



TRANSCRIPT

Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa

2025 Lebowitz Prize: A Discussion on "What Beauty Promises"

This special episode of Key Conversations is joined by Dominic McIver Lopes, Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada and University Killam Professor at the University of British Columbia, and Samantha Matherne, Professor of Philosophy at Harvard University. Each year, the Lebowitz Prize is presented to a pair of philosophers who hold contrasting views of an important philosophical question that is of current interest both to the field and to an educated public audience. The professors discuss the topic for the 2025 Lebowitz Prize, which is "What Beauty Promises".

Fred Lawrence:

This podcast episode was generously funded by two anonymous donors. If you would like to support the podcast in similar ways, please contact Hadley Kelly at hkelly@pbk.org. Thanks for listening.

Hello and welcome to Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. I'm Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. Since 2018, we've welcomed leading thinkers, visionaries, and artists to our podcast. These individuals have shaped our collective understanding of some of today's most pressing and consequential matters, in addition to sharing stories with us about their scholarly and personal journeys.

Many of our guests are Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars who travel the country to our Phi Beta Kappa chapters, where they spend two days on campus and present free lectures. We invite you to attend. For more information about Visiting Scholars' lectures, please visit pbk.org.

In today's special episode of Key Conversations, I'm delighted to welcome the 2025 recipients of the annual Lebowitz Prize for Philosophic Achievement and Contribution, Dr. Samantha Matherne and Dr. Dominic McIver Lopes.

Samantha Matherne is a Professor of Philosophy at Harvard University, and Dominic McIver Lopes is a University Killam Professor of Philosophy at the University of British Columbia. Together, they are the most recent winners of the Dr. Martin R. Lebowitz and Eve Lewellis Lebowitz Prize, awarded by the Phi Beta Kappa Society in conjunction with our partners at the American Philosophical Association.

Each year, the Lebowitz Prize honors a pair of highly regarded philosophers, whose contrasting perspectives illuminate a major philosophical question of broad public interest, continuing philosophy's long tradition of inquiry through dialogue and debate.

Our 2025 prize winners presented their topic, What Beauty Promises, at this year's Lebowitz Symposium held during the American Philosophical Association's meeting in Chicago in February, and it is the focus of today's episode of Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa.

We're excited to welcome them today to discuss beauty, imagination, pluralism, and the ways aesthetic experience informs how we understand shared life and difference. Welcome, Professors Matherne and Lopez.

Samantha Matherne:

Thanks for having us.

Dominic McIver Lopes:

Thank you very much. It's a real honor to be talking to the members of Phi Beta Kappa from north of the 49th parallel.

Fred Lawrence:

Well, we're delighted to have you both with us. So I'd like to begin with a setup question, if you will, that will give you each a chance to set out your position on our topic, What Beauty Promises, and also give you the opportunity to discuss a little bit about how your positions differ.

My question for you is a variation on the question that we in Phi Beta Kappa here all the time, which is something along the lines of, isn't your concern with the arts and sciences a luxury that we cannot afford right now? In some ways, this is Schiller's question, isn't it? Whether the question of beauty is untimely when political freedom feels more urgent, as he said.

I'd like to mention Professor Randall Bartlett, a gifted economist and professor of mine at Williams College, who used to say that every article ought to start with an abstract that sets out what's the thrust of the article, and then end with what he called a post-track.

And the post-track would answer the question, "So what? Why in a time like this should we worry about the nature of aesthetics, the nature of beauty, aren't there other things we should be concerned about?" How does that question motivate your take on these questions and how do you think that makes you differ? Dom, can I start with you?

Dominic McIver Lopes:

I'm tempted to begin by saying that I'm not sure that our aesthetic engagement is optional for us. It might be, that in some sense, it's a luxury, but if it's in any sense a luxury, it's a necessary luxury. I don't

think that when we're distracted by the problems that we face, we really have a real option of setting aside our aesthetic interests. They are part of who we are, in an intimate way. They're part of our daily lives. We can't avoid thinking about how we present ourselves, which is an aesthetic matter.

Think about waking up in the morning and dressing, and how that addresses the people that we interact with. How we carry ourselves in conversation, that's an aesthetic matter. How we even nourish our bodies, which is something not at all optional, that's an aesthetic matter. How we conduct our thoughts by reading, by listening to music, by watching television, series, entertainment.

