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BEAUTY AND THE GOOD: SITUATING THE *KALON*

ARYEH KOSMAN

EARLY IN THE *SUMMA THEOLOGICA*, Thomas Aquinas, discussing the nature of goodness, considers an argument purporting to show that the good is not a final cause. Goodness is very much like beauty—we may recall Dionysius’ saying *bonum laudatur ut pulchrum*.¹ But beauty is a formal cause; so perhaps we should see goodness, like beauty, as a formal rather than a final cause. Here’s his response (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.1.4):

Beauty and goodness in a subject are basically the same, for they’re founded on the same thing, namely form; and because of this, goodness is praised as beauty. But they’re conceptually distinct. For goodness is properly related to appetite; for it’s the good that all things desire, and therefore it involves the concept of an end, for the appetite is a kind of movement toward something. Beauty, on the other hand, is related to a cognitive power, for things are said to be beautiful that please when seen. Hence beauty consists in due proportion, for sense delights in things of due proportion, as something similar to them; for sense also is a sort of reason, as is every cognitive power.

Aquinas here begins by gesturing toward agreement with the view of Dionysius that the beautiful and the good are identical, a view that has led one scholar, Jan Aersten, to characterize Dionysius as “a typical representative of Greek thought, for in Hellenic culture the beautiful and the good are brought together in a single notion.”² But when Aquinas goes on to distinguish goodness from beauty, his word for beauty—*pulchrum*—presumably corresponds to the Greek *kalon*. This, however, is the very term most often thought to designate the “single notion” in which Hellenic culture has “brought together the beautiful and the good.” So the question arises: how are we to situate the *kalon* with respect to the good and the beautiful? This is the question I want to think about in this essay.

We might begin with two related considerations. The first concerns how much for us but not for the Greeks discourse about beauty is rooted in the project of what we now call the “aesthetic.” I was led to think of this passage from the *Summa* because it’s a text to which the young artist Stephen Dedalus refers in Joyce’s novel. “You are an artist, are you not, Mr. Dedalus? said the dean. The object of the artist is the creation of the beautiful. What the

1. Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite *On Divine Names* 4.7, in Migne 1857, 3: 701.

2. Aersten 1996, 341.

beautiful is is another question.”³ In the course of responding, Stephen (slightly misquoting Aquinas) offers the pithy *pulcra sunt quae visa placent* (“things are beautiful that when seen please us”). Note that “the beautiful” here is what the artist sets out to create. But if we think about the beautiful in Plato and Aristotle—or rather if we think about the *kalon* in Plato and Aristotle—what we are thinking about doesn’t primarily have to do with what we would consider the project of art, that is, the aesthetic. Occasionally, particularly in Homer, *kalon* is applied to artifacts that may for us acquire the status of an art object. But such usage is secondary to the natural beauty of persons and to the beauty (what the LSJ entry delicately calls “moral beauty”) of their actions, states of character, and the like. And in any case the use of *kalon* in relation to such objects attends to their efficiency, their utilitarian virtue, how well they are made; think how this fact plays out in the argument of *Hippias Major*. It attends, in other words, to features that for our post-Kantian aesthetic imagination seem precisely *not* to be associated with objects of pure, or as we say, “fine” art. Much the same is true of another category of entity that we characteristically find beautiful: nature in all her glorious aspect. Where in antiquity do we find sunsets, meadows, groves, streams, waterfalls, and fields of daffodils described as *kalon*?

The second consideration, perhaps a more central one, is the obverse of the first. It arises from noting how comfortable the notion of the *kalon* is instead in the fields of moral discourse, and how uneasy we are with talk of “the beautiful” in this context. Here’s Aristotle (*Eth. Nic.* 1115b23): “So it is for the sake of the beautiful [*kalou dê heneka*] that a courageous person endures and performs emotions and deeds appropriate to courage.” And this remark follows fast upon the heels of the more general claim that a courageous person does what he does “for the sake of the beautiful [*tou kalou heneka*] for that is the end toward which virtue is directed [*touto gar telos tês aretês*]” (*Eth. Nic.* 1115b12–13). Aristotle’s thought here—that lives marked by the virtue of courage and by virtue in general are to be sought after in order that such lives should exhibit beauty—ought to strike us as remarkable. The desire for a beautiful life or for a life of beauty—an eagerness “for to shine in the high aesthetic line” as a later wordsmith puts it—may well characterize some of us—men of “culture rare.” But what such people aim for surely is different from and subordinate to the life toward which Aristotelian virtue is directed. Though we may be happy for him if he does, we do not expect the *phronimos*, as a part of his virtue, to “walk down Piccadilly with a poppy or a lily” in his eudaimonic hand.⁴

It may be that we are called upon or desire to fashion our lives or characters in a way that could be described in terms of an artistic endeavor. But to heed such a call properly must be to read it by way of a kind of hortatory analogy. As an artist should strive to be serious but not earnest, or moving

3. Joyce 1965, 185.

4. The references are to the “fleshly poet” Reginald Bunthorne in Gilbert and Sullivan’s *Patience, or Bunthorne’s Bride* (Gilbert 1952, 164–65). I’m not suggesting that Bunthorne or Gilbert would have in fact held to the views about morality I’m here criticizing; my thought is simply that someone who in fact did hold those views would have a worrisome position to answer for.

but not sentimental, or witty but not frivolous, or detached but not cynical, so ought we to strive in the living of our lives. But all of this is about living well, that is, about living lives whose beauty may shine forth as a result of their goodness (a goodness that may indeed be read by analogy with that of a work of art), but not about making our lives beautiful and therefore good. That order of causality—beautiful and therefore good—may apply to a person's looks, or it may apply to a work of art; but for our lives, if we are not to make of them works of art, goodness must precede beauty and neither arise as a consequence of it nor be defined teleologically as a means to its accomplishment. We ought not to set out to fashion our lives and their moments as if they were primarily works of art.

