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THE SENSE AND REFERENCE OF *KALON* IN ARISTOTLE

T. H. IRWIN

1. BEAUTY VS. MORALITY

MORAL PHILOSOPHERS often have something to say about beauty. The semantics of aesthetic predicates and the metaphysics of aesthetic properties seem similar to the semantics and metaphysics of moral predicates and properties. Aesthetic judgments seem apt for truth and falsehood in the way that moral judgments do. At least some of the arguments that make it difficult to defend a noncognitive account of moral judgments also make it difficult to defend such an account of aesthetic judgments. Many critics, however, would hesitate to infer that aesthetic properties are objective features of the world. They may reconcile their metaphysical judgments with their semantic judgments by embracing some form of error theory about aesthetic judgments. Then it is natural to ask whether we can embrace a similar error theory about moral judgments.

Whatever we say about the semantic and metaphysical questions, we can easily see some analogy between aesthetic and moral value. In both cases, we seem to recognize some noninstrumental value that does not necessarily satisfy any of our antecedent needs. The fact that the existence of a beautiful object does not necessarily make anyone richer, healthier, or more secure is not a reason for denying that it has aesthetic value. Someone who identified beauty with some sort of instrumental value might seem not to understand the value of beautiful things.

But though aesthetic value is similar to moral value in these ways, it is also sharply different from it. In fact, we might try to explain moral value by contrast with aesthetic value. The mere fact that the *Iliad* has greater aesthetic value than today's *Guardian* does not show that we ought to read the *Iliad* rather than today's *Guardian*. In some cases we might speak of a preference for one action over another as a "merely" aesthetic preference that carries no moral requirement.

This comparison between beauty and morality makes it easy to understand why, for instance, Kant treats beauty as a symbol of morality, but does not identify beauty with moral rightness or goodness.¹ Similarly, Hutcheson inquires into both beauty and virtue, but supposes he inquires into two things rather than one.² Moral philosophers are legitimately interested in aesthetic

1. Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 59.

2. See Hutcheson [1726] 2004.

properties, even though they do not take them to be their main objects of inquiry.

Greek moralists, however, are sometimes thought to be different. The prominence of references to the *kalon*³ in moral contexts in Plato and Aristotle persuades some readers that they connect beauty and morality quite closely. When Greek moralists speak of the moral virtues that make up the character of a good person, they say that such virtues, and the corresponding actions, are *kalon*, that an action is virtuous precisely insofar as it is *kalon*, and that a virtuous person is *kalos kagathos*.

It is helpful to distinguish three views that Plato and Aristotle might hold:

1. They have distinct concepts of the morally right and the beautiful, and they explicitly identify the property of moral rightness with the property of beauty.
2. They have no concept of the morally right, but they have a concept of the beautiful, and the value they attach to actions that we might count as morally right is beauty.
3. Their concept of the *kalon* is broader than our concepts of the beautiful and of the right. They do not draw the distinctions that we draw by the use of these two distinct concepts.

The first and the second of these claims allow us to infer that Greek moralists have a distinctively aesthetic conception of moral values. The first claim implies that they explicitly conceive moral value as aesthetic value. The second claim implies that their conception is implicit. The third view implies that they lack both specifically moral and specifically aesthetic concepts, so that they cannot hold an aesthetic conception of moral value.

To discuss these claims fully, we would need to ask whether Greek moralists have a concept of morality. This question has been discussed quite fully, and I will mostly set it aside.⁴ I will restrict myself to the *kalon*, as we find it in Aristotle. Some of the same questions could usefully be asked about Plato and about the Stoics, but I do not suggest that the answers that fit Aristotle would also fit these other Greek moralists.

I believe that none of the three claims above is correct about Aristotle. My view is closest to the third claim. I agree that the reference of *kalon* is wider than the reference of “beautiful” and also wider than the reference of “morally right.” But I believe that, none the less, Aristotle uses *kalon* both to pick out beauty and to pick out moral rightness, which he recognizes as two distinct properties. He takes the *Ethics* to be about the *kalon* only insofar as it is about moral rightness.⁵

Many translators assume something like this view, insofar as they choose different words to translate *kalon* in different contexts. When Cicero renders Stoic claims about the *kalon*, he uses *honestum* rather than *pulchrum* in moral

3. I will normally use *kalon* (neuter singular) without regard to case and number.

4. See Irwin 2007, §114; Annas 1993, 120–34.

5. I use “*Ethics*” (roman) to refer generally to the three major ethical treatises in the *Corpus*.

contexts. Ambrose does the same. By contrast, the translators of the Latin Vulgate version of the Bible normally prefer *bonum* as a general equivalent of *kalon*. Mediaeval Latin translators of Aristotle's Ethics normally follow them. In the sixteenth century, however, Lambimus reverts to the practice of Ambrose and Cicero and uses *honestum* and *pulchrum* as he thinks appropriate.⁶ Similarly, some English translators use "beautiful," "noble," and "fine" in different places. If we want to find the occurrences of *kalon* with the help of the *ROT* (Barnes 1995), we need to look up all these words (which are also used to translate Greek words other than *kalon*).