These are all aesthetic matters. So, I think there's a false dichotomy, the thought that we even have an opportunity to set aside our aesthetic engagement while we address what seems more urgent. So then, the question for me is, can we channel these aesthetic engagements that are already mandatory for us, and use them to help to address the urgent matters that you're alluding to?

And philosophers, there are exceptions, you mentioned Schiller. But philosophers have not taken that question very seriously, have not given much attention to it.

Schiller's tradition is a minority tradition, but I think Schiller's on the right track here. I think that we can channel what is mandatory for us, the importance of the aesthetic in our lives, into addressing what is so urgent for us. And I don't want to downplay how urgent it is. We're facing very tough problems, but I think that aesthetic engagement gives us a tool to face those problems.

Fred Lawrence:

Samantha, I'm going to let you respond, and then we're going to dive in a little more to the actual debate between your work, but on this question of, is this a luxury we can't afford? Is this a necessity we can't do without?

Samantha Matherne:

I am in agreement with Dom about the pervasiveness of the aesthetic. I think that there's a tendency to often associate aesthetics with luxury goods, with going to the spa, with plastic surgery, with having a certain kind of car, a certain kind of wardrobe. Where, those really are luxury goods, but part of what I think Dom is getting at is once you just look around the room that you're in, it is full of aesthetic choices. The clothes that you're wearing, the paint on the walls, what did you eat for breakfast, what glass you're drinking? These are all aesthetic choices. And I think that really appreciating the beauty doesn't just happen in these, kind of elite luxury spaces, but it's pervasive. I couldn't agree with Dom Moore.

And I think, for my part, I also think that we can harness some of that pervasive aesthetic potential to intervene on these really pressing issues. I think that there is instrumentality, if that's what you want to call it, which I think is to exaggerate it. But if you think about protest songs, if you think about even the aesthetics of marches, what are the signs people are wearing? What are the clothes that they're wearing? I think that there's a way that we can parlay this kind of pervasive aesthetic into making a difference with respect to these urgent issues.

But I also think that there's a wing of the aesthetic that is just for the aesthetic, and it doesn't just have to be instrumental, but that doesn't mean that it is ancillary to these urgent political or economic or

social matters, because there's always this question of what are we fighting for? What is the quality of life that we want people to have? And I think part of the quality of life is, not just being obsessed by the social, political, economic issues, but having time to just dwell with beauty, to dwell with beauty.

So I think that aesthetic is also an ideal that isn't reducible to these other urgent matters, but is kind of on the other side, as something to hope for.

Fred Lawrence:

Let me jump into one of the places where, at least I think I understand, that there's a point of disagreement that's important between what you're saying. Dom, as I understand it, talks about aesthetic communities, talks expressly about pluralism and different kinds of aesthetics in that sense.

Samantha, you've articulated the role of the urgency of imaginative play, to use your term, your language, distinctive, imaginative domain in which we playfully explore possibilities.

So, do either of you see a possibility for what I would call a normative argument for beauty? Is there a way I can say Mozart's music is beautiful, and that's an intelligible statement? Or, can I only say Mozart's music is beautiful to me? Or, can I only say, "Here's how I came to appreciate Mozart's music." And that's the only statement I can make.

Can I say, "This is beautiful music?" Samantha, let me start with you this time.

Samantha Matherne:

So, I think that there's a really nefarious way in which that statement has operated in the history of aesthetic culture, where when you say, "Mozart is beautiful," the expectation is that anybody who's cultured knows that Mozart is beautiful. And if you disagree, then somehow you're not cultured enough or you're not elite enough, and it becomes this way to exclude people from who really gets to make aesthetic judgments versus who doesn't.

For me, when I think about the statement, "Mozart's music is beautiful," it's a statement of hope and it is holding out something that you think is not just beautiful for you, but is a site of community and connection, not just for the people that you happen to know, but for people anytime, anywhere, because we all have this capacity of imagination that allows us to play with aesthetic possibilities.

So for me, it's really the capacity of imagination that allows us to connect over shared beauty, and it's never a guarantee when you say something is beautiful that other people will agree, but it's the hope that we can find something in spite of our differences. That's what I think is going on when you say, "Mozart's music is beautiful."

Fred Lawrence:

So Dom, I take your pluralistic approach to aesthetics to be that when I say, "Mozart's music is beautiful," that's not really an aspiration that everybody would agree with. That's a statement about me and other people who like Mozart, but other people won't and that is the nature of aesthetics.