Someone might want here to object that my argument begs the question since it assumes that our lives are not works of art; it posits the rejection of the very aestheticism that I'm questioning. But it seems right to do so. Even though the making of art may be distinctively human, and even though many of the features of our moral lives may share principles with our aesthetic faculties—most notably principles of conception and imagination—a life is not a work of art. It does not, for one thing, flourish by virtue of its novelty, originality, or radical individuality. It may exhibit those features in response to the necessary specificity of its circumstance, but its virtue, as Kant consistently reminds us, lies in the proper deportment that we would ask of anyone in such circumstance.⁵ So when we think of the relation of our lives to works of art, the vector of priority must go in the right direction. The primary focus of our endeavor to realize the good is our endeavor to live well and in doing so to live good lives, of which our endeavor to create good poems, for example, may, like our interest in culinary excellence, or in religious piety, or in erotic prosperity, or more generally in the creation, possession, and contemplation of beauty, be a part, but only a part. So the analogy must primarily go in that direction as well: as we endeavor to lead good lives, so do poets endeavor to create good poems or artists to paint good paintings. This is true despite the fact that the shapes and strategies of these several endeavors, though different, may exhibit the same formal requirements. And it's true despite the importance, in the formation of ourselves as deliberating moral agents, of imagination, of our fiction-making capacities, and of our ability to think of what is not, all of which faculties are literary in their further import.

Nor do I mean to deny, when I urge that the analogy needs to be structured with the vector I have here offered, the arguments of philosophers like Bernard Williams and Susan Wolf, arguments showing that what we think of as moral good is not the only human good. Morality is neither the only source of our values nor the only good of a human life, and moral value does not always trump other values (even though when it doesn't the price we pay may be significant.) I've not meant to deny these facts, but simply to assert

5. Here I'm reminded of an older and wonderfully rich essay on the difference between ethical and aesthetic considerations: Hampshire 1959, 161–69.

that there is a general sense of a good human life that is importantly not founded upon, even though it includes, aesthetic notions, notions of what it is for our lives and our activities and our possessions to be beautiful.

All of this is perhaps merely a long-winded and roundabout way—a philosophically fussy way—of saying that we ought to be uneasy with what appears to be Aristotle's claim that virtue is for the sake of the beautiful. I think we would find it decadent or something like belletristic to be directed to keep a promise because it would be lovely or in good taste to do so, or enjoined not to commit mass murder because doing so would be tacky.⁶ For us, "she acted beautifully" and "she acted rightly" do not mean the same thing, nor do "she's beautiful" and "she's virtuous."

But if we are uneasy with Aristotle's claim, this uneasiness will perforce be considerable, for the role of beauty in Aristotle's moral thought and Plato's as well is itself considerable. One way to settle this uneasiness is to reveal a causal connection between our love of beauty and our moral character. This is, for example, what Gabriel Richardson Lear sets out to do in the case of Plato in a thoughtful essay on our attraction to beauty in the *Symposium* and its connection to moral grace, and with regard to Aristotle in her essay in the Blackwell Guide to the *Ethics*.⁷ It's also what Elaine Scarry undertakes in a very general and rather different mode in the last of her Tanner Lectures.⁸ These essays elaborate interesting and what seem to me strong and compelling arguments for the moral power of our attraction to beauty.

But they do less than they might to answer a question that may escape our attention, even though in a sense it is obvious. Is the *beauty* to which these essays attribute moral power the very thing that's referred to as the *kalon* in Plato and Aristotle? That is, are the concepts of *beautiful* and *kalon* sufficiently congruent that arguments showing the moral power of beauty at the same time explain Aristotle's *tou kalou heneka*? Scarry, to be sure, is under no obligation, given the general project in which she's engaged, to establish such congruence. Nor need Lear show that the concepts are identical for the sake of elucidating the argument of the *Symposium*, or for showing the relevance of what she refers to (revealingly, as we are about to see) as the "fine" to the "good" in Aristotle.

But this question is of greater consequence than it might at first appear to be. For asking whether it's actually *beauty* that's under consideration in these texts suggests a more direct and straightforward way to settle the uneasiness of which we've spoken: we can simply avoid the translation that first leads us to think of Aristotle as a "moral aesthete." For we will only be perplexed by Aristotle's remarks to the degree that we render *kalon* as "beautiful" and the *kalon* as "beauty" or "the beautiful." And sure enough, as though precisely to avoid such perplexity, translators frequently avoid this rendering, particularly in philosophical texts. So when Aristotle writes that a courageous person endures and acts as he does *kalou heneka* (*Eth. Nic.* 1115b23), translators frequently portray him as meaning that he does so not for the sake of the

6. I think here of Walter Benjamin's characterization (2008, 41) of fascism as politics rendered aesthetic.

7. Lear 2006b, 2006a.

8. Scarry 2001, 58–125.

beautiful, but for the sake of the noble. In Rackham's translation it is "for the sake of that which is noble" that a courageous person thus acts and feels, and in the versions of Ross and Ostwald it is "for a noble end."

And if we are uncomfortable with "noble" because it suggests that excellent character is grounded in something like patrician status, as though it were for the sake of being an aristocrat that one should behave courageously, other options are available and in common use in translations of Aristotle and Plato. Here's an example: responding to his account of *sôphrosunê* as a kind of quietness, Socrates begins to subject Charmides to a standard cross-examination beginning with a question we've heard elsewhere: Isn't *sôphrosunê tôn kalôn*: isn't temperance among the things that are *kalon*? (Pl. *Chrm.* 159c). But translators do not give us: Isn't temperance beautiful? They give us, and understandably: Isn't it admirable? or fine? or honorable?