A defense of Cicero and his followers should explain Aristotle's practice. Do these different Latin and English words capture different senses of *kalon*? If so, does Aristotle recognize these different senses, and does he display his recognition of them? Even if he does not think *kalon* has different senses, does he distinguish different types of *kalon*? Or does the translator's use of different English terms reflect nothing in Aristotle's explicit or implicit views?

2. THE HOMONYMY OF THE KALON

A useful place to start may be Aristotle's discussion of the uses of *kalon* in the *Topics*. The *kalon* is a source of dialectical arguments partly because it is homonymous. If we assume that homonymy implies difference of sense, we can infer that Aristotle takes *kalon* to have different senses. The assumption, however, is not secure; we need to look more closely to see what sorts of differences he marks.

A sign of the homonymy of the *kalon* is the fact that it has different contraries. In the case of a *zôon* (animal? picture?) the *aischron* is the contrary, but in the case of a house the *mochthêron* is the contrary.⁷ This apparently simple remark illustrates some of the difficulties we face: (a) It is not clear whether the relevant kind of *zôon* is an animal or a picture, and so it is not clear whether Aristotle has beauty in mind; (b) It is not clear what is being said about a *mochthêron* house; does it look awful, or are the ceilings so low that we bump our heads? (c) Aristotle speaks of the *aischron* and the *mochthêron* quite a lot in the Ethics in moral contexts. They are not quite interchangeable. *Kalon* and *aischron* are contrary predicates of actions, whereas *agathos* and *mochthêros* are predicates of virtuous and vicious people, and *aretê* and *mochthêria* are applied to states of character. But the two terms do not seem to introduce radically different features of actions or people.

In some contexts, then, the *kalon* has these different contraries. But it is not clear whether the term has distinct senses. Aristotle's claim about homonymy does not prevent him from making general claims about the *kalon*. He objects, for instance, to anyone who says that the fitting is a peculiar property (*idion*) of the *kalon*, on the ground that the *kalon* and the

6. For some evidence see Irwin 2007, §332–34.

7. "Likewise, also, *kalon* as applied to an animal has ugly [*aischron*] as its contrary, but, as applied to a house, mean [*mochthêron*]; so that *kalon* is homonymous" (*Top.* 106a20–22).

fitting are the same (*Top.* 135a12–14). This does not seem a wholly uninformative equivalence; for whatever is fitting seems to be fitting for something—for the subject or for the situation in question.

One argument rests on the supposition that the *kalon* is what is pleasant through sight or hearing (146a22). But Aristotle does not endorse this supposition, and so we need not try to reconcile it with his description of the *kalon* as the fitting. He distinguishes those who are *kalon* through their own *kallos* from those who appear *kaloï* because of artificial help (*Soph. el.* 164a26–b21). Aristotle seems to have in mind those who go to what Americans call the “beauty parlor”; they hope to acquire or to imitate physical beauty.

Moral questions also introduce the *kalon*. We can ask whether the *kalon* or the advantageous is more choiceworthy, and whether the life of virtue is pleasanter than the life of gratification (102b14–20).⁸ The *kalon*, the advantageous, and the pleasant are three possible objects of choice (105a27–28). The *kalon* and the advantageous are two candidates for being the right (*to deon*, 110b9–11). Sacrificing one’s father may be *kalon* for the Triballians, but it is not *kalon* without qualification (115b22–35). The just is a type of *kalon* (*kalon ti*, 141a21), but not the same as the *kalon*.

The last two examples are easy to understand if we substitute “right” or “morally good” for *kalon*. If we do that, we attribute different senses to *kalon* in moral and nonmoral contexts. But they do not require this interpretation. We might prefer “beautiful,” on the assumption that Aristotle has an aesthetic view of morality, or “fine,” on the assumption that he attributes a single but unspecific sense to *kalon*. It is difficult to decide, on the basis of the *Topics*, which of these accounts we should prefer.

We can use the discussions in the *Topics* to understand the uses of *kalon* elsewhere in the Corpus. Aristotle speaks of the *kalon* in four contexts: (a) Aesthetic; (b) Natural; (c) Abstract; (d) Ethical. These divisions are very rough and are not mutually exclusive. But they may help us to grasp the wide range of his use of the term and to fix some of the more plausible options for our understanding of it.

The first context corresponds approximately to the examples in the *Topics* that mention natural and acquired physical *kallos*. The last corresponds to the ethical examples. The second and third do not correspond directly to any examples in the *Topics*. But the equivalence of the *kalon* and the fitting (*prepon*) should help us to understand these contexts.

3. AESTHETIC USES OF *KALON*

I speak of “aesthetic” contexts to indicate places where Aristotle seems to observe simply that something’s physical features make it pleasant and attrac-

8. “To accident are to be attached also all comparisons of things together, when expressed in language that is derived in any kind of way from accident; such as, for example, the question, ‘Is the *kalon* or the advantageous preferable?’ and ‘Is the life of virtue or the life of gratification the pleasanter?’, and any other problem that may happen to be phrased in terms like these. For in all such cases the question is ‘of which of the two is the predicate more properly an accident?’” (*Top.* 102b14–20).

tive to the onlooker, apart from any further judgment about it. Further judgments include judgments about the value of the property that is found *kalon*, or judgments about the expected effects. As Aristotle remarks, the lion does not enjoy the sight of a deer simply because it likes to look at deer; it is pleased to see the deer because of the prospect of food (*Eth. Nic.* 1118a18–23). If it simply enjoyed the sight of the deer, it would keep looking at it, rather than eating it. In this passage Aristotle implicitly distinguishes purely aesthetic and disinterested pleasure from pleasure that results from a judgment about some further feature of the pleasant object.