So first of all, am I understanding you correctly? And if so, or if not, where is the point of disagreement that you and Samantha have on this?

Dominic McIver Lopes:

There's a sense in which anybody can agree that Mozart's music is beautiful. Anybody can agree that Sonny Rollins' music is beautiful. Anybody can agree that Arcade Fire is beautiful. But these are, in a way, they're empty statements.

So this is maybe where I disagree with Samantha on hope. What matters isn't whether this is beautiful, but how beautiful is it? Mozart's music is beautiful in a way that's different from the beauties of Sonny Rollins and Arcade Fire. And we know this. We know this because we've gone through the onboarding process, as Samantha so beautifully put it, for some kinds of music but not for other kinds of music.

And we know that when we go through that onboarding process, we acquire a sensitivity to the rich texture of a way of doing music. And, we're confronted by our inability to get the rich texture and other kinds of music, and we realize that there are so many kinds of music out there, there's no way that in one lifetime we can access them all.

Okay. I think Samantha doesn't disagree with any of this, but then she says, "Okay, but there's the hope," right? Which is, it's an unprincipled hope because our lives are limited. I can't hope that by the end of my life I will learn to appreciate every kind of music. So it's an unprincipled hope.

And I say, "Well, hold on. There's another way to go. Let's just embrace the limits and embrace the fragmentation and embrace the diversity." It's a knee-jerk response to think that fragmentation and difference and limitation are bad things in human life.

But I actually think that one of the lessons that we get from our aesthetic lives, is that fragmentation and limitation and diversity can be good things. They can be good in the political way that we should come back to. And so, rather than reaching for a hope of commonality, I say, let's embrace what makes us different.

Fred Lawrence:

Samantha, our listeners can't see that you're nodding as Dom is talking. So tell us why you're nodding.

Samantha Matherne:

So, I think it is absolutely right that one of the greatest things about the aesthetic domain is the fragmentation and that you get to find your niches and fellow fans and fellow nerds who, not everybody can be a fan and not everybody can be a nerd. And that's actually part of the bond. It's like, we get it and not everybody does. And that is a wonderful thing about aesthetic life.

But I do still hold out that hope for commonality and whether it's Mozart's music, or whether it is the mountains in the lake district, or whether it is Hamlet, or whether it's the music of Sonny Rollins, I think that experience when you realize that somebody else from a different time period or a different culture, was aesthetically moved the way that you were, it's miraculous. And I think that's the commonality, that is, at least one part of the hope of the aesthetic domain that I want to hold onto.

Fred Lawrence:

Dom?

Dominic McIver Lopes:

This conversation is making me realize that both Samantha and I, in a way, we're trying to change the terms of debate. The terms of debate have been about, is beauty objective or is it subjective? And I think that for both of us, that's not really an interesting question.

The interesting question is, what is the promise of beauty? Is it a promise of meeting the stranger, or is it a promise of building community? There's no clear line from objective versus subjective to that. And I think that what's really at stake for us in our aesthetic lives is that stranger versus community dialectic, rather than objective versus subjective.

Fred Lawrence:

I want to ask you both for a moment, and I want to pull back from your wonderful project, but I want to ask a more general question. I've always been fascinated by the fact that French high schools require philosophy, and we don't do that in the United States. And my understanding, and Dom will tell me if I'm right, is they don't do that in Canada either. Should we in the United States and Canada require philosophy?

And I'm not just asking you for the kind of union position as philosophers, you'd like to see more philosophy. And more high school students taking philosophy makes more philosophy majors in college. I mean something obviously a lot deeper than that. Would this be an important part of secondary education, and how do you think it might advance if it's not too big a question, or society to do so?

Whoever wants to start with that one?

Dominic McIver Lopes:

Well, I can say that there are international baccalaureate high schools in most cities in Canada, and the international baccalaureate has a big dose of philosophy in it. It's a French program. And I teach those students. They have fallen in love with philosophy and they're terrific philosophers coming into first year university.

They certainly haven't been harmed, and they've got philosophy young enough that it's really begun to shape how they think. And they've got very sharp minds, critical minds. They're willing to question their assumptions. They know how to go about it in a way that's not alienating, that's productive. They're good at learning anything. I think a philosophical education just makes you a good learner.

So, I can't imagine it wouldn't be a terrific idea to have more philosophy in high schools. Unfortunately, there's no AP philosophy in the US. That would be the way to do it.

Fred Lawrence:

And that's a different question. In a sense, a smaller question should be the easier question and I have no answer to that. The fact that it's not a required course is the question that we're talking about. I'll come to Samantha for thought on that as well.

And there, at least I can see arguments on the other side. I could never understand an argument why there wouldn't be an AP philosophy curriculum. That to me is a conundrum. As you say, Dom, it will do no harm, and it might very well do some good. Samantha, other thoughts on this one?

Samantha Matherne:

I'm all for it. There's a way of thinking philosophically that is different from thinking how you do in English and history and chemistry and mathematics. And it is, of course, about calling certain assumptions into question and critical thinking.

But it's also a really slow way of thinking. You start with a question like, what is knowledge, or what is beauty? And you can never answer it the rest of your life, but thinking through it, the quality of that slow thinking, I think it's an irreplaceable thing, and that we can offer that as philosophers.

Fred Lawrence:

Irreplaceable think. That's a beautiful expression. Let me ask you both, as I always do with our guests on Key Conversations, help our listeners build their reading lists. The people listening to us today will include people with some background in philosophy, maybe a philosophy course in college, maybe one in high school, but also people with extensive background.

So I wonder if each of you could give us a couple of suggestions of works that you would recommend for people who are coming back to these topics from a long time away, and people who are engaged but looking to press their knowledge further. Dom, let me start with you.

Dominic McIver Lopes:

I've got three recommendations for you all. The first is a book by Elaine Scarry. She's a literary scholar at Harvard. The title is *On Beauty and Being Just*. It's a very philosophical book, about this very issue that we've been discussing today, the connection between beauty and the good society that we all are trying to build.

A second book, Alexander Nehamas, *Only A Promise of Happiness*. This would be interesting if you want to think more carefully about what beauty means for you personally, and your own individual life. It's got a very individualistic, personal take on things.

And then I'm going to suggest a book that I co-authored with a couple of friends, Bense Nanay and Nick Riggle. It's called *Aesthetic Life and Why It Matters*. And it's three essays and a conversation, a dialogue between the three of us, giving three perspectives on the importance of our aesthetic lives to each and every one of us.

Fred Lawrence:

Thank you for those. Samantha.

Samantha Matherne:

The first is *Sense and Sensibility* by Jane Austin, which you might not have thought was a bit of philosophy, but I'm here to tell you it is absolutely a bit of philosophy and a bit of aesthetic philosophy. And it is all about how to balance your rational and romantic sides vis-a-vis aesthetic engagement.

Fred Lawrence:

Beautiful.

Samantha Matherne:

The second book is a book by a Scottish author named Nan Shepherd, and it's called *The Living Mountain*. It was one of these, shoved in the drawer of a desk and forgotten and then was rediscovered much later in life, and it's simply put just one of the best pieces of nature writing I have ever read. I am not typically a big fan of nature, and it is a book that will make you re-see the beauty of nature because you see it through her eyes.

As she puts it, in the beginning, she's talking about the Cairngorm Mountains in Scotland, and she says, "No matter how many times she walks these hills, they hold astonishment for her. There's no getting accustomed to them." That is what aesthetic experience is.

And then, the last book to close it out with a classic suggestion, *The Symposium* by Plato. It is a wild drinking party where everybody gets together and gives their philosophy of beauty.

Fred Lawrence:

The two of you have done such important work on this topic, but to our particular time together today, this is exactly what the Lebowitz Prize was supposed to be about. People think about serious issues in philosophy that, as you both said, you can start with and follow where the road leads and the road will lead further than we have time enough for the world to follow it, but we have our time on it.

But at the same time, issues that are very much of the moment. This is not an abstraction in the sense of not being of this world, very much of the world, the things we've been talking about.

I'm delighted that we were able to honor you with the Lebowitz Award, your work on this, your particular work on this issue, and I'm particularly grateful to you both for spending time with me today, on *Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa*.

This podcast is produced by Phantom Center Media and Entertainment. Kojin Tashiro is the lead producer and mixed this episode, and Hadley Kelly is the Phi Beta Kappa producer on the show. Our theme song is *Back to Back* by Yan Perchuk.

To learn more about the work of the Phi Beta Kappa Society and our Visiting Scholar program, please visit pbk.org. Thanks for listening. I'm Fred Lawrence. Until next time.

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