We might worry that this way of settling our uneasiness—abandoning "beautiful" as a translation of *kalon*—is like a rule for flawless reasoning that goes: When you encounter a contradiction, cross it out. Manipulating the translation may merely hide the issue rather than determining whether it's a real one. The question surely has to be whether *kalon* in fact points to something different—whether very different or only slightly different—from "beauty." But we need only to look again at Plato's text to see why we cannot translate *kalon* by "beautiful" in this passage from the *Charmides*. For the subsequent argument would make little sense if the several instances that Socrates proceeds to give of activities in which quickness and speed are more *kalon* were appealed to by virtue of their being more beautiful. The argument requires that it be a question of their being better—better, to be sure, in the sense of more admirable, but still better. Similarly, when Laches suggests that the virtue of courage may be a kind of steadfast endurance (Pl. *Lach.*, 192c). Here, again in response to Socrates, Laches asserts that courage is not merely *kalon*, but *kalliston*, one of the things most *kalon*. When Socrates then leads Laches to acknowledge that endurance can sometimes be harmful and injurious, and that it would be odd to say that something harmful and injurious is *kalon*, he must mean that it would be odd to say that something harmful and injurious is, even as the translators give us, admirable or fine.

These choices of translation reflect an appropriate concern about whether "beautiful" is a proper rendering of *kalon*. And this concern, which is at the heart of this essay, is related to our earlier questions: if beauty is for us associated with what we think of as art and nature, why is the *kalon* so little associated with these matters? And if *kalon* means "beautiful," why do Aristotle and Plato treat the *kalon* as morally normative?

Note that this same concern would be appropriate with respect to the text from Aquinas with which we opened this conversation. Is *pulchrum* an apt analogue of *kalon*? Indeed, the first thing that caused me to mistrust the suitability of Aquinas' remarks to our topic was the fanciful question: how would we translate Aquinas' thought into Greek?⁹ Would *pulchrum*, to ask

9. This question was generated, I must confess, by hearing of Andrew Wilson's translation (2004) of J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*.

a question that is the reverse of what I've been asking, be appositely Greeked as *kalon*? Perhaps it would. But we should surely be well advised if we made that choice to recall that *kalon* is as often rendered in Latin by *bonum* or *honestum* as by *pulchrum*.

Indeed, to see the complexity of the semantic field of the term *kalon*, consider these moments in Biblical translation: the *Septuagint* at Genesis 1:10, *kai eiden ho theos hoti kalon*, translates the Hebrew *vayar elohim ki tov*—"and God saw that it was good"—which becomes in the *Vulgate*, *et vidit Deus quod esset bonum*. But the *Septuagint* at Song of Songs 1:15, *idou ei kalê hê plêsion mou* translates the Hebrew *hinach yafah rayati*—"Behold you are beautiful my love"—which then becomes in the *Vulgate*, *Ecce tu pulcher es, dilecte mi*. In these locations, *kalon* is seen on one occasion consorting with "good" and on another with "beautiful," like an uncertain lover attracted to one person because of their noble character and to another because of their striking looks.

So there is a deep history of uncertainty about how properly to translate *kalon*. Here's further evidence of that uncertainty. In translating the *Hippias Major*, Paul Woodruff renders *kalon* everywhere by the English "fine," so that the question Socrates imagines and focuses upon at 287d, *ti esti touto, to kalon*, is no longer, as in Fowler's English, "what is this, the beautiful," but "what is that, the fine." This striking choice makes some of the passages feel strange. Hippias now offers not the slightly archaic observation that "a beautiful maiden is beautiful," but the somewhat slangy "a fine girl is a fine thing."

Woodruff offers this translation, I imagine, because in other contexts it is hard to support translating *kalon* as "beautiful." It may be that a wooden spoon is more desirable than a golden spoon if it's better able to perform its spoony functions. But does it follow that it's more beautiful? (Pl. *Hp. mai.* 291c). And although it's surely desirable to be able to bury one's parents with honor and dignity, wouldn't it be odd to describe that ability as beautiful? Do we want our translation to make even Socrates' imaginary interlocutor, discussing the view that "it is *kalon* for everyone to be buried by his children and to bury his parents," say that it is beautiful so to be buried and to bury? (Pl. *Hp. mai.* 293a). It may be a good thing or a desirable thing; could it be beautiful?

Here, then, is the problem: *kalon* applies both to girls and to the burial of one's parents, but for that very reason it leaves us perplexed about what to say in English. As so often in the project of translation, we feel the need for different words in different contexts. We might imagine adopting this rule: for a proper translation of *kalon*, use "beautiful" when applied to girls and boys, and "fine"—or perhaps "desirable" or "admirable," or for that matter "good"—when applied to other things, for example, to moral notions.

Commonly we describe this fact by saying that *kalon* means both "good" and "beautiful." But what do we mean when we say that a word like *kalon* means several things? And for that matter, what do we mean when we say that two things, such as the good and the beautiful, are brought together in a single notion, as in the description of Greek thought with which I

began?¹⁰ We don't mean that the word *kalon* means several things in the way in which a homonym like the English "fluke" means several things. A fluke is a fish, a flatworm, the end of an anchor, the tail of a whale, and a stroke of luck. But in a case like that, a word has several meanings because the single word form, though one, is only accidentally one. In fact, there are several words—several lexemes—each with a different etymology that through the vagaries of English orthographic history share a single lexical instantiation but do not in fact represent the same lexeme. They constitute instances of homonymy no different from more obvious homonyms such as "pear" and "pair." No one thinks to say that "pear" and "pair" constitute one word with two meanings, except in the trivial sense in which a single phone, in fact, represents two different lexemes. And this is not the sense that we have in mind when we say that *kalon* "means both" good and beautiful, that is, has two meanings. If we think that the term has these two meanings, it's not because we think of it as a kind of linguistic panel truck, able to contain more than one meaning in its commodious cargo area. It's because the meanings are related to one another; and not merely accidentally, for example through the happenstance—the metonymic flukes as it were—of linguistic history, but related to one another essentially.

Perhaps Woodruff's translation seems slightly awkward because he wants to finesse the question of such a relation. In any case, he offers "fine" not simply because "beautiful" is odd in some contexts, but also because he wants one and the same English word to consistently represent one Greek word. But why should he want that? Isn't it our standard practice, when translating, to treat differences in semantic geography between languages by variation in the target language? Think how often that happens in the complex project of translating philosophical texts. English versions of the *Charmides*, for example, struggling to capture the meaning of the difficult term *sôphrosunê*, often use three or four different English terms to represent the Greek in different contexts.