On this basis, we can understand his use of *kalon* for physical features of birds and animals.

1. In a spurious work in the Corpus, the author reports that the cuckoo grows so big and *kalon* that it easily overcomes the other birds in the nest, and that the parents of the other birds take such pleasure in the cuckoo that they help it to expel their own chicks ([*Mir. ausc.*] 830b16–19).⁹ If the fact that the cuckoo is so *kalon* explains why the other birds take such pleasure in it, *kalon* here probably refers to its beauty.
2. People who make jokes about someone who is not *kalon* compare him to a fire-breathing goat (*Gen. an.* 769b18–20).¹⁰ The victims of these jokes are likely to be ugly people. Perhaps “fire-breathing” implies that these people have bad breath. In that case, they may be more generally repellent, rather than just ugly.
3. The bison has a black horn, and its blackness is shiny and *kalon*.¹¹ Nothing in the context suggests any objection to “beautiful.”
4. The bird called the “chatterer” has a good voice, a *kalon* color, shows ingenuity in arranging its life (*biomêchanos*), and has a becoming (*euprepês*) shape (*Hist. an.* 616b16–18).

These examples of birds and animals provide us with good evidence that *kalon* sometimes refers to beauty. They seem to refer to disinterested pleasure in onlookers. Aristotle does not mention any further feature of these birds and animals that might ground our judgment that they are *kalon*. We do not find the color of the bison’s horn *kalon* because we look forward to eating bison, or because we notice that it is well adapted to the bison’s life in its physical environment. These relatively simple judgments about the *kalon* are good examples of judgments about beauty. They will provide us with some basis for comparison with other types of *kalon*.

9. “They say that the cuckoos in Helice, when about to breed, do not build a nest, but lay their eggs in the nests of ringdoves or turtledoves, and neither sit on their eggs, nor hatch them, nor rear their young; but when the chick is born and reared, it expels its companions from the nest. Moreover, it appears, it grows large and beautiful, so that it easily overcomes the rest. They say that the ringdoves also take such a delight in it that they even assist it to drive out their own young” ([*Mir. Ausc.*] 830b14–19).

10. “Hence often jesters compare someone who is not beautiful to a goat breathing fire, or again to a ram butting, and a certain physiognomist reduced all faces to those of two or three animals, and his arguments often prevailed on people” (*Gen. an.* 769b18–20).

11. *hê de melania kalê kai lipara tou keratos* (*Hist. an.* 630a35).

4. THE *KALON* IN NATURE

In the biological works, Aristotle mentions types of *kalon* things that differ from the previous cases insofar as they involve some further judgment about the *kalon* object. Without this further judgment we do not recognize the object as *kalon*. Such judgments underlie the attitude that Aristotle believes we should take toward the plants and animals around us. These perishable things are less valuable than imperishable realities; that is why any awareness of imperishable realities, however fleeting and fragmentary it may be, is pleasanter than anything we can learn about perishable things (*Part. an.* 644b32–645a1). Still, perishable things as well as imperishable have some attractiveness (*charis*, 644b32), and inquiry into them can be, and should be, pleasant. If we take pleasure in the craft that produces works of art, we should also take pleasure in the nature that produces the plants and animals we see around us, however unattractive they may be (*en tois mê kecharismenois autôn pros tēn aisthêsin kata tēn theôrian*, 645a7–8). In this way, we discover that the natural and the *kalon* are present in all animals (645a23–25).¹²

Is this the sort of *kalon* that gives disinterested pleasure to the onlooker? If Aristotle meant this, we might expect him to say that in the order of nature birds have beautiful feathers, bison have beautiful black horns, and so on. But this is not what he means. The *kalon* that we discover is the result of teleological order.¹³ That is why Aristotle compares them with the products of a craft. A well-designed engine may not be much to look at, and an engineer who understands that it is well made for its intended function need not even look at it at all. Similarly, our recognition of the *kalon* in natural organisms does not consist in our visual experience of them, but in our understanding of their goal-directed order. This order may be discernible only when we study the admirable construction of organs that we find ugly or even disgusting to look at.

And so, when Aristotle mentions the different places where we can find the *kalon* in living creatures, he mentions the different types of explanation that give us reason to believe that something is *kalon* (640a33–b1). A teleological explanation of a part of an organism may connect it more or less closely with the life of the organism. The closest connection derives the organ from the essence of the creature; the next closest derives the organ

12. Balme's translation (1972) renders *kalon* rather unhelpfully by "good" and "beautiful" in different places, on no obvious principle. In his note on 645a23 (pp. 123–24) he says: "This ordinary word connotes *good* as well as *beautiful*, and both senses are present here. The visual arts aim at beautiful representations of animals; real animals may not have such beauty, but instead they are composed for the sake of ends, which is even more wonderful." Balme's claim about two senses of *kalon* is not supported by his next sentence. One might be more inclined to suppose that "wonderful" comes close to capturing the single sense of *kalon* in this passage.

