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Aesthetic Ethics without Evil. *Aischron* in Greek Popular Ethics

Abstract

In the paper I consider the Greek term *aischron* as a candidate for a moral concept of evil, focusing on popular rather than philosophical Greek ethical thought. I distinguish between a wide and a narrow concept of evil, focusing in the enquiry on the latter. A narrow concept of evil is limited to a moral meaning, referring to moral agents and actions. In this use evil represents the strongest negative evaluative term of moral agents and actions. I begin the analysis of *aischron* with a scrutiny of its positive counterpart, *kalon*. I synthetically discuss the ongoing discussion regarding its meanings. I then turn to the term *aischron* and its cognates and conclude that its meanings have a similar, albeit not identical, range to *kalon*. In both cases the semantic field of these terms include a functional, aesthetic, and ethical component. I further argue that these three components are interconnected which suggests that the various meanings of *kalon* and *aischron* are not homonymous. On this basis I argue that the functional and aesthetic components present fundamental difficulties for reading *aischron* as denoting moral evil.

Keywords

Metaethics, Evil, *kalon*, *aischron*, Popular Morality

In this paper, I consider the concept of evil in popular ethical thought of the Greek archaic and classical periods (roughly from the 8th to the late 4th c. BCE). I use the term “popular thought” rather than “literature.” It would be inaccurate to distinguish between the study of evil in ancient Greek literature and philosophy since there was no literature in the modern sense in the archaic and classical Greek world. In fact, such an opposition would be particularly misleading in the case of authors such as Plato, who relied essentially on dramatic and narrative devices in the construction of reasoning.

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A more viable approach would be to discriminate between Greek philosophy and poetry, where the difference could consist roughly in that the claims of poetry are predominantly declarative and/or enthymematic, while philosophical texts strive towards more rigorous reasoning. Even so, this categorization struggles to accommodate such authors as Xenophanes and Empedocles on the one hand, and Isocrates on the other.

I use the term “popular” as referring to sources that can be plausibly considered to reflect an everyday understanding of ethical concepts as opposed to a theoretical (“philosophical”) systematization thereof. Naturally, the boundary between the “popular” and the “philosophical” is bound to be fluid, particularly in a period formative for philosophy as a distinct endeavor. A general criterion that should suffice is the degree of technicality and systematicity of a given source. A philosophical source is thus assumed to display a degree of technicality that made it markedly less accessible for the general ancient readership as well as a tendency towards integrating its component concepts within a systematic theoretical frame. I borrow a further but related criterion from Bernard Williams. Echoing an argument made to this effect by Nietzsche, Williams distinguished between ancient authors that offered descriptive psychological ethics and ones that sought to develop a normative ethical psychology informed by theoretical ethical preconceptions.¹ Accordingly, the following considerations are limited to non-technical sources that were addressed to the general educated readership and reflected everyday modes of thought and speech rather than examined the latter from the vantage point of a systematic ethical theory. As this criterion is only rudimentary, I concede a degree of liberality if not arbitrariness

¹ Commenting on Nietzsche's *The Dawn* 168 Williams acknowledges: “There is a certain amount that is fanciful or, again, dated in Nietzsche's judgement, but it contains a helpful insight. Thucydides may not be as impartial in a local sense as used to be thought [...], but he is so in the sense that the psychology he deploys in his explanations is not at the service of his ethical beliefs. [...] But Thucydides' conception of an intelligible and typically human motivation is broader and less committed to a distinctive ethical outlook than Plato's; or rather—the distinction is important—it is broader than the conception acknowledged in Plato's psychological theories. The same is true, if less obviously, in relation to Aristotle” (Williams 2008, 161-162). Cf. Nietzsche, *Morgenröte* 168; *Götzen-Dämmerung* 2; Williams 2008, 163-164. Williams and Nietzsche argued on the basis of this distinction that Greek philosophical ethics differ substantially from popular Greek ethical thought, a contentious conclusion on which I do not take sides here. For the present purpose the weaker premise is sufficient, namely that there are ancient sources that display a marked degree of technicality and systematicity in their treatment of ethical concepts.

in making the selection. I include the Greek poetic tradition, historiography, and oratory. In addition, I draw on less technical passages from philosophical sources, such as Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Rhetoric*. Excluded from the present study are the (putatively) systematic ethical theories of Plato and Aristotle,² as well as technical and revisionary conceptions of Pre-Socratic authors such as Heraclitus and Democritus.

For an inquiry about the concept of evil in popular Greek ethics it is necessary to begin with a delimitation of the relevant concept, since modern scholarship is far from consenting to a predominant meaning. It is fairly uncontroversial, however, that, whatever its other features, a coherent concept of evil must express the highest degree of condemnation. Further, from a metaethical perspective it is apposite to distinguish between a broad and a narrow concept of evil. The former comprises a moral as well as a natural meaning, encompassing actions and agents but also physical and supernatural (e.g. eschatological) states and events. The latter is limited to a moral meaning, qualifying solely moral actions and agents.³ The broad concept of evil is intimately related to the (originally) theological problem of evil, namely whether the presence of evil in the world can be made compatible with the endorsement of the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient and supremely good God. As this problem is arguably absent from Greek thought of the archaic and classical periods,⁴ the present study is limited to the nar-