It's an understandable strategy. Apart from the fact that neither "temperance" nor "moderation" nor "self-control" nor "self-mastery" nor, God help us, "chastity" quite captures the semantic register of *sôphrosunê*, the different moments in the argument of the *Charmides* tempt us to the easy and, in one sense, more revealing expedient of rendering it here with one English term and there with another.

In one respect, this does make for more revealing local translations; the structure of each argument's moment is made perspicuous by tailoring the vernacular to its demands. But this local felicity and the clarity that it purchases are paid for dearly by the fact that the shape of Plato's overall argument is obscured. This price is always borne home to me when students, having lost their way trying to follow the argument of the dialogue, express anger upon learning that the Greek word the translator has represented to them as "temperance" is the same word he later represents to them as "virtue," and still later as "wisdom." A parallel difficulty is generated by English versions of

10. Aersten 1996, 341.

Euripides' *Hippolytus*, in which an understandable variation in the translation of the same key term obscures the central thematic opposition between *erôs* and *sôphrosunê*. More globally, students experience frustration on discovering different English renderings of the same term in different dialogues, for example, the different English translations of *sôphrosunê* in standard editions of the *Republic* and of the *Phaedo*. The same well-intentioned strategy, with the same baffling and frustrating consequences for the Greekless reader, can be witnessed in the wide range of words used to translate key terms—*ousia*, *ti esti*, *to ti ên einai*, *kath'hauto*—in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, a variability that never ceases to confuse students.¹¹

We can therefore understand and even applaud the desire for consistency underlying Woodruff's choice. And given that constraint, "fine" is perhaps preferable to "beautiful," a woman being "fine" (we may need to amend: "fine looking") preferable to our ability to bury our parents being "beautiful," even when we bury them with dignity and honor. But although we might be comfortable with the unexpectedness of that choice for *kalon* in a dialogue like *Hippias Major*, which is not among the most widely read of the dialogues, it's harder to contravene the tradition of "beauty" and "beautiful" in Platonic texts more firmly established in our reading canon. So it is that in Woodruff's translation of the *Symposium*, "beauty" is everywhere; and at 204b, Woodruff translates the claim that wisdom is among the things that are *kalliston* with the words: "and wisdom is extremely beautiful."

Despite what surrounds these words in the *Symposium*, this claim should strike us as odd. Wisdom is not beautiful. It's not ugly; but it's not beautiful. It's a good thing, and being beautiful is one way of being good; but it's not the only way, and it is not wisdom's way. Helen, on the other hand, is beautiful. It is indeed a person—Helen or Tadzio or any of the others whom we lust after or dream of or are merely pleased to admire—it is a person that is above all the subject, and the shared subject, of the predicates "beautiful" and *kalon*.¹² "Person" here embraces in its meaning countenance, aspect, carriage, and body, including body parts, as most famously recognized in the Renaissance blazon, and as Greek recognizes in *Khrusêis kalliparêos*, fair-cheeked Chryseis of *Iliad* fame (Hom. *Il.* 1.143), or Callipygian Aphrodite, Venus of the beauteous butt.

A sunrise over Lake Michigan may also be beautiful, or the bucolic view of a meadow (as well as its representation in "cold pastoral"). Giotto's frescoes

11. The key technical concept *kath'hauto*, for example, is characteristically rendered by a bewildering array of terms and expressions. "Per se," "essential," "in itself," "necessary," "intrinsic" all confront the English reader of the *Metaphysics* with no clue that there is a single Greek phrase that lies behind these terms, and therefore a conceptual thread, however complex, that ties together the arguments in which they appear. Ross, in a footnote students of mine have found both amusing and infuriating, at least has the decency to warn his readers; appended to his rendering "*propter se*" in his translation of *Metaphysics* 1029b14, is the following note: "It seems convenient here to translate thus the phrase translated in v. 18 as 'in virtue of itself';" "Convenient?" one of my students shouted in wild accusing apostrophe to Ross, "not convenient for me!" We can sympathize; for the thread of Aristotle's argument is concealed by Ross's practice. I've written about this issue in a forthcoming essay entitled "Translating Being."

12. It is because persons like Helen are the paradigm subjects of beauty that the scientific unit for the measurement of beauty, as defined by the Bureau International des Poids et Mesures, is the *millihelen*, the amount of beauty sufficient to launch exactly one ship.

in the Scrovegni are beautiful; I find the andante of Schubert's E flat Piano Trio spectacularly beautiful. Even someone's act of charity, or expression of clarity, or (as in "beautifully explained" or "articulated" or "dealt with") a certain display of wisdom might be said to be beautiful. But not wisdom itself. It's this very fact that underlies Woodruff's reluctance to translate *kalon* in the *Hippias* by "beautiful." And it seems to me that in this he's right.

We found ourselves compelled by the supposition that "beautiful" translates *kalon* to attribute to Aristotle the use of "beautiful" as a term of moral praise; now we find ourselves compelled by this supposition to attribute to Plato the odd and ungainly view that wisdom is beautiful. This may indeed be Plato's view, and in the end, I will suggest that something like it indeed is. But first the obvious strategy is once again to question the felicity of the translation. And once again there therefore appear to be contrary constraints attending our translation of *kalon* and contrary practices that result. Sometimes it seems perverse or at least silly to use terms of beauty in translating *kalon*; sometimes it seems perverse or at least silly not to do so.

