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Reponse to Irwin

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refer to beauty and to other types of *kalon* without any recognition of different senses.

If, therefore, we are to do justice to Aristotle's use of *kalon* and to his arguments about different kinds of *kalon* things, we should probably prefer a uniform translation that does not suggest one type of *kalon* rather than another. Unsuitable uniform translations include "beautiful," "right," "noble," and all cognates of "honor." Suitable translations include "fine" and "admirable," and perhaps "fitting" (to mark the close connection between *kalon* and *prepon*). This translation expresses the fact that Aristotle does not seem to think we equivocate if we say that a bird's plumage and a brave action are both *kala*. At the same time, it does not imply that different things are *kalon* because of some one property that makes them all *kalon*. We have noticed the different properties that Aristotle takes to make different kinds of things *kalon*.

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## RESPONSE TO IRWIN

ANTON FORD

Terence Irwin rejects the idea that Plato and Aristotle hold what he calls "an aesthetic conception of moral values."<sup>1</sup> One reason they might be thought to hold such a conception is that they frequently use the word *kalon* in reference to virtuous action, and this is a word that they use elsewhere in reference to the beauty of a statue or a poem. Their readiness to use *kalon* in both sorts of context might lead one to suppose that Plato and Aristotle think of virtuous action quite differently from modern philosophers—as though it were an artistic performance and so properly the object of aesthetic judgment.

If Irwin is worried that such a conception threatens to trivialize serious things, then I do share his concern: life is not art; and art is not life; and questions of justice are not to be settled by taste. Nevertheless, I think there is a gulf, marked by the word *kalon*, between the ethics of Plato and Aristotle and that of some (but not all) modern thinkers. And furthermore, I think this is what accounts for the sense that the ethics of Plato and Aristotle has a whiff of the aesthetic about it.

In certain strains of modern thought—but especially in those with a Stoic or Christian influence—virtue is seen as a private affair. On this conception, virtue requires that you do good for others, but not that you care what they think, either about the good that you do, or about you yourself. In particular, you need not care, one way or the other, whether these others *see* your virtue: virtuous action, though it is directed *at* them, is not directed *to* them; so nothing essential is missing if they happen not to notice. And on this con-

1. See p. 382 above and compare Irwin forthcoming.

ception, it is not just that you *may* be indifferent to the good opinion of others, but that you positively *ought* to be: wishing for it is a violation of the Christian virtue of modesty as well as the Stoic prohibition against caring about that which is not in your control. And indifference on the part of the agent to the good opinion of others is matched on the part of others by indifference to the agent. Meanwhile indifference of others is typified by their declining to “pass judgment” on you. The quality of your character is said to be “none of their business,” a phrase that suggests not only that it is not for them to judge, but also that it is really not their problem. It does not concern others whether you are good or bad, except insofar as your character poses a threat to them. Whether you are good or bad is, as they say, between you and your conscience, or, if you like, between you and your god.

This privatized conception of virtue is fairly common in modern ethics, but it is utterly foreign to Plato and Aristotle. According to them, whether one is good or bad *is* the business of others, and it *is* for them to judge, and a virtuous person is *not* indifferent to what other people think. That is because, for Plato and Aristotle, ethical life is political, and therefore also public. It is life shared in common with others and properly lived before their eyes.<sup>2</sup>

That which is public has by rights an audience. So if virtue is a public affair, it is destined for acclaim, and not (or not just) the favor of heaven. To say that human virtue is properly addressed to other human beings, in the hope they should think well of it, is not to imply that all the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players. But it does suggest that certain very abstract features of aesthetic experience are characteristic of ethical life.

One such feature, noted by Kant, is that aesthetic experience cannot be explained by reference to the beautiful object alone. Beauty, for Kant, is not a quality inhering in the object itself, considered in isolation; it belongs to a pole of a bipolar relation between the subject and object of judgment.<sup>3</sup> Thus, aesthetic experience requires a certain otherness, or opposition, between the appraiser and the appraised. A second important feature, also noted by Kant, is that a favorable aesthetic judgment is accompanied by a feeling of pleasure in the appraiser.