² Aristotle's conceptions of evil have been recently discussed from various perspectives in Kontos ed. 2018. For the present paper relevant are the discussions of the possibility of evil in Aristotle's ethics and politics. These are discussed in several insightful ways, all of which arguably fall short of identifying a full-blooded narrow concept of evil in Aristotle's thought. The two most promising candidates for a concept of moral evil are Aristotle's concept of vice and his concept of *thēriotēs*, the status of which in Aristotle's ethics is debated in Kontos 2018 and Perason 2018. Arguably, however, both these concepts fall short of a modern narrow concept of evil. The main reason for this in the case of vice is that this constitutes in Aristotle's scheme the opposite of virtue, and thus lies on the opposite end of the same scale of traits, rather than being distinguished qualitatively. In the case of *thēriotēs* it is debatable whether the state thus described constitutes a human condition at all, and even so whether it should more appropriately be categorized as severe illness and/or insanity. Relevant to the inquiry regarding a narrow concept of evil in Aristotle is also the consideration of failed constitutions in Kraut 2018. However, Kraut's assessment of the tyranny as a likely candidate for an evil constitution hinges on the identification of ethical vice as evil rather than severe badness.

³ Authors arguing that moral evil qualifies primarily actions and secondarily agents include: Thomas 1993; Garrard 1998; Kekes 2005; Russell 2014. The inverse view is upheld by, among others: Haybron 2002; Perrett 2002; Singer 2004.

⁴ There is evidence of unease concerning the possibility of harmonizing ethical failure and the resultant suffering (though not suffering resulting from natural disasters) as early

row concept of evil, which may be characterized as “the worst possible term of opprobrium imaginable” as used of moral actions and agents (Singer 2004, 185).

The narrow concept of evil requires further specification. Most fundamentally, for a sound distinction from the broad version, some feature associating it with specifically moral actions and agents is required. The narrow concept of evil thus implies the delimitation of a specifically moral domain of actions and agents. Moreover, within such a domain the concept of evil ought to be distinguished from moral badness and moral wrongness, wherein it usually is construed as a subtype of moral wrongness, distinguished by special traits.⁵ Given the considerable complexity of the current discussion on the moral concept of evil it would seem that a fruitful inquiry into its ancient Greek equivalents would require either settling for one of the definitions put forward or relying on a hybrid set of criteria drawn from various approaches. The former method would of course be laden with an anachronistic bias—there is no apparent reason why this or another modern theory of evil should be particularly appropriate for transposing it onto ancient Greek sensibilities. The latter method would at best yield an artificially complex and unwieldy concept of evil and an incoherent one at worst.

Instead of adopting specific criteria for a concept of evil, I employ a method of semantic analysis. It follows from the above considerations that a narrow concept of evil is standardly taken to express the highest moral condemnation. In ordinary archaic and classical Greek, the highest positive evaluative term applied to actions and agents was *kalon* and its cognates (such as the adverb *kalōs*). As its negative counterpart the Greeks usually employed the term *aischron*. If, therefore, the Greeks had a concept of “evil” in the narrow, moral sense, it can be reasonably expected that this would be expressed by at least some of the uses of *aischron*.

as Xenophanes, and such considerations certainly play a part in Plato’s conceptions of the divine (cf. *Republic* 10.617de; *Theaetetus* 176bc; *Timaeus* 30a; *Euthyphro*, passim).

⁵ Several criteria for distinguishing moral evil from moral wrongness of action and agent have been suggested. For evil action as morally wrong that the agent takes pleasure in see Steiner 2002; for evil action as involving intentional harming see Calder 2013; for evil as distinguished from wrongful action by the degree of harm involved see Card 2010, Liberto and Harrington 2016; for evil action as involving a pathological motivational scheme see e.g. Thomas 1993; Garrard 1999; Steiner 2002; Perrett 2002; Calder 2003, 2009; Eagleton 2010; for evil character as involving particular emotional states see McGinn 1997.

In what follows I focus therefore on the negative term *aischron*, which I consider in conjunction with the corresponding positive term *kalon*. I begin with a brief analysis of the more widely analyzed positive term. I summarize critically the ongoing discussion concerning its various meanings and argue that the evidence supports the conclusion that *kalon* is not homonymous but rather that its various meanings, which can be grouped under the heading of three semantic components, is unified in a complex semantic structure. Moreover, the different meanings of *kalon* are cognate and include, crucially, an aesthetic meaning. I then turn to its negative counterpart, *aischron*, and argue that, despite some divergences, it has an analogous semantic field within which an aesthetic component plays an equally if not more prominent part. On this basis I argue that within the semantic field of *kalon* and *aischron* there can be identified a functional, aesthetic, and ethical component. These refer to, in the case of *kalon*: i) orderliness; ii) beauty; iii) praiseworthiness. Accordingly, in the case of *aischron* these are: i) disorderliness; ii) ugliness; iii) shamefulness. Moreover, the three semantic components co-determine their respective meanings which are ultimately unified in a single, albeit complex, semantic structure. *Kalon/aischron* refer, respectively, to order/disorder, the outward manifestation of which is beauty/ugliness, and which inherently merits praise/shame. In the concluding section I argue that the functional and aesthetic components raise difficulties for a narrowly moral meaning of these strong evaluative terms. If *aischron* is not homonymous then, regardless of its ethical semantic component, the functional and aesthetic meanings effect a concept too capacious for it to work as an equivalent to the modern narrow concept of evil.