If we need an instance of how odd the former practice can seem—a practice that insists on the appropriateness of the term "beautiful" as a translation of *kalon*, avoiding alternatives such as "fine," "noble," or "admirable," as well as strategies of variation, such as using "fine" here and "beautiful" there—we have the courageous and principled translations of Joe Sachs.¹³ Here's Sachs, in a discussion of the *Nicomachean Ethics* in which he explains and justifies his translation:

Aristotle says plainly and repeatedly what it is that moral virtue is for the sake of, but the translators are afraid to give it to you straight. Most of them say it is the noble. One of them says it is the fine. If these answers went past you without even registering, that is probably because they make so little sense. To us, the word *noble* probably connotes some sort of high-minded naiveté, something hopelessly impractical. . . . The word *fine* is of the same sort but worse, suggesting some flimsy artistic soul who couldn't endure rough treatment. . . . The word the translators are afraid of is *to kalon*, the beautiful. . . . What the person of good character loves with right desire and thinks of as an end with right reason must first be perceived as beautiful.¹⁴

As we can hear, Sachs is aware of the fact that his choice will make him seem a maverick. But he thinks that Aristotle's use of *kalon* is "not some special usage of the Greek language, but one that speaks to us directly, if the translators let it."¹⁵ He also thinks that it's represented analogously in English. So:

In the most ordinary circumstances, any mother might say to a misbehaving child, in plain English, "don't be so ugly." And any of us, parent, friend, or grudging enemy, might on occasion say to someone else, "that was a beautiful thing you did."¹⁶

That's not a mother whose mothering (or at any rate whose discursive mothering) I find, as it were, attractive; and the difficulty is manifest in her use of "ugly" where "mean" or "selfish" or, simply, "bad" is what's wanted.

13. Sachs 2002.

14. Sachs 2005.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

And I can neither hear nor find evidence for “beautiful” as a paradigmatic term of moral evaluation. To my ear, when we tell a friend that what he did was beautiful, we recognize some behavior of his as supererogatory or unexpected; in any case, I don’t hear it as an expression of simple moral praise for having done the right thing. But linguistic intuitions undoubtedly differ, and what seems standard to one person to another may seem someone’s idiolect. I mean to say only that Plato and Aristotle’s use of *kalon* as a moral predicate is standard and unmarked and that our use of “beautiful” as a moral predicate is not. Claims that it is should make us uneasy, like the claim that mass murder is tacky.

Here’s the question that once again emerges from these observations about translation: what is indicated by the predicate term *kalon*, applicable to the fair *tuchis* of a goddess, as in Callipygian Aphrodite, and at the same time to wisdom, and how ought we to translate the term? The first case seems to cry out for “beautiful” (though as I’ve implicitly suggested, we could imagine Woodruff offering: she’s got a fine ass, that goddess), but the second calls for some inflection of “good,” and “beautiful” seems oddly inappropriate. Wisdom is something we value, something precious, something worthy of our admiration and striving, something estimable. It is decidedly good; but it’s not beautiful, nor for that matter ugly. Wisdom simply doesn’t look like anything.

I’ve offered these observations not as advice to translators, but by way of indicating how complex and therefore difficult their task is and what we might learn from that fact. The commentary and the classroom make it possible for us, when we’re not translating and have at our disposal a more expansive discourse, to explain this complexity to readers and students. At this point a kind of Wittgensteinian “say what you will” might emerge; “beautiful” will work just fine, as will “fine,” and as will whatever, so to speak, fits the meter. For we will have understood the central point: *kalon* and “beautiful” share enough semantic ground that it’s not unreasonable to think of one as the translation of the other. But the contours of their semantic fields differ considerably, and we need to keep always before us an awareness of the differences.

So if I seem to endorse Woodruff’s practice in the *Hippias* rather than his practice in the *Symposium*, it’s not because I think it would in general be wrong to translate *kalon* by “beautiful.” It’s rather in the hope that in contemplating the practice of avoiding “beautiful,” we might be led to rethink our reading of the philosophers. Such rethinking should affect our understanding of Plato’s arguments about the *kalon*, particularly in the *Symposium*, and it should prevent us from ascribing to Aristotle an aestheticism that, I have suggested, ought to make us uneasy.

We may nevertheless be inclined to think of the issues I’ve tried to generate with respect to *kalon* as problems specific to the task we face as translators, especially when we set out, as every philosophical generation must, to present past texts in a modern vernacular. They’re challenging issues, and as I’ve hinted, have no perfect solution, but it’s easy to see them as not significantly different from the tasks facing someone who wishes to give to English readers a sense of the imagery, diction, and semantic complexity of

the *Duino Elegies* or of the stylistic and rhetorical nuances of *War and Peace* (think of the recent pitched battles among translators of that text!).

Those concerns, however, reflect a translator's project of representing in another language a very specific cultural and literary moment, a highly particular aesthetic artifact, connected specifically to Rilke and Tolstoy; and even this project requires a more elaborate discourse, that is, something in addition to a translation, for a complete analytic representation. The issues of translation at which we've been looking are less literarily specific, and therefore reveal deeper cultural and philosophical patterns of meaning. The impossibility of finding, for *ousia* and the complex of associated terms I mentioned earlier, a simple and unelaborated translation that might map the ontology of the ancient world onto current philosophical parlance reveals more general differences between ancient and modern philosophical imaginations, and not simply between ancient and modern philosophical lexicons.

But even this case (despite the fantasies of those of us who enjoy hardcore ontology as a topic of breakfast conversation) is finally of a technical and therefore somewhat parochial interest. The impossibility, however, of finding an exact mapping of *sôphrosunê* reveals differences between the cultural and moral discourse of our world and that of ancient Greece much more general in scope. It's those differences that make Plato's *Charmides* and Euripides' *Hippolytus* so hard to translate, and make that fact so interesting. And the difficulty we've been discussing, the question of how to render *kalon*, may reveal even more general differences.

I've tried to suggest broadly what those differences might be. They leave me with the urge, an urge that I will of course resist, to say that the Greeks had no concept of *beauty*. But this much is right: the concept of *beauty* is sufficiently different from that of the *kalon* to make the urge understandable. We've noticed merely these two features of our notion of *beauty* not found in a comparable sense in the notion of the *kalon*: (1) *Beauty* critically involves the world of Art;¹⁷ (2) *Beauty* critically involves the world of nature.