13. "... we should venture on the study of every kind of animal without distaste, on the assumption that in all of them there is something natural and *kalon*. For what is not a matter of chance but for the sake of something is found, and found most of all [*malista*], in the products of nature, and the end for which something has been constituted or come to be has the place of the *kalon* [*tēn tou kalou chōran echei*]" (*Part. an.* 645a33–37).

not from the essence, but from what is necessary for the existence of this creature. A third connection shows that an organ is appropriate and useful for the creature, even though it is neither essential nor necessary. This third situation is said to be *kalon*.

The cases in which Aristotle mentions the *kalon* in nature belong to this third class. Human teeth are in a *kalon* condition for the common function of teeth (*Part. an.* 661b7–8), and different ones have different specialized functions. The generation of bees reveals a *kalon* arrangement of nature; the generations succeed one another even though drones do not generate (*Gen. an.* 760b1–3). This is part of the order (*taxis*, 760a32) of nature. In both of these examples, the *kalon* feature is neither essential nor necessary to the organism. Human teeth, or something equivalent, could have been differently arranged for equally efficient treatment of food. Similarly, the strange way in which bees reproduce is not the only way their survival could have been ensured.

Aristotle does not make it clear whether this third situation—neither essential nor necessary—is the only one of the three that is *kalon*, or whether he means that even in this situation we can find the *kalon*. If he has the first point in mind, we might explain it by saying that he intends to contrast the *kalon* with the necessary.¹⁴ But it is difficult to see why we should not recognize the *kalon* in the first two situations as well. When he introduces the *kalon*, Aristotle says that the final cause (*to hou heneka*) and the *kalon* are present to a higher degree in nature than in craft (*Gen. an.* 639b19–21). If teleological order is the mark of the *kalon*, the first two situations seem to manifest it no less than the third does.

What, then, does he mean by speaking both of the final cause and of the *kalon*? Is he simply saying the same thing twice? If he were, he would weaken his argument. For he intends the presence of final causation to be a ground for the judgment that something is *kalon*. The fact that the natures of different organisms are teleologically ordered is a reason to regard the natural order as *kalon*. This is an appropriate way to construct and to arrange organisms. If natural organisms came into being without any goal-directed order we would have a reason to deny that a certain type of *kalon* is found in nature, even if natural organisms had pleasing colors, symmetrical shapes, and so on.

What do these examples of the *kalon* show about beauty in nature? We might argue that these are not examples of beauty, because they are not objects of the disinterested sensory pleasure that we take in the beauty of the peacock's feathers. Theoretical judgments about natural teleology are necessary for the recognition of the *kalon* in plants and animals; and these judgments are not essentially connected to disinterested sensory pleasure. This is an argument for a nonaesthetic interpretation of *kalon* in these contexts. If we accept it, we can still accept Aristotle's equivalence between the *kalon* and the fitting. The appropriate translation, then, will be "fine," or "admirable," or "appropriate."

14. Hence Balme (1972, 87) suggests ad loc. that "The difference . . . is between living and living well."

We might object to this argument on the ground that it rests on too narrow a conception of beauty. Perhaps we ought not to confine the awareness of beauty to disinterested sensory pleasure, and perhaps Aristotle believes that the student of nature should find beauty as well as good order in plants and animals. In favor of this conclusion, we might observe that recognition of natural teleology is a source of pleasure (*Gen. an.* 645a7–10). Is this pleasure not a mark of the aesthetic appreciation of beauty? If we take this view, we may defend the rendering of *kalon* by “beautiful.”

This view, however, commits us to an over-generous conception of beauty. If we suppose that whenever A takes pleasure in x on the basis of a judgment about some nonevident feature of x, A takes x to be beautiful, we make it self-contradictory to say that we take pleasure in x’s being F, or we take pleasure in x because x is F, but we do not find x beautiful. But such a statement does not seem self-contradictory, and sometimes seems to be true. Sometimes the pleasure we take in, for instance, the skilful design of an engine may also cause us to find it beautiful, but our consciousness of its beauty is neither a part nor a necessary result of the pleasure.

This question is not easy to decide. But it is at least not obvious that Aristotle intends these remarks to extend our awareness of beauty in nature. He says nothing to suggest that our attitude to goal-directed order should be analogous to our attitude to a peacock’s feathers. The mere fact that he uses *kalon* in both cases does not convey the relevant suggestion, unless Aristotle assumes that *kalon* itself indicates beauty. But we have found no reason so far to attribute this assumption to him.

5. ORDER, SYMMETRY, AND DEFINITENESS

I called the third class of contexts “abstract” because they include Aristotle’s discussion of the *kalon* in mathematical objects.¹⁵ In *Metaphysics* 13 he mentions order, symmetry, and definiteness as “very great forms” or “the greatest forms” of the *kalon* (1078a31–b2).¹⁶ But he does not confine these standards for the *kalon* to the abstract objects of mathematics. He also applies them to the *kalon* in dramas, cities, and bodies (*Poet.* 1450b36, *Pol.* 1326a33, *Top.* 116b21).¹⁷ The *Poetics* and *Politics* find the *kalon* in greatness and order (*to gar kalon en megethei kai taxeï estin*).

