking, looking, looking, contemplation.

That's not what contemplation is for Plato at all, I believe. It requires the creation of something beautiful. That is what I was driving at earlier when I said that we are constantly trying to see what we love in new ways that are distinctly our own. If we succeed, especially if our various ways of seeing are systematically connected with one another, we can become beautiful in our own right. Objects that others may love and may want to come to know for themselves.

Unlike Plato, I don't believe that the lovers' beautiful logoi necessarily result in the creation of virtue, of moral virtue. And for that reason, although they do result in the creation of beauty, I think they contain an element of ineliminable risk. But like him, I am convinced that beauty is a spur to creation.

And instead of seeing it as an infallible guide, I prefer to think of it somewhat as Stendhal did. It is only a promise of happiness, a promise that doesn't always come true. Sometimes in fact, it may be worse when it does come true. Because by then, I may have become incapable of seeing the harm, whether aesthetic or ethical, it has done me, as may be the case with my relationship with television.

But sometimes its promise does come true, and a new beauty, a new spur to creation enters the world. It is in that case that one can say and say truly that quite apart from any moral worth, it was a life worth living, that one is happy to have become who one is. And that, I think, if you take away-- if you don't think that is a pure sacrilege, Plato's metaphysical view of the world of forms, if you keep, so to speak, the description of the emotions, the phenomenology of Eros and beauty, if you keep that, that is, I think, the view of The Symposium.

The beauty of a young man sets the philosopher on the way to beauty itself. It could be the beauty of anyone, and it could set anyone on the way to beauty itself. It doesn't have to be a boy, and it doesn't have to be a man. It sends them to the creation of the most beautiful logoi of which they are capable.

These logoi, Plato says, are inherently good. One can rightly be proud of them, whether anyone knows them or not. The philosopher's immortality, Plato says, does not depend on the fame to which the lower mysteries are directed, to glory, to people knowing about you, but on the inherent quality of a philosopher's life and worth-- life and work.

It's a stunning vision, I think. And it has come to us because The Symposium has been drawing swarms and swarms of interpreters, all eager to put their own stamp on it for thousands of years. Socrates, whose words, whose logoi it describes, and Plato, whose words, whose logos it is, are no less famous today than Homer or Hesiod, Lycurgus or Solon. And that is partly because The Symposium itself has proved inexhaustible.

Plato would have preferred not to have perhaps Homer and Hesiod next to him, but there they are. Perhaps the life Plato honors is not the best life there is. Perhaps the philosophic life is not the best life there is. But that is only because there is no best human life.

And perhaps it is not the only good life, which is why, in fact Homer and Lycurgus are standing next to him. But if to be beautiful is to provoke the creation of beauty, the proliferation, that is, of beautiful logoi, of beautiful words, of beautiful deeds, little can be compared to The Symposium. Little has produced quite as many beautiful logoi for its own-- in its own right.

Whether or not it has ever led its readers to virtue, it has certainly proved an offspring of which Plato can rightly be proud, which may in fact, suggest that beauty may sometimes be at least as important as truth, and perhaps in a Nietzschean vein, in the long run, more important than goodness Thank you very much.

[APPLAUSE]