These two features of aesthetic experience—both the opposition of the appraiser and the appraised, and the pleasure or displeasure of the appraiser—are characteristic of ethical life in the thought of Plato and Aristotle. Both philosophers emphasize that virtue is naturally such as to please those by whom it is recognized, and moreover, that such recognition is not incidental to virtue itself, but, instead, its proper complement and, as it were, its finishing touch.

It is easy to forget that in the *Republic* Socrates maintains that justice is valuable *both* for its own sake *and* for the sake of what comes from it (358a1–3). In the context, “what comes from it” is, foremost, the acclaim of other

2. Hannah Arendt draws a similar distinction (1958), though I would object to many of her claims.

3. In the *Critique of Judgement*, Kant claims that, “beauty is for itself, apart from any reference to the feeling of the Subject, nothing,” 59. This is by contrast to moral worth, which, for Kant—as for many modern philosophers—belongs to an object considered in isolation as the kind of thing it is.

people, upon which acclaim further advantages depend. When Glaucon and Adeimantus ask Socrates to abstract from the “rewards” (*misthous*, 358b7) of justice, they are challenging him to defend justice as though it were something *other*—and, indeed, *less good*—than he thinks it really is. As Socrates sees it, the scrubbed-down (*ekkathaireis*, 361d7) conception of justice that he has been charged to defend is bereft of, precisely, its proper connection with the good opinion of others. Of course, Socrates thinks that what matters is *to be* good and not merely *to seem* so. But he also thinks that being good is naturally such as to seem so to others. It is easy to forget this, because, unlike Socrates, contemporary moralists are apt to subscribe to a scrubbed-down conception of virtue.

The idea that virtue naturally presents a pleasing appearance to others, attracting their acclaim, is harder to miss in Aristotle. In his discussion of friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle says that, “the good person [*spoudaios*], insofar as he is good, enjoys [*chairei*] actions that are in accordance with virtue, but is appalled by [*duscherainei*] those done from vice, as the musician takes pleasure in beautiful melodies [*tois kalois melesin hêdetai*], but is pained by bad ones [*epi tois phaulois lupeitai*]” (*Eth. Nic.* 1170a8–11).<sup>4</sup> And speaking of the best sort of friendship—that between virtuous people—he claims that, “good people are pleasant both without qualification and to each other” (1156b18–19). One reason that friendship is necessary for happiness is that even a virtuous person needs other people in order to enjoy this kind of pleasure: “we are better able to contemplate our neighbors than ourselves, and their actions than our own” (1169b43–44). It is worth emphasizing that, for Aristotle, the virtue of another is not just incidentally, but *by its nature* pleasing: “if the good person finds pleasure in the actions of good people who are his friends (since they have both the qualities that are pleasant by nature), then the blessed person will need friends like this” (1169b46–47).

Friendship is, for Aristotle, a political relation. He says that it is, or seems to be, what holds cities together (1155a23–24). Moreover, “there seems to be some kind of justice in every community, and some kind of friendship as well” (1159b27–29). Aristotle claims that friendship and justice “are concerned with the same things” (1159b25–26), and that the highest form of justice seems even to be a kind of friendship (1155a28–29). So the mutual recognition and appreciation of virtue, which is characteristic of the best sort of friendship, is something we should expect to find in political life in general. And, indeed, we do find it there.

One important form it takes is honor (*timê*). Aristotle claims that honor is “the greatest external good” (1123b21)—that is, the greatest human good not identical with virtue or its exercise.<sup>5</sup> In that case, it is more valuable than health, wealth, power, or family relations. “Honor,” he says, “is the prize [*athlon*] of virtue and conferred on those who are good” (1123b35–36). But

4. Unless otherwise noted, references are to the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

5. But compare *Eth. Nic.* 1169b12–13, where Aristotle says that friends seem to be the greatest external goods.

the prize is not passively conferred upon them; they actively seek it out, and their doing so is *kalon*: “actions aiming at honors and resources are unconditionally the noblest actions [*kallistai praxeis*]” (*Pol.* 1332a16–17).

Of course, Aristotle disagrees with those “cultivated men of action” who think that honor is the ultimate point of life (*Eth. Nic.* 1095b26–27). He remarks that honor depends more on those who honor than on the person honored; and moreover, that those who pursue honor do so in order to confirm their own estimations of themselves as virtuous (1095b; cf. 1159a). On these grounds, Aristotle concludes that virtue is better than honor. But he does not sever the tie between them. A virtuous person does not want *merely* to have the prize of virtue: she wants to deserve it. But neither does she want *merely* to deserve it: she wants to have it *because* she deserves it.