The meanings of *kalon*

The positive term *kalon* has received considerably more attention than *aischron* and a brief study of its meaning will thus serve as a convenient prolegomenon to the study of its opposite. *Kalon* is the standard adjective referring to physical beauty (cf. *Iliad* 19.285, 23.66; *Odyssey* 19.208; Pindar, *Olympian Ode* 10(11).103; Sophocles, *Oedipus in Colonus* 576-578; Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 2.6.30; Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* 2.1; Plato, *Hippias Major* 291c, 293a; cf. Konstan 2014).⁶ It also denotes that which is fitting or appropriate (e.g. *Odyssey* 14.253, ἐπλέομεν Βορέῃ ἀνέμῳ ἀκραεῖ καλῶ; Sophocles, *Electra* 384; Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War* 5.59.60; Plato, *Hippias Major*

⁶ Cf. Aristotle, *Poetics* 4.1448b12; *Poetics* 7.1450b34-39; *Parts of Animals* 1.5.644b22-45a36.

295c; Xenophon, *Anabasis* 4.8.26; cf. Dover 1974, 69-73). These two meanings may be closely allied, as in Plato's *Hippias Major*, or one of them may be suppressed, as in Aristotle's characterization of *to kalon* in the *Rhetoric* 1.9 (where he draws on popular usage) as that which is in itself desirable and (therefore?) praiseworthy (*Rhetoric* 1366a33-34). These ambiguities are often lost in translation. Thus, where the *Septuagint* uses *kalon*, the Vulgate has at times *bonum* (e.g. Gen. 1:10), yet at times *pulchrum* (e.g. Song 1:15). Most importantly for the present study, *kalon* has what LSJ calls "a moral sense." Indeed, *kalon* constitutes the term of highest approval as applied to actions from Homer to Aristotle and beyond.⁷ Accordingly, as will be discussed in detail below, the negative phrase *ou kalon*, being roughly equivalent to *aischron*, is the term of greatest reproach as referred to actions and denotes that which is not to be done under pain of the highest sanction (cf. *Iliad* 9.615; *Odyssey* 8.166, 20.294; Sophocles, *Antigone* 72; Herodotus, *Histories* 3.155; Andocides 2.9).

Much effort has been put into reconciling these meanings of *kalon*.⁸ It is widely recognized that, although *kalon* most commonly refers to physical attractiveness, it cannot be universally rendered as "beautiful," not least for the reason that even in its aesthetic use its meaning does not overlap with the English term "beautiful."⁹ Firstly, objects commonly considered beautiful, particularly works of art,¹⁰ are not typically qualified as *kalon*. Secondly, *kalon* refers to things not normally taken to be beautiful physically, even aesthetically (in the modern sense), particularly things that would today be commonly considered to belong to the sphere of morality (Kosman 2010,

⁷ "So it is for the sake of the beautiful (*kalon*) that a courageous person endures and performs emotions and deeds appropriate to courage" (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1115b23) [The courageous person acts] "for the sake of the beautiful (*kalon*) for that is the end toward which virtue is directed" (1115b12-13).

⁸ As Kosman remarks, this is not a merely a matter of translational difficulty, but reflects substantive differences in ancient Greek ethical thought and modern moral philosophy: "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. [...] 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" (2010, 351).

⁹ "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" (Kosman 2010, 351).

¹⁰ But cf. Lear 2010, 360-361.

324, cf. 351).¹¹ The complexities of meaning associated with *to kalon* were recognized by Aristotle, who suggested that this term is homonymous on the grounds that it has different opposites (*Topics* 1.15, 106a20-22).¹²

Yet, a strictly homonymous, i.e. equivocal reading of *kalon* has been resisted. In one passage, Aristotle himself claims that *kalon* and the fitting (*prepon*) are equivalent (*Topics* 5.5, 135a12-14), thus tying the term to a single dominant meaning. On a more cautious approach it has been argued that, different uses of *kalon* notwithstanding, its various meanings are “related to one another essentially” (Kosman 2010, 347). This obtains for its uses in popular but also in philosophical sources,¹³ as can be seen in Plato’s *Symposium* where Diotima’s reasoning relies crucially on a progression of various non-technical uses of *kalon*, which implies that she (and Plato?) takes these uses to be at least analogous (Lear 2010, 359).¹⁴ This line of reasoning is corroborated by other related uses of *kalon* in Plato and Aristotle where the term is taken in what is arguably a popular meaning.¹⁵ In an at-

¹¹ “The concepts of beauty and of the *kalon* share a central and important applicability to the countenance [...] of persons [...] but at that point their semantic courses diverge” (Kosman 2010, 351). Cf.: “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*” (Lear 2010, 357).

¹² For various homonymous uses of *kalon* in Aristotle cf.: *i*) Aesthetic: ugly people, *Generation of Animals* 769b18-20, referring to ugly people; [*Mir. Ausc.*] 830b16-19, referring to the beauty of the cuckoo; *History of Animals* 616b16-18, referring to the beauty of a bird’s plumage; *ii*) Goal-directed order: *Parts of Animals* 644b32-645a1; 645a23-25, 640a33-b1, referring to that which has a final cause; *Generation of Animals* 760a32, referring to the *taxis* of nature *iii*) Abstract order: *Metaphysics* 1078a31-b2, referring to mathematical objects; *Poetics* 1450b36, *Politics* 1326a33; *Topics* 116b21, that *to kalon* consists of order and greatness; *iv*) Ethical: *Eudemian Ethics* 1248b23-25; *Nicomachean Ethics* 1176b7-10, referring to noninstrumental goods, what is praiseworthy. Cf. Irwin 2010.

