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Luca Torrente[1]

The Beautiful Action for Aristotle

In his writings, Aristotle uses all the different meanings that beauty possessed in the Greek culture of his time. The term καλόν was used in various contexts to mean the physically or aesthetically beautiful, an item skilfully constructed, a law or a particular kind of knowledge, as well as the suitability of an action or behavior.[2] From Homer on it was applied in the neuter singular to refer to moral goodness and had come to designate actions and persons in the moral order. Indeed, beauty constitutes a widespread dimension, a horizon always present for the Hellene and so also for the Stagirite. It is also important to point out a difference in meaning between the terms καλόν and κάλλος: while on the one hand the former indicates a wide range of meanings and most often connoted moral excellence, on the other hand the second generally indicated physical beauty in connection with desire. In this paper I will focus only on the former, as it is the term that is used in ethics.

Aristotle thinks of beauty (τὸ καλόν) as a term that can be said in many ways (πολλαχῶς λεγόμενον). In other words, καλόν possesses a multiplicity of meanings that are mutually irreducible, since it is predicated of things belonging to several *genera*.[3] The concept of beauty, being a homonym, is not a universal predicate that can be attributed to many subjects in the same way. In this sense, Aristotle detaches himself from Plato: no ideal of Beauty (whose unity is constituted by its synonymity or univocity) is thinkable. But how is it possible that the different and heterogeneous forms of beauty, even in their variety and difference, are still indicated by the same name? In other words, how is the unity of beauty possible? I

[1] Luca Torrente is a Ph.D. Student at the Université Paris IV-Sorbonne. He can be reached at lucanotterre@gmail.com.

[2] David Konstan, *Beauty. The Fortunes of an Ancient Greek Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 31.

[3] Arist. *Top.* I 15, 106 a 20-22.

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think that Aristotle includes the beautiful among those concepts whose unity is thinkable only as a homonymy πρὸς ἕν.

This peculiar type of homonymy provides a *focal meaning* between the different meanings of beauty, as happens in the case of being in *Metaphysics* Γ.[4] The type of logical-semantic unity that provides the foundation for the focal meaning model also constitutes a sufficient basis for the unity of a philosophical investigation. In homonymy πρὸς ἕν, things are not defined according to something unique (as a species of a genus), nor in a completely homonymous way (as in the case of the real man and the painted man), but in reference to one of them, namely the first. The priority of the first of the meanings has the function of a common reference point for different *genera* and is present in the definition of all the others.[5] In the case of being, this first meaning is substance, but in the case of beauty what is it? Aristotle has never spoken directly on the issue and it is an arduous task to address such a question in such a short intervention. I propose to focus now on beauty in the moral field and then try, in conclusion, to suggest an answer to this question.

In the moral context, the Greek word καλόν has been translated variously in English as "right," "good," "beautiful," "noble," "fine," "admirable," "honest," "fair," "seemly," and "honorable."[6] This fact draws our attention to two problems facing any investigation of the concept of καλόν in Aristotle's ethics. First, it seems to show that we have no English word that corresponds isomorphically to the term

[4] Arist. *Metaph.* IV 2, 1003a34 and *EE*, VII 2, 1236a16.

[5] Christopher Shields, *Order in Multiplicity: homonymy in the philosophy of Aristotle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Lisa Bressan, *Aristotele e il bello.* Poiesis, Praxis, Theoria (Lecce: Edizioni di Storia della Tradizione Aristotelica, 2012), 279-286.

[6] Kelly Rogers, "Aristotle's concept of Τὸ καλόν," *Ancient Philosophy* 13, (1993): 355; Joseph Owens, "The ΚΑΛΟΝ in the Aristotelian Ethics," in *Some philosophical issues in moral matters: the collected ethical writings of Joseph Owens*, ed. Dennis J. Billy, Terence Kennedy (Roma: Editiones Academiae Alphonsianae, 1996), 32; Terence Irwin, *Aristotle. