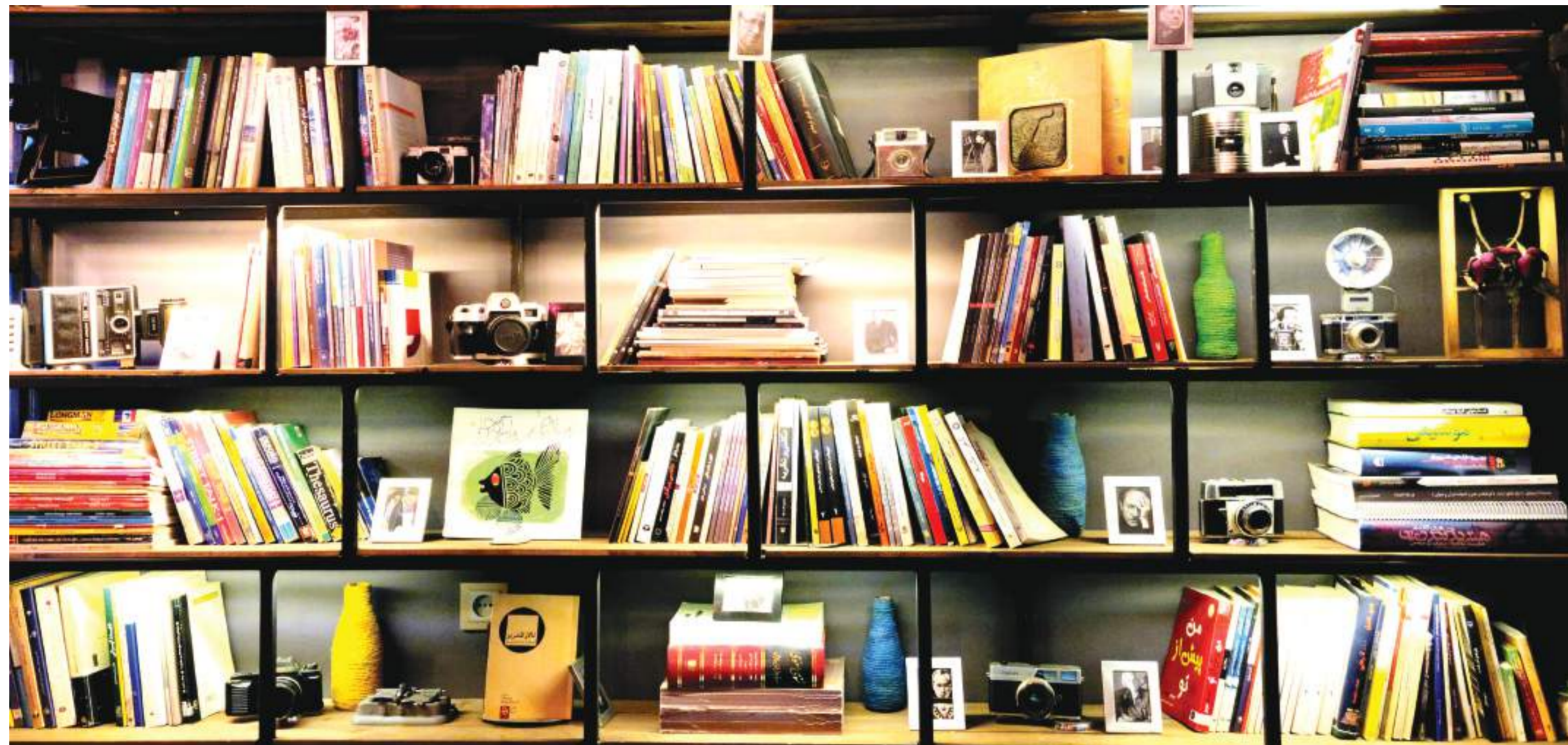


University of British Columbia professor of philosophy Dominic Lopes:

# Aesthetic engagement is an important component of a well-lived life

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PART

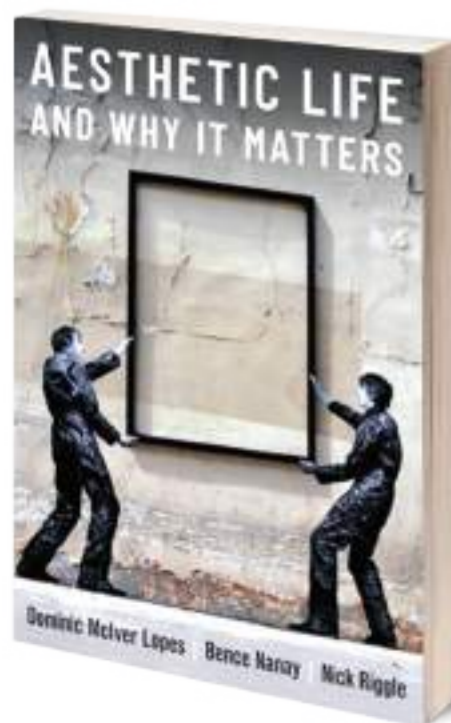


Interior wall of a café in downtown Tehran.  
IRAN DAILY

EXCLUSIVE



Dominic McIver Lopes is professor of philosophy at the University of British Columbia, and coauthor of *Aesthetic Life and Why It Matters*, published by Oxford University Press in 2022, in which he and two other philosophers offer their perspectives on our aesthetic engagement with life in response to Socrates's question about how we should live.



Let's start with the basic question that you also started your whole project with, and that is, "How should we live our lives?" What does it have to do with aesthetics?

I think that you're implicitly drawing a distinction between an aesthetic version and a moral version of the question "how should we live our lives?" In the book, I call this "Socrates's question." I think that Socrates, as represented by Plato in his Dialogues, is principally driven by this question, "how should I live?" and he thinks it's a question that we all ask.

It's true that philosophy, especially in the 19th and early 20th centuries, saw that question as a moral one: What should I do, morally speaking? In posing that question as a moral question, philosophy also viewed it pretty narrowly.

Moral philosophers are worried about what each of us owes to our fellow human beings. What are our obligations to them? What is impermissible in my relations with other people and what's permissible? Am I ever permitted to lie, for example?

This is a difficult question in moral philosophy. So, the question "How should we live our lives?" has a moral component: What's permissible and what's impermissible for me in a moral sense? What do I owe to other people? However, that can't be the full question. Because even once I've done my moral duty and made sure that I'm treating people the way that I should treat them, that leaves open a whole bunch of choices, and those choices

are very important ones.

The way I like to think of it is this: If I get to the end of my life and reflect back and ask, "Have I lived my life well?" and all I can say is "I gave people what I owed them," I'll probably be disappointed. One of the things that are left out is friendship. If I live my life well, I should probably have good friends. Maybe this is not true for everybody, but it's a strong consideration.

But what is a friend? What's a good friend? Those questions aren't to be answered within moral philosophy, which is narrowly construed in terms of obligations. Most of us seek to achieve something in some area of life. For me, it's philosophy. For other people, it might be football; as the World Cup was on. So, we each have areas we'd like to achieve. Maybe it's in building a local community or serving a church or a mosque.

I think that aesthetic engagement is another component of what we look for in a life that's lived well. It goes beyond just performing our moral obligations. In fact, moral challenges are few and far between for most of us, but the aesthetic decisions that we have to make are daily. So, it's really important for me that we're not just talking about art and that we're also talking about how I dress in the morning, how I comport myself in relation to other people, the meals I choose, the car I choose to drive, and how I decorate my house. All of these are parts of my aesthetic life. If we think about aesthetic life that broadly, you realize that it's a very important

part of the question "How should I live?"

It's important what my tastes should be. We have students coming out of high school and arriving at university. One of the things I love about teaching is that for the first time, they're thinking, "I have an opportunity now and I should take advantage of this opportunity to decide who I am going to be as a person." It's not the whole story, but part of that is answering "What music, art, mode of dress, and kind of humor is right for me?" All of this is now up in the air for university students. So, they're confronting the question of "How should I live my life?"

Was this aspect of the necessity to live a good life also implicit in the original Greek version of the question? Because something might have been lost in the translation.

Yeah, I do think that it's in Socrates's mind. Plato has aesthetics. It's, however, notoriously ambivalent. Plato, on the one hand, is a poet and writes beautifully. He uses and sees beauty as a fundamental good alongside truth and goodness. On the other hand, in the Republic, he proposes that there's no role for artists in the ideal society. So, he has an ambivalent attitude. That's perfectly consistent with its being a question for Socrates: How should I live my life, aesthetically?

In that context, is it a stretch to say that we have a moral obligation to pay attention to the aesthetic part of our life? I agree. It's a stretch. I don't think we have

a moral obligation to pay attention to the aesthetic part of our life. It's not a moral obligation at all. It's just a human obligation.

A moral obligation, as I see it, is a duty. When we have a moral obligation, we owe certain kinds of actions to other people. Let's go back to lying. If I have a moral obligation not to lie to you, that means there's a certain way I must speak to you, which is with honesty. And in fact, you have a right to complain to me if I fail to do my duty to you. That's very strong. This is a very strong kind of obligation. Some philosophers think it's overriding. When I have a moral obligation, that obligation trumps, overrides, and supersedes all my other obligations. But I think that I have other obligations.

Maybe the word obligation in English sounds too strong for the aesthetic case. Maybe it's not an obligation. Maybe it's just a should. They're things I should do. If I love a certain kind of food like sushi and I go to a Japanese restaurant but I decide not to order the sushi for some strange, bizarre reason, I may think to myself, "I should have had the sushi." There's a should there, and the should is normative. It's not like I'm blaming myself morally and now think that I'm a morally bad person. I just think I've underperformed aesthetically.

You can even think of an artist. She's standing in front of her easel and considering exactly how to put the shading in on some part of the image that she's depicting. She says, "I'm going to do this" and she does that. Then, she sees the result and says, "I shouldn't have done that." Now, it's not that she's violated a moral commandment there. It's not as if she's abused anybody in the world. It's not as if she's even failed herself morally so that she would then look back on what she's said and say, "Oh, I'm a morally bad person." That's way too strong. But nevertheless, she could say, I shouldn't have done that. I should have made it more red.

So, there's a should there, which is normative. Maybe using the word "obligation" is misleading. But there's a failure to herself. I think we can fail ourselves, aesthetically and we can succeed aesthetically. This is something that we understand, concretely. We've all experienced this every day in our lives. That's what I'm talking about when I say that there's an aesthetic "should." And that's why the "should" is really important in the question "how should we live our lives?"