¹³ “Plato and Aristotle’s use of *kalon* as a moral predicate is standard and unmarked, and [...] our use of ‘beautiful’ as a moral predicate is not” (Kosman 2010, 350; cf. 346-347).

¹⁴ “Plato’s argument at *Republic* 401b–403c that one’s taste for the *kalon* in poetry, music, and boys’ bodies shapes one’s sense of the *kalon* in human character is not persuasive unless there is some robust unity to the concept. The point is not so much that his argument is not in fact persuasive; the point is that it is hard to see how Plato himself could have thought it was persuasive unless he thought that *kalon* named something robust. Likewise for Aristotle: the comparison of the virtuous person’s delight in *kala* acts of virtue to the musically educated person’s pleasure in *kaloi* melodies (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1170a8-10) would hardly be worth making if *kalon* did not mean the same thing in both cases and point to a property more interesting than the merely commendable” (Lear 2010, 359-360).

¹⁵ “Aristotle assumes that good musicians produce *kala* ‘melodies and rhythms’ (*Politics* 8.6.1341a14). No one could reasonably deny that *kalon* means ‘beautiful’ here. Aristo-

tempt to reconcile these uses, Aryeh Kosman proposes to read *kalon* within a “rhetoric of appearance”: *to kalon* is the appearance of the good (*to agathon*), the “shining forth of the thing’s nature” (Kosman 2010, 355), the manifestation of a thing’s “integrity of being” (354). Appearance refers here to that which is inherently subjective and intersubjective. Therefore, what is *kalon* is also that which is inherently desirable (Kosman 2010, 355-356; cf. Aristotle, *Topics* 1.15, 106a20-22). According to Kosman, *to kalon* and beauty both refer to the appearance¹⁶ of virtue, but they have a different meaning, for the meaning of appearance has changed since antiquity and is now more sharply opposed to a thing’s being. Appearance, and thus beauty, but not *to kakon*, is skin-deep. Gabriel Lear extends this to say that *to kalon* is the appearance of *to agathon* that is inherently pleasing. But the notion of pleasure has also changed, which in antiquity was “practically meaningful,” while in modern philosophy it tends to be taken as non-representing (Lear 2010, 359). This may be particularly relevant for comparisons of the ethical import of pleasure in e.g. Aristotle and Kant (cf. Korsgaard 2008, 174-207). Rachel Barney, on the other hand, argues that *to agathon* and *to kalon* are closely related in meaning in that both refer to order (Barney 2010, 365).¹⁷

tle was not deaf to the aesthetic appeal of music, and ‘beauty’ brings out that aspect of music better than any other word. Now, in the previous chapter, he had said that when one listens to musically accompanied words that portray ethical deeds, one learns how to correctly assess and enjoy ‘decent characters and *kalais* (dative plural of *kalon*) actions’ (8.5.1340a17–18). So, when one listens to musically accompanied words that represent the *kala* actions of good people, one undergoes an imaginative experience of something that is *kalon*. [...] For [Aristotle], beautiful music is beautiful in part because it is about actions that are *kala*. It would be implausible to suppose that here ‘*kalais* actions’ does not mean ‘beautiful actions’” (Kraut 2013, 236). Cf. the argument of Gottlieb, who notes that both Plato and Aristotle liken virtue to musical attunement: “Aristotle describes the person who has the virtue of mildness as being disposed meanly and not violently or slackly (sphodrōs kai aneimenōs, *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.5.1105b25-28, Gottlieb 2010, 379). Cf. Plato, *Republic* 441e: “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” (trans. Grube/Reeve 1992, cited in Gottlieb 2010, 380).

¹⁶ The term appearance denotes for Kosman primarily that which is apparent to the senses. As Lear 2010 points out, this may cause problems for his argument. However, one may take “appearance” in this characterization of *to kalon* in a wider sense to include mental perception of e.g. scientific proofs. Cf. Lear 2010, 360.

¹⁷ A key passage for the argument linking *to kalon* with order is Plato’s *Philebus* 64, ff. Cf. Barney 2010; Gottlieb 2010, esp. 378; Meinwald 2008. Aristotle standardly couples order with magnitude as a necessary condition for being *kalon*: “A *kalon* animal and every

They are distinguished on the level of psychology, with *to agathon* being connected with desire and *to kalon* with admiration (Lear 2010, 360-362; cf. Gottlieb 2010, 379). *To agathon* is the object of desire, *to kalon* is the object of *eros*.¹⁸

In conclusion, the various uses of *kalon* may be collected under the heading of three general semantic components. These are: i) order ii) beauty, and; iii) praiseworthiness. Moreover, the three semantic components are not independent of each other. How they are connected is a contentious matter. It may be argued that one of them is primary in relation the two remaining.¹⁹

kalon thing made up of parts must not only have them properly ordered (*tetagmaena*), but also be of a particular magnitude. The *kalon* is a matter of size and order (*taxis*), and therefore impossible either in a very small animal [...] or in one that is very large" (*Poetics* 7, 1450b34-39). In the *Metaphysics* 13.3.1078a31-b1 Aristotle makes the same point arguing that the unchanging objects of geometry are *kalon*: "The most important kinds of *kalon* are order (*taxis*), proportion (*summetria*), and definiteness (*hōrismenon*)". As Kraut notes, this is the reason that nothing can be added or subtracted from what is *kalon* without making it worse (cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.6.1106b9-12; Kraut 2013, 234). In the sphere of ethics, it could be argued that the doctrine of the mean applies an analogous formalism to agency (cf. Kraut 2013, 234). Cf. Aristotle, *Politics* 5.9.1309b23-24 on noses that are most *kala* for being straight.