According to Aristotle, lacking the desire for a merited prize is vicious. Where large-scale honors are due, the proper disposition is greatness of soul (*megalopsuchia*), which Aristotle calls “the crown of the virtues” (1124a1–2). It is not simply a matter of being outstandingly virtuous, and of knowing oneself to be so, but of making a certain demand on others to acknowledge one’s virtue. Indeed, honor and dishonor are things with which the great-souled person is most concerned (1124a5–6). A different virtue is said to govern quotidian honors. In this domain, there is, of course, a vice of caring too much about what other people think, but—and this is the important point—there is also a vice of caring too little. Among the virtues surveyed by Aristotle, those connected with honor are the ones that modern moralists tend to find most alien. And no wonder: these are the ones that underscore the *public* character of virtue.

In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle notes a kinship between honor and the *kalon*. He says that, “Those things of which the reward [*athla*] is honor [*timê*] are noble [*kalon*]” (*Rh.* 1366b34–35), adding later that, “generally speaking [*haplôs*], that which is honorable [*timion*] should be classed among the noble [*kalon*], since they seem to be similar” (*Rh.* 1367b11–12).

That the *kalon* has something to do with being appraised by others is also clear in Aristotle’s strictly ethical works. In that context, the term *kalon* has a political valence and also a special relation to justice.<sup>6</sup> The object of *politikê* is “just things and fine things” (*dikaia kai kala*, *Eth. Nic.* 1094b14–15; cf. 1095b5). And “just things and fine things” also define the proper scope of *phronêsis* (1144a12)—naturally, since *politikê* and *phronêsis* are the same state of soul (1141b23–24). Like Plato, who sometimes speaks of *dikaia kai kala* as a unit,<sup>7</sup> Aristotle appears to think that justice and the fine are intimately related. But what they have to do with each other he does not really explain. My suggestion will be that their connection lies in the public character of virtue.

There is, as Irwin notes, a fair bit of controversy about how to translate *to kalon* in Aristotle’s ethical works—whether as “the fine,” or “the noble,” or “the beautiful.” But, interestingly, there is firm and widespread consensus

6. This point is emphasized in Irwin forthcoming.

7. See, for example, *Resp.* 505d4, 506a4, and 538c8.

about how to translate the opposite term: namely, *to aischron*. In practical contexts, this is nearly always rendered in English as “the shameful” or “the disgraceful.” Now the difference between saying that a person (or action) is “bad” and saying that she (or it) is “shameful,” is that the latter term expresses that the relevant badness is potentially—and, indeed, *properly*—manifest to others. It is clear that whatever might be said about the shameful person considered in isolation, such an account could never exhaust the phenomenon of shame. It is essential that the shameful person be brought into relation with someone else, who is, or might be, passing judgment. Shame is essentially interpersonal. And in that case, so is the *kalon*.

According to Aristotle, the virtuous person does not merely do what is *kalon*; she does it *because* it is *kalon* (1120a28–30). Thus, the *kalon*-ness of her action is internal to her understanding of what she is doing and why. It follows that the relation between her and other people—the relation that in unhappy circumstances takes the determinate form of shame—this relation is implicit in her own conception of her action. She is acting for the sake of doing that which is *the-opposite-of-shameful*. It follows that she is acting with an eye to the eyes of others.

The point is even more striking if we consider that, in the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle defines the *kalon* as “that which is both desirable for its own sake and praiseworthy, or that which pleases because it is good” (*Rh.* 1366a33–34). He also says there that things that are more praiseworthy are more *kalon* (1365a6–7). Meanwhile, he defines praise as “speech displaying the greatness of virtue” (1367b28). Except in the sense that a doctor may doctor herself, one praises or blames *another*, and is praised or blamed *by* another. Praise, too, is essentially interpersonal: it is speaking well of someone else.