Most of the discussion we have had up to now was about our duties to others. Don't we have moral duties towards ourselves?

Yeah, maybe we have moral duties towards ourselves. I think that this is more controversial. Now, we're no longer at the core. If you're going to contrast morality

with aesthetics, I think the way to do that is to look at the core of morality and the core of aesthetics.

Now, when we think about moral obligations to ourselves, we're moving away from the core of morality, and things get murkier here. I'm just not sure about moral obligations to ourselves.

Some philosophers have said that we have a moral obligation not to end our lives. I don't think that that's true. Maybe we have a moral obligation not to end our lives frivolously or gratuitously, but I find this controversial.

As Kant saw, we have an imperfect moral obligation to develop our talents. What he meant by that was that each person should develop some of their talents some of the time. But it's too much to demand that they develop all of their talents all the time. I'm still I'm not totally persuaded there.

Here, one may point to contrasting cases. One case is the person who just lives their life lying on the beach being lazy. Another is somebody who's just enthusiastic about things and really care and put a lot of effort into things that they're not very good at.

Therefore, Kant is probably not right about this. Given what I've just said about the person who's just enthusiastic and puts a lot of effort into the things that they're not very good at, maybe they have a moral obligation just to be active in their life.

All in all, it's really hard to understand what these self-regarding moral obligations might be. And maybe if they're just as weak as that, they're not very compelling. Just live an active life.

But in certain practices and in certain professions, somebody might make a stronger case for that. For example, in the case of your work as a scholar, you might have a moral responsibility to do the best you can.

Yeah, because as we're moving away from the core of morality, at a certain point we confront the question of what the boundaries of morality are. And I would definitely agree that I should do the best I can as a philosopher. I'm just not sure I would call that a moral obligation.

But maybe it doesn't matter whether we put the word moral there or not. Note that we tend to put the word moral there when we want to emphasize the strength of the obligation. In contrast, the core moral obligations are very strong. I should not injure you. I shouldn't take your life. These are very strong obligations. When I say, "I should do the best I can as a philosopher," I don't know how strong that obligation is. So, I'm not sure whether it's moral or not.

TO BE CONTINUED

We can fail ourselves aesthetically and we can succeed aesthetically. That's why I say that there's an aesthetic "should". And that's why the "should" is really important in the question "how should we live our lives?"



"The Death of Socrates" created by Jacques-Louis David in 1787.  
METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

Some 20 kilometers west of Tehran, in Vardji Village, there is an eerie hill aptly named Stone Ghosts Hill, where one could see rows above rows of immense nature-made sculptures resembling disproportionately huge faces

IRAN DAILY



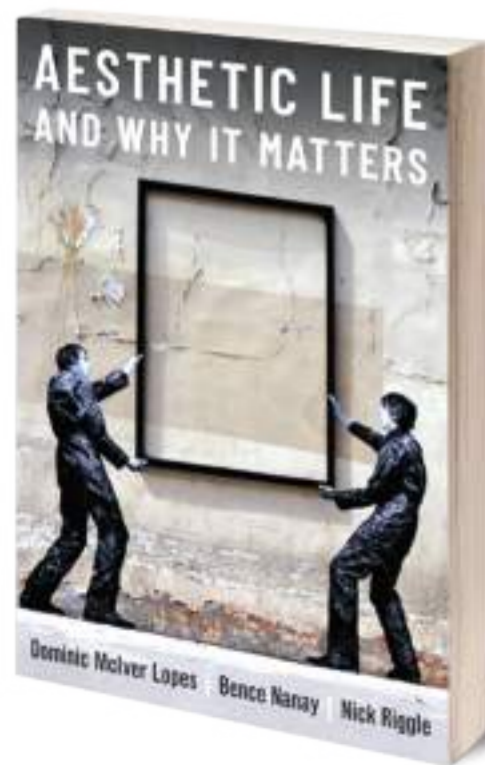
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University of British Columbia professor of philosophy Dominic Lopes:

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PART

EXCLUSIVE

# There might be some aesthetic goodness in the ugly



My next main question is that in a world which is messy, if not ugly, isn't it too romantic to talk about aesthetic drivers of life? There's a lot of pain and suffering in the world. There's a lot of anxiety and grief. There's no denying this. I really want to take that on board viscerally and acknowledge the reality of it for people. There are people who are hungry every day. There are people whose ambitions are thwarted for no good reason; they're pushed down and held down. There are people whose aspirations are just squashed. There's a polluted world and a world that's dying. We're making our planet uninhabitable for ourselves. I want to acknowledge all of that. I don't want to sound like the famous character, Pollyanna, and say, "It's a beautiful world. There's nothing bad in this." That's not true. There's a lot of bad in the world. So, having acknowledged that, if you want to say that everything bad is ugly, I think I can accept that. We're using the word ugly