¹⁸ "A thing's being *kalon* is not a cosmetic supplement, a surface that is painted in; 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" (Kosman 2010, 355).

¹⁹ Irwin argues that Aristotle uses *to kalon* to denote distinct properties. *To kalon* is not equivocal but it is homonymous. It has a single reference, but multiple differing senses (Irwin 2010, 382). Not all *kalon* things are such because of a single property, particularly not because of beauty, the different senses of *kalon* share an essential core that implies the term should be translated uniformly. Irwin points to the *Nicomachean Ethics* 1122a34-23a17 where *kalon* is used to qualify balls, bottles, works of art, and the object of virtuous actions. Since these uses are close apart but suggest different senses, Irwin proposes the translation of *kalon* as "fine," which is unitary but wide enough to encompass the difference in nuance (Irwin 2010, 391). Kraut argues that there is always an aesthetic component to the meaning of *to kalon* including, crucially, ethical uses. Aristotle says in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1169a26-29 that in performing virtuous actions the virtuous person gains *to kalon* which more than compensates for possible losses. Parsing *to kalon* in this passage as "fine" or some other abstract and general term is less than explanatory. Kraut argues that Aristotle's argument is best understood if one takes *to kalon* to mean beautiful. When Aristotle says that there are three kinds of choice worthy goods, namely the beneficial, the pleasant, and *to kalon* (*Nicomachean Ethics* 2.3.1104b30-31) it would be uninformative to parse *to kalon* here as praiseworthy, because that would leave the question of why such

This approach, however, is less than satisfactory in accommodating the above-mentioned arguments from analogous uses of *kalon*. A preferred approach would be to integrate the three semantic components in a unified semantic structure. As discussed above, this approach yielded an interpretation of *kalon* as meaning orderliness and fitness that is inherently manifested in beauty and which is for this very reason praiseworthy. This unity of the meanings of *kalon* does not preclude their variegated use as conditioned by specific contexts.

The meanings of *aischron*

How does the unity of meaning and variety of uses of *kalon* bear on the meanings and uses of its negative counterpart, *aischron*? Indeed, there are far reaching parallels between the uses of *kalon* and *aischron*. As with *kalon*, *aischron* is the standard term denoting physical quality, in this case negatively (e.g. *Iliad* 2.216; Herodotus, *Histories* 1.196; Hippocrates, *De articulis* 16). It may mean physical discomfort as well as mental dissatisfaction (Aristophanes, *Lysistrata* 923; cf. Dover 1974, 71). It is also a key evaluative term, referring to what is base and shameful (*Iliad* 2.298; Aeschylus, *Septem* 685; Sophocles, *Electra* 621, 989; Sophocles, *Philoctetes* 476; Euripides, *Hippolytus* 511; Andocides 2.9; Plato, *Symposium* 183d; cf. Dover 1974, 70). Crucially, *aischron* is the strongest evaluative Greek term referring to actions. Actions thus qualified are on the whole not to be performed under the gravest of sanctions (Sophocles, *Ajax* 473; Herodotus, *Histories* 3.155, cf. also the examples below). As in the case of the various meanings of *kalon*, is difficult if not impossible to make a clear-cut distinction between these uses, and they are often employed interchangeably, as is the case e.g. in Plato's *Gorgias*.²⁰ It is therefore plausible to conclude that *aischron* covers the same semantic field as *kalon*, albeit with a negative valence: it is that which is disorderly and unfitting, physically repelling, and blameworthy.

objects of choice are praiseworthy. It cannot be parsed as good or pleasant, on pain of repetition. Kraut does not argue against parsing it as "pleasant," and concludes that the passage does not tell against an aesthetic reading of *to kalon*.

²⁰ "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. 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" (Kosman 2010, 353; cf. Fine 2016).

In the Homeric epics *aischron* is the strongest term of reproach used of actions, denoting primarily failure: "It is *aischron* to remain long and return empty-handed" (*Iliad* 2.298; Adkins 1960: 33). This also implies public disapproval, denoted by the term *elencheiē* (cf. *Iliad* 2.284-88). The reference to failure is supported by the affinity between *aischron* action and the strongest term of denigration used of people, namely *kakos* (cf. also *ponēros* and *deilos*). The opposite of the *kakos* is the *agathos*, referring to the person endowed with "competitive excellences." It denotes especially men who "successfully exhibit the qualities of a warrior," who possess "wealth and social position," the resources enabling their success. The *agathos* is he who does not fail in his role as a leader and protector of his dependents, both in war and in peace. Thus, the strongest words of commendation in epic language denote men of success. Accordingly, as Adkins concludes, "the most powerful words in the language are used to denigrate those who fail" (Adkins 1960, 34). Therefore, the worst kind of action, denoted by the term *aischron*, refers to failure.

When used of people, the adjective in the masculine and feminine denotes primarily physical ugliness (Adkins 1960, 30-31).²¹ Accordingly, the neuter form of the adjective retains an aesthetic semantic component. However, *aischron* action is condemned not primarily for being unseemly or downright ugly, but for constituting failure. This is seen in that the term *kalon*, which in later texts functions as the standard negative counterpart of *aischron*, is not used as a term of commendation in reference to successful actions. In Homer *kalon* has a narrower meaning, referring to physical beauty and seemliness. If the aesthetic component was crucial for the force of these terms, then *kalon* would in Homer be as strong a term of commendation as *aischron* is as a term of condemnation; but it is not (Adkins 1960, 43-46). Nevertheless, in Homeric language there is a clear nexus between failure and ugliness/unseemliness, as seen in the term *aischron*, with the first trait being of primary importance and the second as its outward manifestation. The close association of ethical baseness and physical ugliness is apparent in the description of Thersites (*Iliad* 2.211ff). He is both a cantankerous curmudgeon, viciously malicious towards the *basileis*, and simultaneously described as grotesquely ugly and disfigured. He is explicitly called

²¹ *Aischron* is not the only term to qualify actions in Homer. Another, closely related term is *elencheiē*, which refers to the feeling of shame and public reproach incurred as a result of having committed an *aischron* action (Adkins 1975: 33). I do not discuss *elencheiē* because it lacks the aesthetic connotation of *aischron*, while it is not a primary term of reproach.

aischistos, which is revealingly ambiguous: it refers to Thersites as a whole, taking his ethical and physical features together (*Iliad* 2.216). The coupling of these two traits constitute the quality of meriting the strongest disapproval. Moreover, what is *aischron*, unseemly failure, incurs public reproach and thus the force of this quality is inherently bound with its intersubjective scrutiny.

The nexus of physical and ethical virtue is thus already present in the Homeric epics, but it becomes more robust and fortified in lyric poetry, especially that produced for or in a sympotic context. The affinity of psychic and physical features is apparent also in Tyrtaeus fr. 10, where *aischron* (as well as *kalon*) refer interchangeably to traits of the body and character. As in the case of Plato's *Symposium* and Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, the ambiguity of these two terms appears to be exploited by Tyrtaeus self-consciously to argue his point (cf. Adkins 1960, 163-164). It is not that these terms are used equivocally; rather, they are variegated manifestations of a unified by a core semantic structure, which allows one to emphasize different components of their meaning depending on the requirements of argumentation and context.

The nexus of physical and ethical virtue is vividly expressed by the phrase *kalos kagathos*, denoting a person of a build character and physical beauty (Solon 1.38-39; Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.6.14, 4.4.10-13; *Symposium* 3.4, 8.3, 2.4; *Cyropaedia* 5.1.18; *Agésilas* 11.6; Plato, *Republic* 3.401d-402a, 4.425de, 6.489e-490a). *Kalos* was a standard term of commendation of *erōmenoi* in pederastic relationships. It was standardly inscribed on vases awarded as gifts to *erōmenoi* by their *erastai* (cf. Dover 1989, 15-19, 57-60). Although it continued to be used as the highest term of commendation when used of actions and character, *kalon* possessed a strong aesthetic, indeed physical connotation, as is seen in the scholion cited by Plato in the *Gorgias* 451e: "you have heard, I suppose, people at parties singing the well-known song where they count up the best things: asserting that the greatest good is health, the next beauty (*kalon*), and the third, according to the author of the song, wealth honestly come by?" (trans. W. Hamilton). The phrase *kalos kagathos* did not always refer to a sublime ethical quality but had a concrete social meaning, denoting the high-born, occasionally in a derogatory context (Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War* 8.48.6; Plato, *Republic* 9.569a). The phrase retained a strong physical connotation throughout Archaic lyric poetry up to the Classical period and beyond (cf. Aeschines, *Against Timarchus* 145).

In post-Homeric sources *dikē* and (at least since Herodotus) *dikaïosunē* gain prominence as normative terms of commendation, which influences the valence of the established terms of greatest normative force, i.e. *kalon* and,

by extension, *aischron*. *Kalon* becomes assimilated to (though not identified with) *agathon* and, at times, *dikaion*, and, concomitantly, *aischron* becomes assimilated to *kakon*. Since *agathon* and *dikaion* lacked an aesthetic component, this assimilation resulted in a more marked distinction between the ethical and aesthetic uses of *kalon* and *aischron* (cf. Sophocles, *Philoctetes* 475ff; Adkins 1960, 189). To be sure, *aischron* is still used in the older, Homeric meaning, denoting primarily failure and the shame thereby incurred, while intention and adherence to social norms is largely inconsequential (cf. Aeschylus, *Persians* 444ff; *Prometheus Bound* 959; *Libation Bearers* 345ff, 493ff). The Homeric meaning of *aretē* and *kalon* persists (cf. Pindar, *Olympian Ode* 6.9, 10.91), and at times *aischron* trumps *dikaion*, but this is arguably by now a usage contested by *dikē* and its cognates as the strongest term of condemnation (Sophocles, *Electra* 558ff; Euripides, *Orestes* 194, cf. Adkins 1960, 156, 185).