15. See Allan 1970, 63–71; Cooper 1999, 273–75; Lear 2006a, 118 (“... he offers what looks like a quite general account of the fine . . .”).

16. The *ROT* (Barnes 1995) translates as follows: “Now since the good and the beautiful are different (for the former always implies conduct as its subject, while the beautiful is found also in motionless things), those who assert that the mathematical sciences say nothing of the beautiful or the good are in error. For these sciences say and prove a very great deal about them; for if they do not expressly mention them, but prove attributes which are their results or their formulae, it is not true to say that they tell us nothing about them. The chief forms of beauty [*tau kalou megista eidê*] are order and symmetry and definiteness, which the mathematical sciences demonstrate in a special degree. And since these (e.g. order and definiteness) are obviously causes of many things, evidently these sciences must treat this sort of cause also (i.e. the beautiful) as in some sense a cause. But we shall speak more plainly elsewhere about these matters” (1078a31–b2). On the last sentence, Ross (1924) remarks: “Neither xii 7 (1072a34), 8, 10, nor xiv 4, nor the *De Caelo* really fulfils the promise here made, and it seems best to treat it as one of Aristotle’s unfulfilled promises.”

17. Ross (1924) cites these passages.

The conditions set out in the *Politics* and *Poetics* do not coincide with those in the *Metaphysics*. The discussion of mathematical objects says nothing about greatness. In the *Poetics* and *Politics*, Aristotle mentions greatness because he discusses the *kalon* in wholes, including animals, that have natures or functions or both. Appropriate size is relevant to nature and function. However exquisite a scale model of a boat may be, it is not big enough for us to sail in it. The appropriate size has limits; a city that grows too big loses the features that allow the fulfilment of the function of a city.

Do these passages describe the criteria for beauty in mathematical objects and in organic wholes? If so, Aristotle seeks to explain the aesthetic reactions that he takes to be appropriate in these different circumstances. This might be his point in the *Poetics*; perhaps he intends to describe the features that would make a play beautiful. When he says that small people cannot be *kalon* (*Eth. Nic.* 1123b6–8), he seems to refer to physical beauty.

But it is not clear that his primary aim is to give an account of aesthetic judgments. His remarks about the *kalon* in cities and plays fit the remarks about the *kalon* in nature that we have already discussed. Just as we see goal-directed order in organisms, we see it in cities and plays, and that is why we take them to be *kalon*. Aristotle does not suggest—though he does not deny—that the appropriate reaction to a city that is well designed for its proper function is aesthetic pleasure. Moreover, he does not suggest that the criteria he offers for numbers, plays, and cities are the criteria for everything *kalon*. They do not seem to fit our purely aesthetic reactions to peacocks' feathers and bison's horns.

In our discussion of the *kalon* in nature, we remarked that our pleasure in something's good order might cause us to find it beautiful, so that our teleological judgment influences our sense of beauty. Aristotle offers an example of this influence in our judgments about small people. In his view, teleological judgments about appropriate size influence (consciously or unconsciously) our reluctance to say that small people are *kalon*. Our judgment about small people is an aesthetic judgment, and so here *kalon* refers to beauty. But we should not jump to the conclusion that when we believe a well-designed city, or drama, or animal, is *kalon* we thereby find it beautiful.

In these cases, therefore, as well as in the general comments on nature, we should take Aristotle to set out conditions for being fine or admirable or appropriate in the ways relevant for the different kinds of things that can display order, symmetry, definiteness, and appropriate size. We need not infer that these conditions are meant to be criteria of beauty, even though they are relevant to some cases of beauty.

6. THE KALON IN ETHICS

The ethical works assume that they are properly concerned with the *kalon*.¹⁸ Aristotle does not take it to be controversial, or a point that takes any argument or explanation. He has relatively little to say about what type of *kalon* is

18. See Irwin forthcoming.

relevant to ethics. But he says enough to distinguish this type of *kalon* from the types we have noticed so far.

Kalon things are a proper subset of noninstrumental goods (*Eth. Eud.* 1248b23–25; *Eth. Nic.* 1176b7–10). They are distinguished from other non-instrumental goods by being praiseworthy, and therefore by being connected with the voluntary actions that are the appropriate objects of praise and blame (*Eth. Nic.* 1109b31; *Eth. Eud.* 1223a9–15). The connection between the *kalon* and the praiseworthy distinguishes the ethical *kalon* from the *kalon* in peacock's feathers, numbers, and the natural order.

Does Aristotle nonetheless maintain that the *kalon* in ethics is a form of beauty? If the virtuous person acts for the sake of the *kalon*, does this mean that he relies on his aesthetic sense to identify the right action, or that he reacts aesthetically to virtuous actions by himself or by others? We have seen in previous cases that the answer to this question is not straightforwardly Yes or No. The same is true in ethics. I will try to illustrate this point by considering a virtue that might seem to suggest an aesthetic interpretation.

7. MAGNIFICENCE AND GOOD TASTE

We will have a good case for an aesthetic interpretation of the ethical *kalon* if we can find virtues that are concerned with the *kalon*, but seem to be concerned with the aesthetic rather than the moral aspects of characters and actions. The two virtues of character that seem to display this aesthetic outlook most clearly are magnificence and magnanimity. We might suppose that Aristotle's division between these two large-scale virtues and their small-scale counterparts (generosity and the nameless virtue concerned with honor) betrays his aesthetic point of view on the virtues. For if he were simply concerned with someone's moral outlook, what reason would he have to distinguish its large-scale and small-scale manifestations? The large scale of a virtue seems to be relevant only because it offers a special opportunity to manifest good taste.