there in a very broad sense. But there's another sense in which the badness in the world is compatible with there being a considerable amount of aesthetic goodness. So, there's an issue with the word beauty. Beauty can be understood very narrowly. If you imagine heaven, everything in heaven is glowing and beautiful in some way. That's a very special conception of beauty. I just think of beauty as aesthetic goodness. So, in many things, there's some element of aesthetic goodness. In many activities, there's some element of aesthetic goodness. It's there even in the badness. So, let me give you an example of this. Sunsets are beautiful. They're more beautiful because of pollution. The pollution is bad but it's compatible with the greater beauty of the sunset. So, you can look at the sunset and you could say, "Oh, my! That's gorgeous." And then, have second thoughts because it's a result of smog and pollution. In fact, the beauty of the sunset is a harbinger

of how we're making our planet uninhabitable for ourselves. So, there's one way to think about ugliness on which the badness in the world pulls against the beauty. And then, there's another way in which to think of it as compatible with the beauty that's there. And we have a choice. This is mostly terminological because I think that anybody who's concerned about the badness of the sunset can admit that there's a sense in which the sunset is more beautiful to look at. That's, I think, what I'm talking about when I say there is that beauty in the world. Now, what this means is that there can be a conflict between our values, and, of course, values cause conflict all the time. That's not news. That's something we should expect. It's something we have to deal with. If I had a view on which it turned out that our values didn't conflict, I would be worried.

Let's suppose that somebody approached slaves in the old times and said,

"Look at the beauty of the chains" and everything that might be "beautiful" about them. There are similar discourses that are metaphorically beautifying the chains we are trapped by. One might say that trying to attract the attention of the people to the aesthetics of something which is deeply bad might have morally bad consequences, making them not aware of their imprisonment in that case. I think that this is, as we said, Plato's concern that duty is going to obfuscate reality, especially the harsh reality. In fact, there's a dominant academic discourse about beauty that is focused on this point. Especially in the humanities, humanists now mostly think of aesthetic value as having an ideological function. It functions to obscure from us our enslavement and our oppression. I take this point very seriously. So, I think it's true, and it's a danger. When the master says to the slaves, "Look at how beautifully crafted your chains are," that is an

attempt to obscure from them their true condition, and that's a bad thing. So, does it follow from that that the slaves can have no beauty in their lives? If that followed, that would make their condition many times worse than it already is. Not only they have no freedom, but also they have no opportunity even to exercise aesthetic freedom within the very limited domain that they have control over. Let's move away from the chains because I don't think this is a great case to think about. In the American South, slaves who were working in the field sang songs. In a recent book, Nicholas Wolterstorff wrote on the personal and cultural importance of slave songs for American slaves in the South in the 19th century. They sang these songs as a way to keep in touch with each other as they were working in the fields and also as a way to create a sense of solidarity. But I think it was also to bring something valuable and positive into a space that would otherwise be filled

with unrelenting drudgery and constant toil and the realization that you have no choice. You have made this song and you are singing with these other people, and the slave master doesn't understand what you're doing. That's really powerful and important.

Let's get back to your book. By aesthetic, you do not mean fine art. Is that correct? That's right.

Then, what is this aesthetic you're talking about?

We have always had a very broad conception of the aesthetic across traditions. This is, for example, in Chinese philosophy, South Asian philosophy, and Islamic philosophy. The word beauty is typically used to characterize the aesthetic, but we have to think of the word beauty very broadly so it's not just about prettiness or symmetry. It's just aesthetic goodness, very broadly. Let me give you some examples. Writing in the 18th century about beauty, Francis Hutcheson said the

paradigm case of beauty is a beautiful idea, a beautiful mathematical theory. He didn't say art. The go-to example of a philosopher like Kant, when he's writing about judgments of tastes and judgments of beauty, is the natural beauty, not art. Art becomes central in the 19th century really. So, there's a cultural shift in European philosophy in which art becomes central. That idea of the central importance of art spreads around the world in the 19th century. So, it's now universal. We now think of the fine arts as the central cases of aesthetic endeavor. The Fine Arts would be music, painting, sculpture, architecture, poetry, and literary writing. And then, we've now expanded them to include installation art, movies, maybe video games, and so on. But there's this broader idea of beauty, and I see the fine arts as occupying a space within that larger aesthetic domain. I think that this is really important because the fine arts, in fact, are dominated by cultural elites. There was a

fight to get jazz recognized as something serious, and there's been a fight to get popular music recognized as important alongside classical music. However, we still tend to valorize serious music or classical music in the various traditions. So, it's not just European classical music but also, I'm sure, Persian classical music and so on. It tends to get more attention from the cultural elites, but everybody should have access to aesthetic life. Pierre Bourdieu, the French sociologist, in his great work "Distinction," was criticizing this. He said there are beautiful ways to mow a lawn, and there are beautiful ways to plow a field, and there are beautiful ways to trim a hedge. He's making the point that aesthetic engagement is, in fact, available to everybody if we think of the aesthetic very broadly. This is an important point for me.

So, where can it be located?