However, even when *dikē* and its cognates have become established as very strong, perhaps supreme terms of approval (and their negative counterparts as terms of reproach), they did not quite supplant *kalon* and *aischron* in this role. Rather, these two groups of terms are assimilated, as is seen in another scholion, this time cited by Aristotle: “justice is noblest (*kalliston*), and health is best, but the heart’s desire is the pleasantest (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1099a, trans. H. Rackham). This is also the case in Plato, who persistently argues that what is *agathon* is *kalon* and what is *kakon* is *aischron* (Barney 2010), and for Aristotle, who defines the *kalon* as the ultimate goal for ethical agency. Moreover, despite shifts in their meaning the affinity of the physical and ethical semantic components of these terms was never obliterated. Indeed, the Greeks were aware of this and self-consciously invoked physical qualities in their assessment of ethical standing. In the *Parmenides* 127b Plato refers to Parmenides of Elea as “beautiful and noble to look at” (*kalon de kagathon tēn opsin*). Beauty was notoriously a necessary condition of happiness for Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1099b3-4; cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1123a34ff). Physical appearance could also be invoked as an argument in forensic oratory (cf. Lysias, *For Mantitheus* 19; Demosthenes, *Against Pantaenetus* 52).

It can be concluded that *aischron* comprises roughly the same semantic components as *kalon*, albeit with reversed valence. However, strictly speaking, *to kalon* and *to aischron* are not exact opposites, which is especially visible in the language of the Homeric epics. Moreover, although their semantic fields tend to converge in lyric and tragedy, as late as in the 4th c. Aristotle could argue that *to kalon* has various opposites. In the case of living beings (or a picture thereof) the equivalent of *ou kalon* is *aischron*, but in the case of

a house the equivalent of *ou kalon* is *mochthēron* (*Topics* 1.15, 106a20-22). On this basis Aristotle concluded that *to kalon* is homonymous. However, as Lear and Kraut argued, the homonymy of *to kalon* did not prevent Aristotle (or Plato) to invoke its different uses in arguments from analogy. Indeed, the two opposites of *to kalon* do not so much indicate that *to kalon* has a markedly different meaning from either *to aischron* (or *to mochthēron*), but that it can be applied in contexts where *to aischron* cannot: “[k]alon and *aischron* are contrary predicates of actions, whereas *agathos* and *mochthēros* are predicates of virtuous and vicious people, and *aretē* and *mochthēria* are applied to states of character. But the two terms do not seem to introduce radically different features of actions or people” (Irwin 2010, 383; cf. *Topics* 1.15,135a12-14).

Nevertheless, the fact that an *ou kalos* house is *mochthēros* rather than *aischros* does reveal something about the meaning of the latter term. Since *kalon* means both “orderly and fitting” and “beautiful,” an *ou kalon* living being or house may be either disorderly, ugly, or both. Yet the use of different terms of negation in these two cases indicates that in each a different property is negated. It is more likely that in the case of an artefact with a clear functional purpose such as a house the property that is negated is its usefulness rather than its outward appearance. This is corroborated by the general meaning of the term *mochthēros*, which may be used of things, particularly man-made ones, being in a state of dereliction (cf. e.g. Aristophanes, *Knights* 316 of an ox; Plato, *Menexenus* 91e of clothes or shoes; Demosthenes, *Against Phormion* 8 of trade).²² However, if *mochthēros* is the negation of the functional component of the meaning of *to kalon*, this suggests that *aischron* corresponds more closely to the aesthetic component. This is not to say that *aischron* always means ugly—that this is not the case has been amply demonstrated by the passages analyzed above. It does imply, however, that if an aesthetic component is inherent in the meaning of *to kalon* as the strongest Greek term of approval, this component is even more prominent in the meaning of *aischron*, the strongest Greek term of disapproval. As with *kalon*, the functional and aesthetic meanings of *aischron* are never clearly separated. When an action or agent is qualified as *kalon*, it is commended as both orderly and fitting as well as aesthetically pleasing. The same obtains, with reversed valence, when an action or agent is qualified as *aischron*. However, in the latter case it is plausible to expect the aesthetic component to be more conspicuous.

²² However, the case is not as clear-cut as scholars would perhaps like it to be, since *mochthēros* may at times be used of negative physical qualities (e.g. Andocides, *On the mysteries* 100), thus approximating the meaning of *aischros* as “ugly.”

Greek popular ethics and modern moral philosophy

Kalon and *aischron*, the strongest Greek terms of approval and reproach referring to actions and agents, cover a complex semantic field, which contains a functional, aesthetic, and ethical component. *Kalon* refers primarily to order and appropriateness to a given purpose; this quality has its outward manifestation in physical beauty or seemliness; and, taken together these two features merit social approval. Accordingly, *aischron* refers primarily to disorder and inappropriateness to a given purpose; this quality has its outward manifestation in physical ugliness and unseemliness; and, taken together these two features merit social reproach. Crucially, *kalon* and *aischron* are standardly used in their various meanings side-by-side in the span of a single passage without indication that their meaning has shifted substantially. Indeed, their functional, aesthetic and ethical components are intimately intertwined, reciprocally coloring their respective meanings. It is now time to draw some conclusions from these results.

Aischron satisfies the fundamental requirement for a narrow concept of evil, namely it constitutes the strongest negative evaluative term referring to actions and agents. It is further required for it to refer to a distinct moral domain. This would seem to be corroborated by the ethical semantic component of *kalon* and *aischron*. However, as was argued above this component is never self-standing but rather co-dependes on the remaining two semantic components, the functional and aesthetic one. It is this nexus that weakens the case for *aischron* being the Greek equivalent of a modern narrow concept of evil.