Greeks assuredly recognized the beauty of art and of nature, but they didn't centrally link it to the beauty of the *kalon*. So in Philostratus' *Imagines*, to take one example, *kalon* words appear only in descriptions of the subject matter of the art, not in descriptions of the art.¹⁸ The concepts of beauty and of the *kalon* share a central and important applicability to the countenance, aspect, carriage, and bodies of persons—boys and girls, men and women; but at that point their semantic courses diverge. Actions, institutions, virtues, and the like were said by them to be *kala*; paintings, musical compositions, sunsets, and the like are said by us to be beautiful.

The concept of *kalon*, then, is different from that of *beautiful*, so that it may be misleading to translate *kalon* as "beautiful."¹⁹ But as I've also indicated,

17. I say that in spite of, or perhaps I should say as is strikingly revealed by, the efforts of many people, chronicled for example by Arthur Danto, to divorce beauty from products of artistic activity.

18. I owe this observation to my colleague Bret Mulligan.

19. This may be the time to note that in this essay I draw this distinction with very bold strokes, and I consequently overdraw the differences, on which account Gabriel Richardson Lear properly takes me to

it would be a will-o'-the-wisp to suppose that somewhere there is a translation that's just right. Maybe "fine" or "noble" or "desirable" will sometimes be preferable to "beautiful," and "good" often will; in some cases it will be preferable to use one term sometimes and sometimes another. Basically, however, the dream of an ideal translation, like the more general desire to reproduce the semantic field of one language in another or to hold back the hermeneutical dislocation that comes when we move from one language to another, is vain.

But as philosophers and interpreters, we enjoy a luxurious prolixity that is not afforded the translator. That fact has consequences. For example, if we come to realize that for Plato, love's proper object, that toward which *erôs* is per se directed as toward its appropriate end, is *kalon*, or is indeed the *kalon* itself, we should feel no inclination to infer that Plato believes love's object to be what we would call "beautiful." We will have acquired evidence that for Plato the object of love is cousin-german to the beautiful, that it is admirable or fine or noble, or indeed that it is good. We may in good conscience continue to speak of the argument as pointing us in the direction of "the beautiful," but only if we take pains to elaborate a nuanced sense of beauty, a sense that captures the subtleties of the *kalon*. If we do, we may then be able to understand why Socrates describes wisdom as among the *kallista* and why he begins the argument in the *Charmides* with the obvious point that *sôphrosunê* is a *kalon* thing. And if we do, we may have taken steps toward learning an art that is at the very core of our project of scholarship. This is the art of recovering our ancestors—an art that will allow us to see Plato's view that wisdom is beautiful as other than odd and ungainly and to understand what leads Aristotle to assert that virtuous action is for the sake of the beautiful.

This paper is therefore a prolegomenon; for the really interesting and hard work remains to be done. That is the work required when we go beyond the facile use of "beautiful" here and "fine" there, or beyond the easy acknowledgment that *kalon* somehow "means both good and beautiful," and ask the question: how so? How are these predicates connected in the concept of the *kalon*?

To ask such a question is analogous to asking the question: how can quietness, self-control, modesty, self-awareness, chastity, and temperance comprise the notion of *sôphrosunê*? What is the shape of such a concept, able to contain all these disparate and self-conflicting features? Notice that this question is a characteristically Platonic question, the kind of question that is typically entertained in and emerges from the dialogues, particularly the early Socratic dialogues.

I offer here only gestures in the direction of answering this question, of situating, as I put it, the *kalon* relative to the good and the beautiful. The

task in her commentary. In thinking of a line from Gerard Manley Hopkins that follows the line she cites ("plotted and pieced, fold, fallow, and plow"), I'm struck by Hopkins' use of beauty as a predicate of God: "He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change" (Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Pied Beauty*, line 15 [1948, 74]). "Beauty" in that line represents exactly the kind of metonymy of which I speak disparagingly, the metonymy that allows "beauty" to characterize god, persons' characters, and perhaps even things like wisdom. My parsimonious account endangers that kind of metonymy; Lear is much more generous about those extended uses, and I think she is right. It would be wrong not to recognize how ample our understanding of the beautiful is. My stinginess is purely tactical; I hope by a kind of semantic frugality to make possible a clearer view of where the centers of these concepts lie.

gestures are given direction by our earlier thoughts about wisdom. Trying to evoke the oddness of speaking of wisdom as beautiful, I proposed that although it's something we value, something precious and worthy of our admiration and of our striving, something "good," wisdom is not "beautiful." It's the sort of thing, I hastened to add, which though good is neither beautiful nor ugly. It simply, I suggested by way of explanation, doesn't *look like anything*.

This explanation works, I think, because *beauty* is in some sense specific to the modalities of sense, particularly to sight and hearing, or perhaps we should say to the modalities of the sensible appearance of those things said to be beautiful. These are the things that have to them a look and a sound that when pleasing constitute their beauty: *pulchra dicuntur quae visa placent*, as Aquinas puts it in the discussion with which we began. It's no surprise then that beauty lives in the realm of the *aesthetic*, that is to say, the sensible.

Perhaps, then, this is what we want to say: because wisdom is good but not visible, it can be said to be *kalon* but not beautiful. For it has no characteristic look or sound. And just so with other things that Plato characterizes as *kalon* but that we were reluctant to describe as beautiful, the virtues in the *Charmides* and *Laches*, for example; perhaps that reluctance is connected to their not having a look or sound, to their not being visible or heard.

But this connection to visibility—the fact that beautiful things are seen and have looks—is true, as we just noted, of entities described by Aquinas as *pulchra*. And indeed Plotinus makes the connection for *kalon*, asserting that what is *kalon* presents itself chiefly to sight (*Enn.* 1.6.1). How then could it be thought that having a look or a sound marks the beautiful in contrast to the *kalon*? So although it might seem promising to think of beauty in terms of visibility and analogous modalities of the sensible appearance of things—in terms of their look, sound, and the like—it's difficult to see the promise as amounting to much.