In my view, then, the question becomes, "What is the aesthetic domain if it's not

just the arts?" My way of thinking about this is to say that there are certain kinds of features that we recognize as aesthetic. Being elegant, graceful, energetic, and edgy are characteristics that we attribute to things. That vocabulary that I just gave you may sound very European. If so, you can look beyond Europe to non-European cultures and see that there is an aesthetic vocabulary there as well that might be different from the European one. I'm not familiar enough with Farsi to be able to give you examples for your audience. But say, in Japan, "Wabi-sabi" is the value you get from something that's not quite perfect. The imperfection makes it better. You don't want to make it perfect. Perfect is just too much. So, that's Wabi-sabi. When I explain that, you say, "Oh, yeah, I know. That's exactly right. That's a kind of aesthetic value." You realize the Japanese have a word for it, and we have the concept and we don't have the word for it. Look at it this way. We have a sense of a set of fea-

tures, and we have words for some of those features but not for all of them. And those features hang together somehow. They're all aesthetically good-making features. So, I think of the domain of the aesthetic as the domain of activities where we're focused on objects, performances, and more generally, ideas we're interested in.

Where do we get our aesthetic sensibilities or preferences from? Is there something essentially human in it that can create some sort of common thread between all humans across the world and across history, or is it just a construct that is built at a certain time within a certain culture? When I think about aesthetics in the traditions that I know — I don't know them all — I realize the fundamental issue that's at the bottom of all the debate is between pluralism and universalism. So, there are those who have this ideal, maybe, of aesthetic culture as universally available to all in principle and hence,

as the language we could all speak that will unite us and bring us together. This is a beautiful vision. I see the attraction of it. And they are worried that pluralism, which is the fragmentation of aesthetic life into different channels and different cultures, is like the Tower of Babel. It's something that is to be regretted in human life. I have the opposite view. I'm a pluralist. In my view, it's universal that we have aesthetic sensibilities or aesthetic culture, but none of those cultures are universal, or not all of them are. Many of them are very local and just have a local attraction. We all have a language, but we have different languages. So, the universal element is just having language, but the local element is the language that we speak. In aesthetics, the universal thing is that we all have something aesthetic, but what aesthetic thing we have, which is our aesthetic vocabulary or our aesthetic sensibility, varies locally. I honestly think this is wonderful.

TO BE CONTINUED

People should not be deprived of the opportunity to exercise aesthetic freedom within the very limited domain that they have control over.

University of British Columbia professor of philosophy Dominic Lopes:

# Diversity of aesthetic life should unite us

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PART

An antique shop in eastern Tehran showcases a selectively concise, though a bit dusty, history of almost 100 years of things underappreciated in their times yet growing in value as they accumulated nostalgic valence despite the fact that most of them have become useless over time. **IRAN DAILY**



EXCLUSIVE

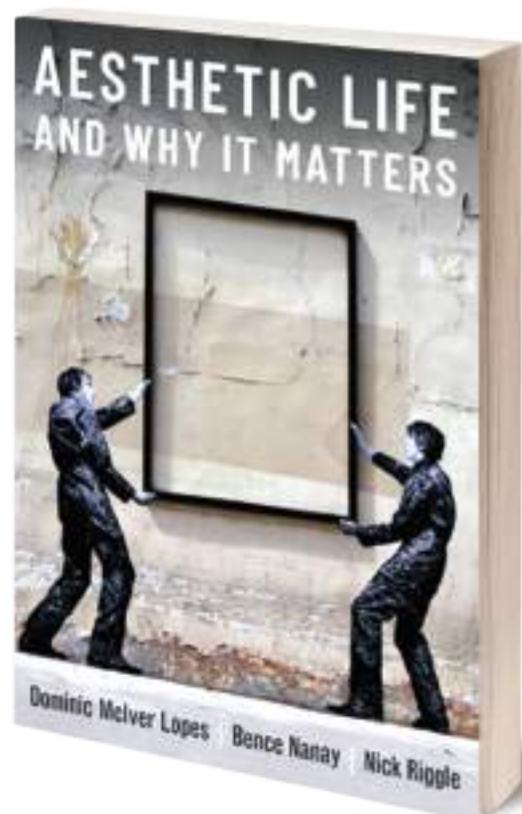


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A florist shop in Tehran. **IRAN DAILY**



We hunger for a sphere of human life where difference is not a problem, where they don't cause friction and divide us. For that, we can embrace aesthetic difference as a completely harmless matter, a common ground that should unite us.



What's "wonderful" about your pluralist approach to aesthetics? The diversity of aesthetic life is something that itself should unite us. In many spheres of life, the fact that we're different is a challenge. The fact that we speak different languages is a challenge for us. The fact that we have different religions is a challenge for humankind. It causes friction and we know this. It even causes war, and it divides us. Our etiquettes and ways of interacting with each other, just to show that we regard each other as equals and worthy of respect, are different, and that is a challenge for us. So, on many levels, the differences between us are challenges. I think we can still see some of those differences as attractive. The fact that we have different languages is a wonderful thing. Every language seems to have a music of its own. There's something aesthetic in that difference. But the thing about the aesthetic difference is that we can embrace it as completely harmless and not really dividing us. We can see it as, in fact, a form of difference

that is itself a common ground. I have musical tastes. I grew up in the 1970s and 80s, circa. But that doesn't mean I have to look down my nose at somebody else's musical tastes. In fact, it should encourage me to think, "It's great that you have a different musical taste so that you can do your thing, and I can do my thing, and we don't step on each other's toes." There's no essential competition. There's competition for resources, but there's no conflict between the values themselves. In that domain, the values themselves are compatible with each other. The beauty of what I do is compatible with what you do being beautiful, as well. So, I think this is something that we hunger for, a sphere of human life where difference is not a problem, and aesthetics provides us with that. I don't think aesthetics is the only thing that provides us with this. Sports does this too, as another example. The World Cup was on, and soccer is a beautiful game. I live in Canada. We're crazy about hockey. I can be crazy about hockey and think that it's wonderful that people love football. We