We can test this suggestion by considering some of the details of Aristotle's account of magnificence. The name of the virtue does not suggest any specific concern with morality or with the good of others; on this point we may question Rowe's choice of "munificence" to translate *megaloprepeia*.¹⁹ "Munificence" includes other-directed, philanthropic suggestions, but the Greek term conveys no such suggestions. If we consider Ross's translation of a few passages, we may conclude that the magnificent person displays good taste rather than moral insight:²⁰

[A] The magnificent man is like an artist [*epistêmoni eoiken*]; for he can see what is fitting and spend large sums tastefully [*emmelôs*]. For, as we said at the beginning, a state of character is determined by its activities and by its objects. Now the expenses of the magnificent man are large and fitting. Such, therefore, are also his results [*erga*]; for thus there will be a great expenditure and one that is fitting to its result. (*Eth. Nic.* 1122a34–b3)

19. See Rowe and Broadie 2002.

20. See Ross 1925.

[B] For a possession and a work of art [*ergon*] have not the same excellence. The most valuable possession is that which is worth most, e.g. gold, but the most valuable work of art is that which is great and beautiful (for the contemplation of such a work [*tou toioutou*] inspires admiration [*thaumastê*], and so does magnificence); and a work [*ergon*] has an excellence—viz. magnificence—which involves magnitude. (*Eth. Nic.* 1122b14–18)

One may argue, then, that the type of *kalon* that is relevant to this particular virtue of character is beauty.

The magnificent person shows his magnificence in the money he spends on himself and on his friends and acquaintances. He displays his magnificence when he builds himself a house, arranges a wedding reception, and even when he gives a present to a child:

[C] And since each expenditure may be great of its kind, and what is most magnificent absolutely is great expenditure on a great object, but what is magnificent *here* is what is great in *these* circumstances, and greatness in the work differs from greatness in the expense (for the most beautiful ball or bottle is magnificent as a gift to a child, but the price of it is small and mean),—therefore it is characteristic of the magnificent man, whatever kind of result he is producing, to produce it magnificently (for such a result is not easily surpassed) and to make it worthy of the expenditure. (*Eth. Nic.* 1123a10–17)

In this passage “beautiful” seems to be a plausible rendering. “Noble” and “honorable” certainly do not seem to fit balls and bottles very well. “Beautiful” seems to fit better. This judgment is reflected in Rowe’s translation, which up to this point in the chapter uses “fine” to render *kalon*, but at this point switches to “beautiful” in agreement with Ross.

Concern for the *kalon* is common to the magnificent person and to other virtuous people. Aristotle places the magnificent person in this context (*Eth. Nic.* 1122b6–7):

[D] And the magnificent man will spend such sums for honour’s sake [*tou kalou heneka*]; for this is common to the virtues.

Here the revision of Ross in *ROT* (Barnes 1995) renders *tou kalou heneka* as “for the sake of the noble,” as it usually does. Ross’s choice of renderings is understandable. In [D] Aristotle makes it clear that he is using his normal formula for the virtues. But in [A]–[C] honor and nobility seem equally out of place, and a reference to beauty seems appropriate. If, therefore, we accept Ross’s renderings (or Rowe’s), we will conclude that in this chapter Aristotle uses *kalon* in different senses.²¹

This conclusion faces a simple-minded but nontrivial objection. Passage [D] comes shortly after [A] and shortly before [B]. Aristotle gives us no sign that the sense of *kalon* in [D] is different from its sense in [A] and [B], which are in its immediate vicinity. If *kalon* is used univocally in the three passages, the references to the *kalon* in [A] and [B] support Aristotle’s claim in [D] that the magnificent person aims at the *kalon* in the same way as other virtuous people do, and that therefore magnificence meets the general

21. See Balme’s suggestion (1972, 87) about *Part. an.* 1, quoted above.

conditions for a virtue of character. But if the sense of *kalon* changes in [D], the claim in [D] about the noble (*kalon*) is not supported by observations about the beautiful (*kalon*) in [A] and [B]. If Ross's rendering is right, Aristotle's argument seems to depend on an equivocation. While this is not a decisive objection to Ross's rendering, it gives us some reason to explore other possibilities.

One possibility is to accept the rendering "beautiful" where Ross accepts it, and to introduce it into [D]. But since [D] is a general claim about the virtues, we need to introduce "beautiful" into the other places where Aristotle speaks of acting for the sake of the *kalon* and of choosing actions because they are *kalon*. The result will be a thoroughly aesthetic interpretation of the *kalon* in the Ethics. But this interpretation allows the tail to wag the dog; it uses the chapter on magnificence to introduce a reference to beauty in many passages where we have no other reason to suppose that Aristotle has beauty in mind.