Perhaps it would help if we were to attend specifically to the notion of appearance that is implicit in this account of "the modalities of sensible appearance." If we think specifically of appearance as presentation to subjective awareness, we may find within that concept some quality that will offer a more fruitful connection to the *kalon* and to the beautiful. To do this, I suggest that we think of Plato's *Gorgias*, a dialogue that highlights the opposition between the *kalon* and the *aischron*. It's easy to understand that opposition simply as an opposition between the beautiful and the ugly. But such a simple understanding overlooks a fact made clear in the *Gorgias*, the fact that the fundamental meaning of *aischron* has less to do with something's being ugly than with its being shameful.²⁰ What the argument of the *Gorgias* reveals is that these concepts are together importantly situated in the register of honor and shame, and what this means more generally is that they are in the register of our appearance to one another. (Recall how attractive

20. I could indeed indicate the central argument of this essay by the tempting though oversimplified syllogism: *kalon* and *aischron* are opposites, *aischron* means "ugly-cum-shameful," so *kalon* as its opposite means something like "beautiful-cum-admirable."

it was to translate *kalon* by “admirable.”) We could say (and here Plotinus is again helpful) that the *kalon* is to the good as “appearance” is to “being.”

To think of the *kalon* this way is to situate it in the realm of what we might figuratively call the “rhetoric of being,” that is, the realm of being’s presentation to our subjective awareness. We might say more generally that the *kalon* and the beautiful alike invoke the realm of the phenomenal. The fact, then, that a cardinal term of Plato and Aristotle for what is commendable is rooted in the phenomenal reveals something important about their ontology. Or perhaps we should say instead: it reveals something important about their phenomenology, not so much, that is, about their understanding of being as about their understanding of appearance. And maybe this is still not right; maybe we should say that it reveals something important about their understanding of the relation between ontology and phenomenology, the relation, in other words, between how things are and how they make their appearance.

Here’s why I think that’s true, and how it bears upon our considerations, both about beauty and about the *kalon*. Our understanding of the nature of appearance and its relation to being, the role that appearance plays in what I’ve called the “rhetoric of being,” affects our attitude toward beauty. One reason that we’re so often unsure about the appropriateness of valuing beauty is that we tend to think of beauty in cosmetic terms, as though it concerned always and only a superficial façade of being, separable from its inner nature, a mask that being wears.

But the reason we hold that view of beauty has to do with the view we hold of appearance. It is because we are inclined to conceive of appearance as antithetical to being, or at least as independent and separate from it, that we are inclined to regard beauty as the cosmetic epiphenomenon of being. For we are then led to read appearance with what is at best a hermeneutics of indifference, as though appearance were equally likely to represent being with or without fidelity, as though it were an independent mask worn by being that may or may not resemble its true face. At worst, that hermeneutics becomes a hermeneutics of suspicion, in which appearance spells in its nature the distortion and deformation of what is, as though appearance were essentially being’s falsification.

But for Plato, appearance is not something separate from being, but simply the presentation of what is to a subject: being, as we say, making its appearance. It is not therefore essentially deceptive; the phenomenological is not standardly the illusion of being. It becomes illusory only in the context of something going wrong, a failure of uptake. Standardly, appearance is being’s presence to subjectivity: face not as façade, but as organic expression. The *kalon* in turn reveals the integrity of being and its proper appearance; it constitutes the virtue of proper and expressive appearance. Why this is the source of pleasure is another topic, but it is. What appears well, we might say, appears in the mode of beauty.²¹

21. It is a separate, although related, question why we take pleasure in the consideration of appearance as such, why the project of capturing, say, the look of things delights us, as does our ability to explore the forms and limits of its plasticity. Thinking thus of art as the production and systematic refiguring of appearance may help explain its connection to beauty.

It is easy for us to become confused about these matters, since in our thinking appearance is so often confined to mere appearance, and this partial and misleading view then foisted upon Plato. We read deeply and with understanding Kant, who shows us why the phenomenal is the realm of the objective, and what it is for an object to make its appearance. But we then casually embrace, and project upon our ancestors, a Gnostic vision according to which the phenomenal, far from being the site in which being makes its appearance, is instead a theater of illusion and false semblance.

Such an understanding constantly insinuates itself into our discourse, both about being and appearance, and about beauty. Here's a small example, from Alexander Nehamas's recent book on beauty. Nehamas is talking about Plato and writes as follows:

Let's turn instead to the problem that appearance, according to yet another tradition that goes back to Plato, is the foremost object of desire, especially desire of the most questionable kind rooted in sense and sensuality. The desires elicited by how things look, and not by what they really are, aim at pleasures that Plato says are neither "true" nor "pure."²²

This last sentence perverts Plato in a thoroughly traditional and wholly disastrous way. Nehamas links beauty with desire and therefore with appearance, but through his phrasing makes the beauty of appearance inevitably cosmetic. Compare, in order to see this, how subtly but importantly different it would have been had Nehamas written: "The desires elicited by how things look, when this is not what they really are."

What we need is a proper rhetoric of being that shows appearance as the presentation of being, a presentation that can but need not betray, and beauty as the goodness of such appearance. It's true for us that beauty is the good of appearance, but for us, appearance too often is only about the superficial look. Of this fact there are consequences. The central locale of the beautiful in our culture is attested to by the beauty parlor and the beauty pageant. We then say that one shouldn't make a choice of, say, office manager as though it were a beauty contest; to do so would be to engage in beautyism. Try now to imagine, if you can, Plato or Aristotle saying that one shouldn't choose managers, or senators, or vice presidents on the grounds of their being *kaloi*. Why in the world not?