don't have to have an incompatibility. I think aesthetics and athletics are very similar in this regard. Some scholars argue that that very diversity is under attack in recent decades by the homogenizing force of the American version of capitalism, or what some call neoliberalism, or in our times, the World Wide Web, which is wiping off much of the diversity in some ways. Isn't that true? This is a very interesting question, and I have a dissenting answer to it. It has just become dogma that every technology homogenizes, and, I think, that is not taking seriously the nuanced differences between technologies. First, we need to draw a distinction between broadcast technologies and technologies that really thrive on creating niches. Let's go back to television 30 years ago, which is an excellent example of broadcast technologies. Most countries had two or three television outlets, which were supposed to provide content for tens of millions of people. That meant that they had to make program-

ming accessible widely to the lowest common denominator. This is what Noel Carroll in his book, 'A Philosophy of Mass Art,' calls "the lowest common denominator concern." Suppose there was going to be a drama on TV. It had to be accessible to everybody. That was powerfully homogenizing. Look, even going back 30 years or 100 years ago, we can ask, "Was the printing press powerfully homogenizing?" And the answer is no. Although there were blockbuster books that sold millions and millions and were read by lots of people, it was completely compatible with there being a publishing industry that was able to service very niche audiences. There are small presses for poetry that will publish 100 books for those 100 enthusiasts, and they're able to make it work and still exist. So, not every technology has homogenized us. Some do, and some don't. We need to be very careful here.

What about the more recent examples of "new media"? Let's now switch to the World Wide Web and the new informa-

tion technology. Here, we might be inclined to say that social media is highly homogenizing. Again, I think we need to draw distinctions. I think it's a bit like the printing press. There are some social media outlets like Twitter and Facebook and TikTok that really do reach huge audiences, hundreds of millions of people around the world. So, they tend to be homogenizing, and I think there's a concern there. But at the same time, the World Wide Web actually promotes niche aesthetic cultures in a way that no other technology has ever done. The reason is that it used to be that if you had 100 people who were interested in some specialized aesthetic thing — say a very, very special kind of music — in order for them to connect with each other, know each other, and interact, they had to be in the same place. They had to be geographically local. That was the case, say 200 years ago. Maybe 50 years ago, they had to know enough about each other that they could correspond by mail. This was very hard. Now, if you have 100 people anywhere in the world, they can

find each other and they can collaborate. Can you give us a concrete example? Sure. Let me give you an example of this, from my book on photography. There was an article that was written by Virginia Heffernan in 'The New Yorker' about a Flickr group. Flickr is a less well-known website now, but 10 years ago, it was very well-known. It's a place where you would post photographs, but Flickr is organized around communities of aesthetic interest. Some of them are people who like cat pictures and would share pictures of cats, cakes, or whatever. But some of them are communities of people who just like to make pictures in a particular way. And they draw from all over the world. There was this little tiny Flickr community that was posting pictures and then talking about the aesthetically good and bad qualities of the pictures. They were like a little community of photography enthusiasts. They had their own aesthetic. And somebody who was being a little provocative posted a photograph to this group that was

taken by Henri Cartier-Bresson, who's one of the most important photographers of the 20th century, or at least one of the five most important ones. Yet, the community didn't recognize the photograph and criticized it. They said, "Oh, it's kind of blurry and it's oddly cropped." Then, there was a lot of laughter about this and a lot of poking fun like, "How could these people not know about this photograph? And then how could they not see how great it is?" So, there was a lot of snickering. My reaction was that the snickering is misplaced. I think it's wonderful that there could be a group of people who are seriously engaged in their own photography practice and don't know about what's going on in the art galleries. They don't know what's in the official art Press. They're doing their own thing, completely free of the encumbrances of the elite photography world. It's great for them, and I think it's great that it exists. And it's Flickr that made that possible. So, I think the thing new information technologies are a two-edged

sword. On one hand, they can be homogenizing. But on the other hand, they open up spaces. Even social media and platforms like TikTok and Twitter allow for small groups of people to interact. So, I think we have to have a much more nuanced view. Every tool invented by humans from fire forward that I can think of has had pluses and minuses. No tool has been totally good. No tool has been totally bad. I agree with the premise that no tool is entirely good or entirely bad. But we can say that some tools are very close to being entirely bad. A nuclear weapon, for example? Q: Yes. We just sent a craft into space to test the hypothesis that we could nudge a meteor off-track in case one large enough is ever coming and could do a lot of damage. Maybe a nuclear weapon will save the planet at that point. If you're asking, "What good could it possibly do?" that might be it. I think it's possible to imagine positive uses for nuclear weapons.

Yes, if we are thinking ahead, we can create scenarios wherein every tool that we can construe could have some really, really good things about it. But empirically speaking, with an indication from the history, that's not the case. For example, in that specific case, if you look in retrospect, they've been for the most part bad. For instance, I can't drum up any good use for chemical weapons, unlike how you did with nuclear weapons. Yeah, it's a good example. I would say that there are many tools that have been mostly bad. So, maybe I'll back off my claim. I put it very strongly when I said "every tool has some good use." Maybe that's false. Maybe there are some tools out there that just don't. I think I can run my argument with the claim that most tools have some positive uses. And I've given you some examples of positive uses of information technologies that people just tend to criticize in a knee-jerk fashion.

