

Princeton University

HONORS FACULTY MEMBERS
RECEIVING EMERITUS STATUS



May 2021

The biographical sketches were written by staff and
colleagues in the departments of those honored.

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In the Nation's Service and the Service of Humanity

CONTENTS

Faculty Members Honored in 2021 for Receiving Emeritus Status

Chih-p'ing Chou	3
Lynn William Enquist	7
Edward William Felten	10
Andrew L. Ford	12
Olga Peters Hasty	15
Michael Jennings	18
Gerta Keller	21
Sara McLanahan	24
Alexander Nehamas	29
Philip Nord.	32
James Richardson.	36
Thomas Shenk	38
Yakov Sinai.	41
Marta Tienda	43
Robert J. Wuthnow	46

ALEXANDER NEHAMAS



Alexander Nehamas was born and raised in Athens, Greece. At the age of eight, he was sent to Athens College, Greece's most distinguished boarding school, which was just five miles from his home. His first introduction to philosophy came at boarding school, when he read Spinoza's *Ethics*. Written in Latin, with a Greek translation on the facing pages, Alexander confesses that he couldn't understand any of it, but he was also sure that it was very deep, so he resolved to study philosophy. As an undergraduate at Swarthmore College, Alexander majored in economics and philosophy. Though his plan was to become a shipowner, make lots of money, and then study philosophy in his retirement, Alexander instead went on to Princeton for his Ph.D., where he wrote his dissertation, "Predication and the Theory of Forms in the *Phaedo*," under the supervision of Gregory Vlastos and David Furley. Little did he realize that he would be as celebrated in his day as they were in theirs.

Alexander's first teaching position was at the University of Pittsburgh, where he rose to the rank of professor of philosophy (1971-86). From Pittsburgh he moved to the University of Pennsylvania as professor of philosophy (1986-90) before coming to Princeton as the inaugural Edmund N. Carpenter II Class of 1943 Professor in the Humanities and professor of philosophy and comparative literature (1990-present). While at Princeton, Alexander has served in many roles, including chair of the Council of the Humanities (1994-2002), director of the Program in Hellenic Studies (1994-2002), and founding director of the Society of Fellows in the Liberal Arts (1999-2002). He was also honored by the University with the Howard T. Behrman Award for Distinguished Achievement in the Humanities (1999) and the President's Award for Distinguished Teaching (2011).

Alexander's many distinctions include the Mellon Distinguished Achievement in the Humanities Award (2001), the International Nietzsche Prize (2001), and the Stephanopoulos Philosophy Prize (2017). He was elected as a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (1994), a member of the American Philosophical Society (2016), and a member of the Academy of Athens (2018). He was awarded honorary doctorates by the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (1993), the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (2011), the Athens School of Fine Arts of the National Technical University of Athens (2011), and the International Hellenic

University (2014). He was made Commander of the Order of the Phoenix of the Republic in 2014.

During his distinguished career, Alexander published over a hundred articles and seven books: *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Harvard University Press, 1985); *Plato's "Symposium"* (Hackett, 1989) with Paul Woodruff; *Plato's "Phaedrus"* (Hackett, 1995) with Paul Woodruff; *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (University of California Press, 1998); *Virtues of Authenticity: Essays on Plato and Socrates* (Princeton University Press, 1999); *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art* (Princeton University Press, 2007); and *On Friendship* (Basic Books, 2016). He also co-edited *Aristotle's "Rhetoric": Philosophical Essays*, with David Furley (Princeton University Press, 1994). He delivered the Sather Lectures at the University of California-Berkeley (1993), the Tanner Lectures at Yale University (2000), and the Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh (2008).

By any account, Alexander is one of the world's leading authorities on the thought of the ancient Greeks. From the very beginning of his career, he launched himself fearlessly into the task of understanding Plato's most notorious doctrine: the Theory of Forms. Plato holds that there is such a thing as Beauty (he calls it the Form of Beauty): anything that is beautiful is beautiful because it relates in some suitable way to Beauty. Philosophical problems abound. Is Beauty beautiful? Does that even make sense? In one famous publication, Alexander wonders whether Helen of Troy possessed Beauty itself, or whether she merely approximated it: his answer is that she had it, but she had it ephemerally, contingently, contextually. It was Beauty, *bel et bien*, that she had, but her hold on it was precarious.

Alexander has always been fascinated by Plato's excoriation of Art and Poetry in the *Republic*, a part of the text which he has called "both incomprehensible and disturbing." Alexander deftly sheds some light by arguing that Plato was not, in fact, against art as such, but rather against what poetry was in his time: entertainment for the people. The great tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles were in fact the "mass media" of their day, and Plato's attack on them should be compared to contemporary attacks on offerings such as *Dynasty* or *Dallas* (this was in the 1980s, after all). Here is transformative scholarship.

Alexander has engaged closely with the thought not just of Plato, but of Plato's teacher Socrates. "The art of living is a Socratic art," argues Alexander; he underlines time and again that a proper engagement with Socrates demands not only that we engage with the structure and content of Socrates' arguments, but with "the form of his life." Alexander once said that he would love to meet and argue with Socrates,

to find out what motivated him. So speaks this humanistic philosopher par excellence: to understand the thought of Socrates is to understand the human being who thought those thoughts. Don't study the thought of Socrates; study Socrates as a thinker.

In *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, Alexander tells us that Nietzsche thinks of life as a work of art, and of people as characters in a story, and that this in turn leads him to think of our attempts to understand the world as being a lot like an interpreter's attempts to understand a literary text. This way of understanding Nietzsche's view of life helps us better understand his doctrine of "eternal recurrence": what would your life be like if you were to live it again? The answer, according to Alexander's interpretation of the doctrine, is that it would be exactly the same as it is. Because you are just a character in this story, everything you do is essential to you. When you act badly, you therefore mustn't dwell on what might have been if you had acted otherwise. Instead, you should focus on crafting a future in which your having done those bad things is part of the story of one of the very best lives that anyone could lead.

In *Only a Promise of Happiness*, Alexander returned to his original theme of beauty, arguing for a revival of the notion, which had been relegated to the sidelines in serious thinking about art. He also argued for a transformation of beauty according to which the judgment of beauty makes no claim of universality, but rather reflects the distinctive sensibility of the individual. To judge an object beautiful is to invite others—principally one's friends and potential friends—to spend time with it, to incorporate it into their lives as you have incorporated it into yours. A key theme of the book is that while one's friends need not share one's taste, they must find it intelligible, a claim that forges a link between aesthetics and a part of ethics that had once been central to the subject—the nature of friendship and its place in human life.

This neglected topic became the theme of Alexander's beautiful book *On Friendship*, the culmination of several writings on the same theme. "Friendship," as Alexander puts it, "is crucial to what most of us come to be in life." He underlines the difference between the modern notion of friendship and the Greek notion of *φιλία* that caught Aristotle's attention. And he takes an uncompromisingly honest view of friendship. We have to understand the good and the bad sides of friendship, or the "double face" of friendship: friendships are "more often than not commonplace and trivial," often the source of grief (when the friendship ends, for instance), and sometimes the source of harm.

Those of us lucky enough to have worked alongside Alexander, as friends and colleagues, have long reveled in his warmth, his virtue, his authenticity, and his unflinching humor and urbanity. This thinker, this human, will be much missed.