Understood properly, the relationship of the beauty represented by the *kalon* to the good thus reveals the relationship of appearance to being. A thing's being *kalon* is not a cosmetic supplement, a surface that is painted on; it is the shining forth of the thing's nature. The *kalon* is, then, not something in addition to the good, and so to speak on its surface. It is the mode of the good that shows forth; it is the splendor of the appearance of the good. The *kalon*, we might say, is the splendid virtue of appearance.

So the argument I've proposed is finally a simple one. Beauty is a mode of the good, as the *kalon* is of the *agathon*. In this regard, the beautiful and the *kalon* are analogous modes of a general and catholic desirability, a desirability that marks not merely what we find ourselves desiring, but rather that which is to be desired, that which is desired, as it were, "in the space of reasons." But although the two concepts are congruent in this way, they

22. Nehamas 2007, 19.

are not identical. For the beautiful and the *kalon* are marked as the desirable in the mode of appearance; they depend upon presentation of the good to subjective awareness. And as our understanding of appearance has shifted, so have the beautiful and the *kalon* come to exhibit the differences that I have tried to bring out, differences that make it problematic that “beautiful” should serve as a translation for *kalon*. Problematic, but at the same time, as I’ve argued, understandable, and perhaps even on occasion (with an appropriate *caveat lector*) the best game in town. This understandability may not be very helpful, one way or another, for the enterprise of translation. But it is of no small significance for our understanding of Plato’s and Aristotle’s moral theories.

Think of the fact that for Plato and Aristotle alike the moral sphere is governed by a principle so clearly cousin-german to the beautiful. And when we recall that it has a foundation, shared by the *kalon* and the beautiful alike, in the faces of the young and fair, we will recognize this principle as specifically erotic—rooted in what we are attracted to. We may then find ourselves inclined to think that the moral theories of Aristotle and Plato alike are essentially informed by their allegiance to a notion of the good rooted in what we are attracted to rather than to a notion of the good rooted in a concept of the right.

We may then imagine that this is what a robust pre-Kantian moral theory must look like. A good life on such a theory is not characterized by desire that has been made subordinate to reason, a reason that alone enjoys a view of the right. It is characterized by desire that has come to be informed by reason and is thus right in its own right. We are therefore called upon, ideally, not to act appropriately in response to our desires, but to desire appropriately and to act in accordance with those appropriate desires. (Just when you thought you’d heard the last of *sôphrosunê*.) So it is in an important sense our view of the beautiful—understanding the beautiful as the intentional object of proper desire—that governs our moral life.

That’s a good way for a moral theory to look, and when we have such a vision, it may present itself to us, appropriately, as a prophylactic against a mistaken assimilation of Greek moral theory to a morality of the right or of duty. Seeing the place of the *kalon* in Aristotle’s thought supports that corrective impulse. But to recognize what I have here been suggesting—that the *kalon* is a somewhat different modality of the good from the beautiful as we picture it—should lead us to recall how important it is for Greek moral theory that our desires be appropriate. We may then want to temper somewhat our sense of a contrast between a morality of attraction and a morality of the right.

But even with that caveat in mind, the beauty of the *kalon*, if we may finally call it that, reminds us, by its radiance, of important things about our philosophers. It reminds us that Plato and Aristotle alike invite us to understand the goodness of the world as, among other things, phenomenal; that is, they invite us to a vision of a world of splendor and radiance that is there for us to behold and love (though, of course, if we wish to behold and love it appropriately, we are required to understand it, that is, to see it clearly for what it is.) That’s why for Aristotle a good life culminates in the divine bliss of an awareness of spectacle that he nominates *theôria*, just as for Plato, phi-

losophy, beginning with the love of theater, is, in its refined form, still a love of spectacle. "Who then do you say are the true philosophers?" Socrates is asked, and he replies: "Those who love the spectacle of truth" (*tous tês alêtheias philotheamonas*, Pl. *Resp.* 475e). So although a philosophical life may in its more workaday moments be importantly informed by a love of wisdom, it both begins with and culminates in a love of clearly seen splendor, a love of beauty.

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RESPONSE TO KOSMAN

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What does *to kalon* mean? And why on earth do we have such a hard time answering this question? On the one hand, it seems to mean beautiful not just because we find it on vases and in poetry describing alluring young bodies, bodies that we find natural to describe as beautiful, but also because there has been a more or less continuous philosophical discussion beginning with the nature of the *kalon* and ending with the nature of the beautiful. As Aryeh Kosman has reminded us, Aquinas begins his discussion of the *pulchrum* by referring to the Neoplatonic Dionysius' account of the *kalon*; later, we find that Shaftesbury's theory of beauty is indebted to what Aristotle says about the *kalon* in poetry, ethics, and nature (which, interestingly, he treats as continuous with what Cicero says about the *honestum*!), as well as to the Cambridge Platonists.¹ These philosophers certainly seem to be thinking about the same thing.² At least, the later philosophers seem to take themselves to be talking about the same thing as the earlier ones. So when *kalon* appears in ancient philosophical texts, it is often translated as "beautiful." And often that seems appropriate.

On the other hand, it often does not seem appropriate to translate this way. Kosman has offered a host of marvelous examples: figwood soup spoons; burying one's parents and being buried by one's children in turn; wisdom and, the most troubling, morally virtuous action. As he explains, although "the concepts of beauty and of the *kalon* share a central and important applicability to the countenance . . . of persons," after this point "their semantic courses diverge" (see p. 351 above). Whereas we go on to treat landscapes and paintings and music as central cases of beauty, the Greeks turn instead to actions, institutions, and virtues as paradigm cases of the *kalon*. The fact

1. Shaftesbury [1711] 1999; see esp. p. 415 n. 25 and p. 353 n. 12.

2. Although there are differences or disagreements among these philosophers about what the *kalon* / *pulchrum* / beautiful is, a common thread is the idea that this property is a sort of orderliness and proportionality of form of which a spectator is immediately aware and which gives pleasure. There are significant differences in the way these philosophers link their concept to the good, but it is notable that they all *do* link it to goodness in some way or other; this is so even of Shaftesbury, who is evidently talking about what we call beauty.