You touched upon your main argument in the book, which is "we have a hunger for difference", and it might find satisfaction in

the realm of aesthetics. From your vantage point, what's the issue in a nutshell? The deep issue that fundamentally structures thinking about aesthetics across traditions is pluralism versus universalism dichotomy. The universalists have anxiety about the difference. They think the difference is what divides us and it's a problem for us. My response is that some forms of difference can unite us, and they can be a kind of common ground. That said, there are certain features that they need to have in order to be the kinds of differences that unite us. There has to be basically no threat of conflict between values. There can be competition for resources, but the values themselves don't conflict. So, this whole dialectic is premised on a concern that differences are a problem. My point is that, it's not that we have a hunger for difference, exactly. It's that we have a hunger for there being a kind of difference that is not a problem for us.

TO BE CONTINUED

University of British Columbia professor of philosophy Dominic Lopes:

# In aesthetics we can find a model for being together in difference

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We asked the AI bot on Midjourney.com to depict a demented patient remembering a sweet memory, as Edward Hopper would have drawn it.

IRAN DAILY

EXCLUSIVE



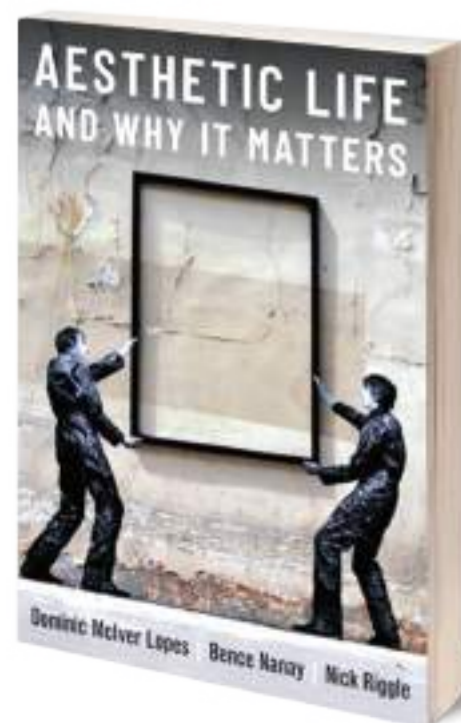
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Aesthetic life can be seen as a way of achieving individuality, but I don't think that we all strive for it, or there is a universal appetite for it.



Where does our "hunger for difference" come from? I think it just comes from a recognition that we share a world. We're in the world together and we have to get along. We have to find a way to get along. There are psychological necessities that put us in conflict with each other. And we know that our lives can go very poorly if we allow those psychological necessities to reign unchecked. And maybe we'll recognize that we're fundamentally social creatures. Could we live without friends? Could we live without family? Could we live without community? Some people can, but they're oddities. Most people thrive as social creatures. And to thrive as social creatures, we've got to find a way to be on the same page with at least some of our fellow human beings. This idea is the fundamental idea of the European Enlightenment that must be true. Scholars are nowadays very suspicious of Enlightenment thoughts, but this is the one

Enlightenment thought of which, I hope, nobody is suspicious. We need to find a way to be together. However, we should be suspicious if finding a way for being together means we all ought to share exactly the same culture. But I'm offering — and this is the point of my work — a model for how we can be together in difference.

That would be your way to win a Nobel Peace Prize. (Laughs) Wow. You know, I have no ambition for anything like that. This is the Enlightenment's idea, not mine. But, yes, I agree that this is the core of peace.

Is that "hunger for difference" a driving force in our efforts toward individualization, to make myself a distinctive individual? It is. I don't think that we all strive for individuality, however. That is another Enlightenment idea that the individual is sovereign. That, I think, is not universal. There's not a uni-

versal appetite for it. Some traditional and indigenous communities, for instance, are ones where people see themselves as deeply embedded in a social context in a community. Therefore, that's maybe the thing that is a bit of American ideology and the American picture. And it's a matter of degree. I think it's very strong in the US and less strong in Canada, which would seem to outsiders to be two very similar societies. Living here, however, I think our sense of community here in Canada is far more important to us than the sense of community in the United States. So, aesthetic life can be seen as a way of achieving individuality. My students are very interested in being individuals. They're all looking for ways to express themselves aesthetically that are different from everybody else. But I don't think everybody has to be that way. There are indigenous cultures here on the coast of British Columbia that really privi-

lege cultural forms where there's very little change over time, where there's not a big emphasis on innovation, and where it's important that we do things the same way we've always done them. That's good, too.