Another possibility is to reconsider the suggestion that in passages [A] to [C] *kalon* should be translated by "beautiful." We might agree with Rowe's choice of "fine" in [A] and [B], but disagree with him by sticking to "fine" in [C]. An objection to this view might seem to arise from the first sentence of [A], where Aristotle, according to Ross, compares the magnificent person to an artist and speaks of his good taste. But Ross's rendering of the relevant terms depends on an aesthetic interpretation of the passage, and does not support it. Instead of "artist" we might reasonably prefer "expert." "Good taste" appears to have the support of LSJ (s.v. *emmelês*), who cite four passages.²² Three of these passages, however, are from this chapter, and it is not clear why all four cannot be rendered by "suitable" or "fit," which LSJ suggest for other passages. Neither Aristotelian nor non-Aristotelian usage requires any reference to aesthetic good taste. Once we remove the spurious support that Ross's rendering offers to an aesthetic interpretation, we have no good reason to render *kalon* by "beautiful" rather than by the more general "fine" in all of [A]–[D].

If we render *kalon* by "fine" throughout, we remove the appearance of equivocation that results from Ross's different renderings of *kalon*. Admittedly, the magnificent person may sometimes try to produce a beautiful result, that he may well need an eye for beauty. But it does not follow that when he acts for the sake of the *kalon* he acts for the sake of beauty. He pursues the *kalon* insofar as he aims at the fine; and so he shares the aim of other virtuous people.

8. MAGNIFICENCE AND THE COMMON GOOD

Can we say anything more informative about what the *kalon* relevant to magnificence consists in? As usual, Aristotle connects the *kalon* with the fitting and the becoming (*prepon*):

But in all cases, as has been said, we have regard to the agent as well and ask who he is and what means he has; for the expenditure should be worthy [*axion*] of his means, and suit [*prepon*] not only the result but also the producer. . . . great expenditure is becoming [*prepei*] to those who have suitable means. . . . (*Eth. Nic.* 1122b23–30 Ross)

22. LSJ⁹, s.v. *emmelês*.

The result of a magnificent person's expenditure may or may not be aesthetically attractive, but they are fine insofar as they are appropriate in these circumstances and for this person.

What, then, makes an action appropriate to the person or the circumstances? Aristotle might have answered this question by referring to the agent's circumstances. Perhaps the magnificent actions are those that represent the agent as a person of power, wealth, good family, and influence, but are restrained enough to avoid humiliating his inferior neighbors. But these are not the primary considerations in Aristotle's description of the virtue. He emphasizes the role of magnificence in the fulfilment of "liturgies," the Athenian substitute for taxation on rich families:

For, as the name itself suggests, it is a fitting [*prepon*] expenditure involving largeness of scale. But the scale is relative; for the expense of equipping a trireme is not the same as that of heading a sacred embassy. It is what is fitting [*prepon*], then, in relation to the agent, and to the circumstances and the object. (*Eth. Nic.* 1122a22–25 Ross)

Magnificence is an attribute of expenditures of the kind which we call honourable, e.g., those connected with the gods—votive offerings, buildings, and sacrifices—and similarly with any form of religious worship, and all those that are proper objects of public-spirited ambition [*hosa pros to koinon euphilotimêta*], as when people think they ought to equip a chorus or a trireme, or entertain the city, in a brilliant way. (*Eth. Nic.* 1122b19–22 Ross)

Aristotle takes the primary results of magnificent expenditure (triremes, public buildings, provision for the cult of the gods, dramatic choruses, and so on) to be public goods. In these cases, the magnificent person aims at the appropriate result for the public good—a strong navy, a well-trained chorus, etc. He attends to this goal rather than to the display of his wealth and power.

The standard of fineness and appropriateness is conveyed in the phrase *hosa pros to koinon euphilotimêta*. These results of magnificent expenditure are objects of ambition and the desire for honor (*philotimia*), but it is an appropriate desire for honor (so that they are *euphilotimêta*) because it is not a desire for honor by itself, but a desire for honor that results from promotion of the common good (*to koinon*). Magnificent actions and their results are fine insofar as they are guided by concern for the common good.

Aristotle uses the same standard to determine whether expenditure is appropriate and fine or excessive and ostentatious:

... the man who goes to excess and is vulgar exceeds, as has been said, by spending beyond what is right [*to deon*]. For on small objects of expenditure he spends much and displays a tasteless [*para melos*] showiness; e.g. he gives a club dinner on the scale of a wedding banquet, and when he provides the chorus for a comedy he brings them on to the stage in purple, as they do at Megara. And all such things he will do not for honour's sake [*tou kalou heneka*] but to show off his wealth, and because he thinks he is admired [*thaumazesthai*] for these things, and where he ought to spend much he spends little and where little, much. (*Eth. Nic.* 1123a19–27 Ross)

Here, as before, Ross's reference to taste should be replaced by a reference to appropriateness, as the following sentence suggests. The magnificent person acts for the sake of the *kalon* insofar as he aims at the common good (*to koinon*), but the ostentatious person acts to display his wealth. Aristotle does not mean that a chorus dressed in purple is less beautiful than

a chorus dressed in clothes colored with some less expensive dye. He means that this sort of display is irrelevant to the provision of a chorus that contributes appropriately to a good performance of a play.