But now, if we add it all up—that the virtuous person acts for the sake of doing the *kalon*; that the *kalon* is what is worthy of praise; and that praise is speech expressing the greatness of someone else’s virtue—we seem to arrive at the conclusion that the virtuous person acts for the sake of making herself the topic of conversation. Of course, she doesn’t *just* want others to talk about her: she wants them to say nice things. And not about her looks, but instead about her character. And she doesn’t want it said by fools, but rather by the wise. And not by strangers, but by people who really know her. In short, she wants to be spoken well of by those who are in position to appreciate the full measure of her virtue. We can safely infer from Aristotle’s remarks on honor that this is not the primary thing that the virtuous person wants, and that what she wants primarily is to be worthy of being so spoken about. But we can also infer that, nevertheless, she *does* want to be so spoken about, and this on the grounds that she really is worthy.

One might object that in offering this suggestion I am guilty of something like Euthyphro’s fallacy—the fallacy of supposing that virtue is good because it is praised, rather than being praised because it is good.<sup>8</sup> As everyone knows, Socrates claimed that the gods love what is pious because it is good, and that it is not good because they love it. But here we should remember that

8. This objection was raised in discussion by Andrew Barker.

there is nothing impious or otherwise vicious in wanting the gods to look favorably upon one's virtue: one might have thought that, on the contrary, it is impious not to care what they think. For what could be more *disrespectful* than indifference to their good opinion? In any case, Socrates himself was far from indifferent to what the gods thought of him. He wanted them to look down upon him favorably *because* he was worthy of being so looked down upon. And with praise, I think, it is just like that—except it is on earth. It is between one human being and another, as required by mutual respect.

But doesn't this mean that a virtuous person is motivated by vanity? Such a question might be prompted by a characteristically modern discomfort with the public character of virtue—a tendency to see wickedness in any concern with what others think. On the other hand, the worry could also be put by saying that, if I am right, the motive of the virtuous agent has something in common with *pleonexia*—the special sort of graspingness that seeks to obtain, not just more and more, but precisely more than others. This is the other-directed motive of what Aristotle calls particular injustice.<sup>9</sup> It is an essentially interpersonal desire to have a greater share of competitive goods, especially those of honor and esteem. If acting for the sake of the *kalon* is acting with an eye to honor and esteem, then it does, indeed, have *that* in common with *pleonexia*. But notice that, as Aristotle describes it, particular justice is not competitive: it has absolutely no interest in *outdoing* others. It is characterized by a concern, not with superiority, but rather with equality (*to ison*)—a concern, that is, to be treated as equal relative to those with whom one is in fact equal. And that is what we should expect, given what else we have seen. A good person would certainly not wish for someone else to be bad just so as to be better. For virtue takes pleasure in the virtue of others.

The fact that we have stumbled upon the topic of justice is a sign that we are on the right track. After all, we wanted to know what justice and the fine had to do with one another. It would be, at least, a partial explanation if *pleonexia* emerged as the special corruption of that very motive that leads a virtuous person to act for the sake of the *kalon*.

Having offered this conjecture I am forced to leave it there. If it were supported, what it would show is that no description of the *kalon* person, or of the *kalon* action, considered all by itself—for example, as selfless, or in keeping with its own nature, or conducive to the common good—could possibly exhaust the relevant phenomenon: for at the core of it is an interpersonal relation between the appraiser and the appraised, where the former is pleased by the latter. In that case, the phenomenon would, indeed, have certain abstract features in common with aesthetic experience. But acknowledgment of the relevant similarity would not tend to trivialize matters of importance.

In offering this suggestion, I do not claim either that all ancient philosophers embraced a public conception of virtue, or, again, that all modern philosophers share the same aversion to it. An ancient exception, already mentioned, is

9. The idea that there is a special motive associated with particular justice is controversial, but I cannot defend it here; for a criticism of this interpretation, see O'Connor 1991, 136–64.

the Stoics, whose conception of virtue is quite different from that of Aristotle, but also, I think, from that of Plato. This might explain the tradition of translating *to kalon* that originates with Cicero, and that Irwin hopes to recuperate. Meanwhile, an obvious modern exception is Rousseau, who writes of *amour-propre*, a naturally good, but highly corruptible other-regarding motive: “It is to this ardor for making oneself the topic of conversation, to this furor to distinguish oneself, that we owe what is best and worst among men, our virtues and our vices, our sciences and our errors, our conquerors and our philosophers, that is to say, a multitude of bad things against a small number of good ones.”<sup>10</sup>

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10. Rousseau [1754] 1987, 78.