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## RESPONSE TO BARNEY

PAULA GOTTLIEB

Every day there is a new chess problem in the *London Times*. A recent problem was taken from a game featuring the great player Tal. The setter of the problem commented: "White has various ways to win this position, but, naturally, Tal found a beautiful combinative finish. What was it?"<sup>1</sup> Any chess grandmaster will immediately grasp what Tal did and exclaim, "Yes, that's beautiful." But the beauty in question is elusive. While we would not expect the Art Institute of Chicago to hold an exhibition of Tal's chess endings, there is clearly an aesthetic aspect to Tal's chess combination that calls for explanation. What is that aesthetic aspect? Well, as a first approximation, we might think that what is beautiful about Tal's finish must be connected with its being a good combination. Since Tal's moves are good moves, it is reasonable to think that there is some connection between good moves and beautiful moves, or more generally between good things and beautiful things, and more generally still between beauty and goodness, and finally, if one is a Platonist, between the form of the beautiful and the form of the good. These are the connections at issue in Rachel Barney's paper on the fine/beautiful (*to kalon*) and the good (*to agathon*).

Let us begin, in a more mundane way, by supposing that if something is beautiful, it is good. This is an assumption that Plato makes in the *Meno*, but Barney argues that Plato is more concerned to argue that if something is good, then it is beautiful. For example, if exercising naked in the agora is good, it is beautiful. Again, we might assume that Tal's moves are beautiful if they achieve the good goal of winning the game. According to Barney, one of Plato's suggestions is that something is beautiful if it carries out its function well. But this does not seem enough. A particular alternative variation may be just as good as Tal's combination at winning the game, but lacks a stylistic aspect that Tal's combination has. Tal's is not just good at achieving some aim, but it does it in a particular way. Perhaps Tal's winning combination displays a certain organization and order that the alternative lacks. Again, as Barney explains, Plato considers the idea that what is beautiful and good involves *taxis* and *cosmos*, and she argues that, according to Plato, what is good and what is beautiful have order in common. She also quotes *Philebus* 64 where Plato irenically suggests that we can only capture the good in the unity of beauty, proportion, and truth.<sup>2</sup> It seems as if the good, the beautiful, and proportion are inextricably connected. So perhaps, according to Plato, the alternative chess combination is both less beautiful and less good than Tal's.

So far the good and the beautiful appear to be very closely related, so closely that one might think that Plato is talking about one and the same

1. Chess: Winning Move: September 11th, 2008 ([http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/games\\_and\\_puzzles/chess/article4654910.ece](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/games_and_puzzles/chess/article4654910.ece)).

2. On Plato's *Philebus*, see Meinwald 2008.

thing. The main thesis of Barney's paper is that there is an important difference, and that difference is to be explained by human psychology. On Barney's account, based on the *Gorgias* and the *Symposium*, the good is connected with desire, while the beautiful relates to admiration. Now, as Barney shows, the good cannot simply be what anyone happens to desire, nor the beautiful what anyone happens to admire, because we can desire and admire things that are not good nor beautiful at all. What is good, then, is not simply what is desired, but what is desirable. Similarly, what is beautiful is not simply what is admired, but what is admirable. Therefore what is good is what deserves to be the object of desire (*boulêsis/epithumia*/general *erôs*), and what is beautiful is what deserves to be the object of *erôs*—*erôs*, as explained by Barney, being a special sort of desire that involves admiration or perhaps is admiration.

How does the admirable generate *erôs*? As Barney notes, one can find something admirable without having *erôs*, but she argues that this is a dead form of admiration. Still, one might wonder why some people are inspired to procreate, others to make speeches or write poetry, and yet others to "beget virtue." Are some things admirable for some people but not for others? Perhaps *erôs* involves not just an attraction to admirable things, but also an expression of something in one's underlying makeup or character that is beautiful. Barney alludes to Aristotle several times in her paper, so I will conclude with some remarks about Aristotle's view of virtue of character and the beautiful.

According to Aristotle, not all good things are beautiful. Virtue and virtuous actions are beautiful, and so is the good person who is not merely civically virtuous—doing good actions because they bring approval and wealth, as described in *Eudemian Ethics* 8.3—but properly virtuous, doing good actions for their own sake. Now, doing good actions for their own sake is perfectly compatible, according to Aristotle, with doing them also for the sake of something else, happiness (*Eth. Nic.* 1.7). Just as Tal makes his moves for their own sake—they have something to be said for them independently of winning the game—he also does so to win the game. Similarly the fine and good person performs virtuous actions for their own sake, but the actions are also chosen for the sake of happiness. But there is an important disanalogy between Tal and the Aristotelian virtuous person. The Aristotelian virtuous person has practical wisdom (*phronêsis*), and this is disanalogous to a skill (*technê*). Unlike a skill, practical wisdom requires and is required by ethical virtue, and ethical virtue requires that one has one's emotions in good order, as specified by the doctrine of the mean. As Aryeh Kosman explains, the good person must be disposed to have the right emotions on the right occasions and to act appropriately.<sup>3</sup>

Aristotle describes the person who has the virtue of mildness as being disposed meanly and not violently or slackly (*sphodrôs kai aneimenôs*, *Eth. Nic.* 2.5.1105b25–28). The terms "violently" and "slackly" come from music and invoke a musical analogy. Imagine a lyre. If its strings are too lax, when the lyre is played, they will be flat. If its strings are tuned too tightly, by

3. Kosman 1980.

contrast, they will be sharp. When the strings are correctly tuned, the right notes will sound when the strings are plucked. Virtuous human beings are like well-tuned instruments, not too tightly wound that they react badly to particular situations, nor too lax, so that they fail to have the right emotions and act appropriately. Of course, this is just an analogy. The virtuous human being does not literally have internal strings, but the analogy captures the harmonious and beautiful disposition of the good human being in a way that alternative language cannot.

A unitarian about Plato's and Aristotle's thought might connect this with the passage in the *Republic* where Plato says that "a god has given music and physical training to human beings, not, except incidentally, for the body and the soul but for the spirited and wisdom-loving parts of the soul itself, in order that these might be in harmony with one another, each being stretched and relaxed to the appropriate degree" (*Resp.* 411e, trans. Grube/Reeve 1992). As James Adam comments, "The effect of all this musical imagery is to suggest that Character is the Music of the Soul."<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps in modern life we have lost the sense of virtuous character as the music of the soul, and, indeed, of unheard and unseen beauty. Or perhaps not. If we consider Tal's winning combination, there are no sounds to hear or colors to see, but, for whatever reason, it is unquestionably beautiful.

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4. Adam [1902] 1965, 188.