



Foreword

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BEAUTY, HARMONY, AND THE GOOD

FOREWORD

ELIZABETH ASMIS

This special issue of *Classical Philology* consists of papers and responses presented at a conference on “Beauty, Harmony, and the Good” that was sponsored by the Chicago Area Colloquium on Ancient Greek and Roman Philosophy in October 2008. There is one exception. Part of Irwin’s conference paper “Beauty and Morality in Aristotle” will be published elsewhere (see Irwin forthcoming); another part was rewritten for this issue, with the title “The Sense and Reference of *Kalon* in Aristotle.” Ford comments on this new paper in his response.

The papers address a puzzle that continues to intrigue students of ancient ethics: Why do ancient Greek philosophers designate moral goodness as *kalon*? What does beauty, as evoked by the term *kalon*, have to do with morality? Plato and Aristotle frequently refer to the good as *kalon*. An especially weighty example, cited by Kosman, is Aristotle’s pronouncement that the *kalon* is the end (*telos*) of virtue (*Eth. Nic.* 1115b12–13). The Stoics argued that everything good is *kalon*, and conversely. It is extremely puzzling, however, how everything we regard as beautiful could be morally good. Is there, then, a fundamental difference between what Greek philosophers meant by *kalon* and what we mean by “beautiful”? Or did the Greek philosophers recognize something about the conjunction of beauty and moral goodness that deserves to be widely recognized even now?

The first three papers in this issue focus on the meaning of *kalon* in relation to moral goodness. Kosman (“Beauty and the Good: Situating the *Kalon*”) takes us on a panoramic journey that includes Genesis, wooden spoons and pretty girls, Thomas Aquinas, and Joyce’s *Dedalus*. Kosman proposes that *kalon* invokes the realm of the phenomenal, understood not as mere appearance (as distinct from reality), but as the appearance, or presentation, of being. Lear agrees that *kalon* is a feature of appearances, but suggests that *kalon* is closer to the ordinary sense of beautiful than Kosman allows. In ordinary usage, Lear argues, “beautiful” and *kalon* apply to the same ontological categories.

Turning to individual philosophers, Barney focuses on Plato, Irwin on Aristotle. Barney (“Notes on Plato on the *Kalon* and the Good”) argues that “good” picks out the property of being useful, whereas *kalon* is used to commend something as orderly or fitting. She proposes “admirable” as a translation for *kalon*. In her response, Gottlieb suggests that, just like a winning chess combination, a virtuous character may be beautiful even without being heard or seen. Irwin argues, with special reference to the virtue of magnificence,

that Aristotle assigns two distinct meanings to *kalon*: beauty and moral goodness. He proposes “fine,” “admirable,” and perhaps “fitting” as suitable translations of *kalon*, but not “beautiful.” His respondent, Ford, argues that *kalon* lies in the public character of virtue.

These brief summaries cannot do justice to the wealth of insights and intricacy of arguments contained in these papers and responses. It appears, though, that there is something of a consensus, together with a range of differences. There is rough agreement that *kalon* involves both orderliness and admiration. There is disagreement, on the other hand, on the extent to which the term “beauty” may be applied to moral goodness. Irwin rejects any overlap in the case of Aristotle; Lear suggests that moral character can be described as beautiful. One solution to the problem of *kalon* is to separate off beauty from moral goodness, as Irwin does in the case of Aristotle; a very different solution is to associate *kalon* more closely with our ordinary understanding of beauty.

Both Plato and Aristotle associate harmony and proportion with beauty. They also view the morally good soul as harmonious or well proportioned. According to Adam, as cited by Gottlieb, Plato’s imagery suggests that “Character is the Music of the Soul.” Does musical theory, then, perhaps hold a key to how beauty and moral goodness might be linked? Does the study of mathematics help? Or is it not breathtaking enough just to discover what musicians and mathematicians thought beautiful?

In his paper “Mathematical Beauty Made Audible: Musical Aesthetics in Ptolemy’s *Harmonics*,” Barker suggests that what many Greek writers admired most about music was not the melodies that they heard, but the formal structure of the composition. At this level, “musical and mathematical perfection coincide.” To illustrate the connection, Barker analyzes Ptolemy’s preference for simple proportions in his *Harmonics*. In his response, Huffman adds further insights about the Pythagoreans and notes that Plato opted for complexity rather than simplicity in at least some cases. Netz (“What Did Greek Mathematicians Find Beautiful?”) offers a two-pronged approach: on the one hand, there is something beautiful in the telling of mathematics, that is, the telling of a story that reveals a surprising result; on the other hand, there is a beauty that resides in the simplicity of the proportions, which differ from those of Pythagorean musical theory. Building on Netz’s interpretation, Lee argues that in the third division (*dianoia*) of Plato’s divided line, visible diagrams are configured in such a way as to point to an invisible structure in the same way as mathematical diagrams indicate an underlying structure.

To round out the inquiry, Kraut takes us beyond the ancient Greeks and focuses on just the good, apart from beauty or harmony. Taking as his topic the good itself, or intrinsic goodness, he asks whether the good is something absolute, having no relationship to anything else, or relational—“good for” someone or something. He argues for the latter sense. In her response, Nussbaum disagrees with Kraut’s evaluation of the human good in relation to that of other animals. In her view, Kraut is not justified in assigning superior value to the human good.

The papers and responses offer new answers as well as raise new questions. Inevitably, they cover just a tiny part of the territory, while pointing to other areas to be explored. Two important areas that are barely touched on are ancient Greek and Roman art, as well as the entire field of literature. How is the term *kalon* used in reference to works of art or literature? And is there something moral about the beauty exemplified by them? And what about nature? How great is the divide between ancient and modern views of natural beauty? There are also large areas of ancient philosophy that invite closer attention, among them the Presocratics, Stoics, and Neoplatonists. Cicero, too, has a place in this discourse as an eyewitness who rightly prided himself on his linguistic skills. Does his translation of *kalon* as *honestum* owe more to Roman values or to Greek thought? It is hoped that this collection of papers will stimulate many more contributions on the topics of beauty, harmony, and the good, whether separately or in conjunction.

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