You provided an example of someone putting a photograph of Cartier-Bresson, one of the most important photographers of the 20th century, on Flickr and everybody else criticizing it. There have been other social experiments like that. For example, a professional musician once played a million-dollar violin in the subway, and nobody paid attention to him, even though some others had paid \$1,000 per ticket to attend his concert the night before. That points to the power of the brand, which is a shorthand in my understanding of the politics of aesthetics. That means, it's not just about our universal sensibility about what is pretty;

rather, there is politics in it. Right? There is. There's no denying that social, political, economic, and market forces creep into every aspect of human life. So, I don't have a picture of which aesthetic life is somehow magically immune from all of that. It's not immune from all of that. In fact, it has to contend with it. I think it was Joshua Bell, who was playing outside the subway station the morning after he had performed in Carnegie Hall in New York, and nobody stopped to listen. But it's happening while you're coming out of the subway and you're on your way to work. It's not a fair experiment. It's not at all surprising that nobody would stop to listen. So, I'm not sure that shows a lot, but there's no question that there are distorting influences. One thing that happens that worries me a lot is the capture of aesthetic life by, for example, political or social communities in ways that are completely arbitrary. In the

United States, there's this terrible polarization between the left and the right, or the Democrats and the Republicans, if you want to put it in party terms. There is also geographical polarization between urban and rural. There is also an educational polarization between the highly educated and those with nothing more than a high school education. And then, it's also become an aesthetic polarization. Between listening to hip hop or Beethoven on the one hand, and listening to country music or heavy metal, on the other; between wearing red baseball caps, on the one hand, versus other kinds of headgear; on the other hand; between drinking lattes and cappuccinos, on the one hand, and Coke and Pepsi, on the other hand; and between watching certain kinds of television programming versus other. That polarization is now cutting across all areas of human life.

So, the aesthetics is becoming politicized. In fact, what I think is happening is that aesthetic differences are being used to cement and amplify political differences. So if you're not with me, aesthetically, you're not with me, politically. This is a great shame because, as you know from this conversation, I think that these are aesthetic differences or differences that can unite us. And now, politics are making those differences. They're making those differences, ones that are not going to unite us. They're robbing the aesthetic realm of its power to be a ground where we can interact easily with each other, even though we have different values. So, I'm offering a picture of something aesthetic engagement can do for us, and political differences are undermining that picture. I think that we have a fight ahead of us. We have to save the aesthetic from its politicization.

That's a good point. Are you

familiar with Midjourney? No.

It's a website, centered on an artificial intelligence program. The program draws different AI-generated paintings based on the words you feed it, and the paintings usually turn out to be very interesting and well-done. The website is currently trending. The New York Times even wrote a piece comparing the Thanksgiving dishes visualized by Midjourney and the ones cooked by its staff. It can be argued that artificial intelligence is driving human agency in many areas of life to the margins, and it has now come to the arts and aesthetics in the broader sense of the matter. Don't you see this as a threat, considering that you promoted saving aesthetics from politicization? I don't know. Maybe. It's really hard to speculate about the future of this. We can ask

the question, "Are artists going to quit? Are they going to give up? Or are they going to be muscled out of space by artificial intelligence? Am I going to stop painting or am I going to lose my market for painting because of artificial intelligence?" I kind of think that the answer is no. There will always be an interest in things that are made by humans because they're made by humans. There will always be that difference there. Meanwhile, artificial intelligence is probably going to produce more and more interesting things, things that will intrigue us and make us think, "Oh, that's just so worth paying attention to." I don't see what's bad about that. And then, thirdly, artificial intelligence is intelligence. It's not quite there yet, but maybe it will get to a point where we begin to see it as worthy of the kind of interpretive stance that we now approach human acts with. When I read a book, I ask these Wh- questions from myself:

Why is the story told this way? What is the author trying to convey? Where is she coming from? What's her background? How is she viewing me as a reader? These are great questions to ask. Asking them enriches my experience of reading the novel. So, we take an interpretive stance towards the products of human endeavor, and taking that interpretive stance enriches our aesthetic experiences. Would we never take that kind of stance towards products of artificial intelligence? I think the answer is probably no. Right now, we do have a sense that this algorithmically generated art probably doesn't warrant that interpretive stance. I'm not going to ask: Why is this computer making it this way? How are they viewing me? What is the context in which they're operating? But I think that artificial intelligence is very likely to develop enough sophistication that those questions will become live questions so that my en-

gagement with the products and artworks produced by AI is going to have that kind of richness, as well. I don't see philosophers working in AI debating this, of course. But if you want to call it optimism, I'm optimistic about the potential for AI to be genuine art, that is to say, created by a mind whose steps are such that they further illuminate the work that I'm engaging with. Let's conclude the interview with a fun question. Do you think animals lead aesthetic lives, too? That's a wonderful question. It's really hard for us to know. Some animals create artifacts of astonishing beauty. Honeybees, magpies, songbirds, and termites ants are among those, who create things which we think are beautiful. But it's really hard to know how they're perceiving what they create. In my view, in the aesthetic domain, we are seeing objects as having certain features like being elegant, balanced, and

soon. Are they able to see that? Look, we are animals and we can see it. In fact, we can see it just because we're animals. Our perceptual capacities have equipped us to see that. Therefore, maybe there are animals who are close to us in their perceptual capacities. I sometimes ask myself if there's intelligent life out there that we can communicate with, what would it take for a creature, for us, not to be able to see these kinds of features in them? Maybe such features are there, but they're not the same ones that we see, and maybe we will never quite understand them — unlike the Japanese phrase Wabi-sabi which we get in the manner that it's explained to us. Maybe we'll never quite get it. Then maybe we'll think they must have something analogous, something functionally equivalent, that plays the same role in their lives as aesthetic engagement plays in our lives.

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