One might object that this attempt to explain the fineness and appropriateness of the magnificent person's actions by reference to the common good gives them too narrow a focus; for they are not confined to expenditure for public causes. They also include expenditure on private objects. Aristotle anticipates this objection, and argues that it raises no difficulty for the account he has given:

Primarily [*malista*], then, the magnificent man is of this sort, and magnificence is shown in expenditures of this sort, as has been said; for these are the greatest and most honourable [*entimotata*]. Of *private* occasions of expenditure the most suitable are those that take place once for all, e.g. a wedding or anything of the kind, or anything that interests the whole city or the people of position in it; . . . for the magnificent man spends not on himself but on public objects [*ta koina*], and gifts bear some resemblance to votive offerings. A magnificent man will also furnish his house suitably [*prepontôs*] to his wealth (for even a house is a sort of public ornament), and will spend by preference on those works that are lasting (for these are the most beautiful [*kallista*]), and on every class of things he will spend what is becoming [*to prepon*]; for the same things are not suitable [*harmozei*] for gods and for men, nor in a temple and in a tomb. (*Eth. Nic.* 1122b33–1123a10 Ross)

Ross's choice of different English renderings for instances of *prepein*, and of *timê* and its cognates, may obscure Aristotle's repetition of his previous conditions for fine action. Though the magnificent person need not aim directly at the common good whenever he spends money, the common good guides him nonetheless. He builds a large house for himself, not for the common good, but he considers the effect of a large house on the common good. If it looks all right now, but will soon be a wreck, it will be a blight on the landscape; the same will be true if it is large, but repulsively ugly. When Aristotle says that longer-lasting things are *kallista*, he does not necessarily express an aesthetic preference for sculptures over paintings, but suggests that longer-lasting things will be a more enduring, and therefore more appropriate, monument to the individual and a greater benefit to others. We have no reason to accept Ross's choice of "most beautiful" to render *kallista* (Rowe wisely prefers "finest").

Aristotle, therefore, treats magnificent expenditure on one's own house and other private objects as a secondary form of expenditure on matters of common concern. He implies that this sort of expenditure is not a purely private matter. His description of this virtue, therefore, does not undermine, but supports, our suggestion that promotion of the common good is the common feature of *kalon* actions in ethics.

It may be helpful to add a brief comparison of the treatment of magnificence in the *Nicomachean Ethics* with the treatment in the other two Aristotelian ethical treatises. As usual in the treatment of the particular virtues of character, the description in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is fuller than in the other two works. Moreover, the amplifications are not simply decorative, but also instructive on the point that concerns us. I have emphasized two features of

the treatment in the *Nicomachean Ethics*: (1) The references to *kala* results and to action for the sake of the *kalon*; (2) The primary emphasis on action for the common good. Neither feature is present in the treatments in the *Magna Moralia* (1.26) and the *Eudemian Ethics* (2.6). Though they speak of what is *prepon*, they use neither *kalon* nor *koinon*. Nor do they explain the relation between magnificence in private and in public expenditure in the way the *Nicomachean Ethics* explains it. Indeed, they do not discuss the public aspect of magnificence at all.

Our reaction to these differences between the three treatises will depend on other questions about their relation: (a) We might simply say that they result from the greater detail in the *Nicomachean Ethics*; (b) If we think the *Nicomachean Ethics* is earlier than the *Eudemian Ethics*, and the *Magna Moralia* is later and spurious, we may say that Aristotle came to believe that his emphasis on the public aspect of magnificence distorts the facts about the virtue; (c) If we think all three treatises are genuine, and that the *Nicomachean Ethics* is the latest, we may say that Aristotle came to believe that the public aspect of magnificence explains why it is a genuine virtue of character. I believe the third answer is more plausible than the first two, but I cannot argue all the relevant points here.

But even if we leave these questions undecided, the two basic differences between the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the other treatises are none the less helpful. The *Nicomachean Ethics* is the only one of the three treatises that mentions the *kalon* in its account of magnificence, and so might appear to support an aesthetic interpretation. But at the same time it presents an explanation of the relevant type of *kalon* by reference to the common good. Since the *kalon* and the common good are so closely connected in Aristotle's conception of this virtue, we may reasonably infer that this connection captures his conception of the *kalon*. Our study of the virtue of magnificence, therefore, does not support the view that concern for the *kalon* is primarily concern for beauty. It suggests that the virtuous person aims at the *kalon* by aiming at the common good.

9. UNITY AND VARIETY IN THE *KALON*

What should we conclude, then, about Aristotle's use of *kalon* in light of his view that the *kalon* is homonymous? (1) On the one hand, we have found good reason to deny that he ascribes one and the same property to all *kalon* things, or that he gives the same account of what makes them *kalon*. Some things are *kalon* insofar as they are beautiful, others insofar as they are well ordered, and others insofar as they are praiseworthy attempts to promote a common good; (2) More specifically, we have found no good reason to claim that all *kalon* things are *kalon* insofar as they are beautiful. Aesthetic attractiveness belongs only to a proper subset of *kalon* things. Hence we should not use "beautiful" to translate *kalon* everywhere; (3) Nor, however, should we use "beautiful" in some places and (say) "right" in other places, according to our judgment about which type of *kalon* we think Aristotle has in mind. Some passages—especially the discussion of the role of appropriate size in making something *kalon* and the chapter on magnificence—seem to

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."¹ 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.