The functional semantic component implies that *kalon* and *aischron* do not refer to distinct properties but rather different degrees of a thing's possessing a single property, since order and disorder are opposite ends of a single scale. From this follows that the qualities denoted by *kalon* and *aischron* are commensurable, which is not ordinarily the case for evil and goodness.²³ In particular, an action or agential trait may be *aischron* in a given context but *kalon* in another. Moreover, the functional semantic component refers more accurately to what modern moral theories denote by the term badness, although it extends widely beyond this to strictly non-moral uses. In particular, contrariwise to the concept of evil, badness may qualify both actions and agents as well as inanimate objects and natural states. This is also true of *aischron*, which is commonly used of negatively valued physical traits with no apparent ethical relevance.

²³ But it may be true for badness and goodness, cf. The essential inseparability of goodness and badness in Plato's *Theaetetus* 176bd.

The aesthetic semantic component poses perhaps an even greater difficulty for reading *aischron* as a narrow concept of evil for no less than two reasons. Firstly, in its aesthetic meaning *kalon* and *aischron* refer to that which is perceptibly attractive or repulsive. The benchmark of being qualified as aesthetically *kalon* or *aischron* is a sensation of joy or pleasure, misery or suffering. A modern narrow concept of evil, however, being a kind of moral wrongness, is ordinarily taken to consist in a breach of a moral norm. As such it is at least compatible with the presence of a sensation of joy or pleasure, particularly on affective theories of evil. Moreover, the sensation involved in the *kalon* and *aischron* is non-discursive: it is an immediate psychosomatic response to a sensory stimulus.²⁴ The concept of a moral norm needs not preclude the presence of a non-discursive sensation concomitant to the enactment or breach of a moral norm. However, the presence of a non-discursive sensation cannot be the reason for determining whether the norm has been enacted or breached. If it were so, the norm would cease to be the paramount reason for moral agency that is capable of trumping all possible non-moral incentives. Given these two reasons, the aesthetic component of *kalon* and *aischron* appears as a particularly striking feature of Greek ethical thought which distances it from modern moral philosophy.²⁵

The functional and aesthetic semantic components of *aischron* are serious obstacles for reading this concept as an equivalent for a modern narrow concept of evil. The *aischron* is not a strictly moral property but an indication of disorderliness manifested in physical ugliness that is inherently reproachable. Given that *aischron* was the strongest negative evaluative term used of actions and agents it may thus be argued that popular Greek ethical thought lacked such a narrow concept of evil altogether. Indeed, it has been often argued that the conceptual categories of modern moral philosophy are inherently maladapted to the normative outlook of ancient Greek ethics. A fundamental reason for this might be that while the former is crucially

²⁴ It is worth noting, however, that for the Greeks, more so than in modern approaches, aesthetic sensations retain a greater amenability to rational analysis, as seen in Plato's *Philebus*.

²⁵ As Kosman remarks: "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" (Kosman 2010, 356).

concerned with developing a scheme for determining the moral value of single acts, the latter focuses on the valuation of the ethical agent as considered in a broad psychological, social, and biological context.²⁶ It is this broad notion of the ethical agent that the semantically complex terms *kalon* and *aischron* are specifically suited to characterize. While they do refer to ethical traits narrowly conceived, they concomitantly signal functional and aesthetic features that, albeit less straightforwardly moral, are equally relevant to the valuation of the agent's broad ethical condition. A *kalos* agent, rather than being narrowly moral, is better taken as a mentally and physically skilled, beautiful individual, the object of their community's praise. The *aischrons* agent, as a negative counterpart, encompasses an equally broad semantic spectrum. From this distinctly Greek perspective, the preoccupation with sharp evaluative distinctions, which modern moral philosophy excels at, gives way to concern for the agent as enmeshed in the contingencies of life:

It is hard for a man to become truly *agathos*, four-square in hands and feet and mind, wrought blameless. Nor does the saying of Pittacus seem to me to be well said, though it was uttered by a wise man. He says it is hard to be *esthlos*. Only a god could have this privilege. For a man it is impossible not to be *kakos* if irresistible disaster overtakes him. For when he fares well, *eu prattein*, every man is *agathos*, but *kakos* when he fares badly, *kakos*. Accordingly, I will not seek for what is impossible and throw my share in life fruitlessly away on the vain hope of finding a man without blame, among those of us who enjoy the fruit of the broad earth; but if I find him I will tell you. I praise and make my friends anyone who does nothing *aischron* of his own free will, *hekon*; but against necessity even the gods do not fight" (Simonides, Bergk 5, cited in: Adkins 1960, 165; cf. Wolf 1988).

²⁶ "The Greeks, as is shown by the writings of the elegiac poets, and even earlier by Homer, were wont to lay much more emphasis on the characteristics of the approved type of man and his excellence, the *agathos* and his *arete*, than on those of his individual actions" (Adkins 1960, 179-180, cf. 70ff). This central feature of "eudaimonism" has been discussed by numerous authors. Cf. Bayertz 2005; Swanton 2003; Audi 1995; Nussbaum 1995, 1993; Annas 1992; Broadie 1991; Williams 1985; Foot 1878; Anscombe 1958. It could be argued that the formality of *kalon* and *aischron* is also correlated with the particularism of Greek ethical thought, namely that what is appropriate to do cannot be precisely determined beforehand, but depends on the person's assessment of a given situation and his or her individual character (cf. Zingano 2013; MacDowell 2009, 1998). The aesthetic component of *kalon* and *aischron* may indeed entrench the particularist reading of Greek ethical thought, in that it emphasizes the subjective aspect of ethical valuation.

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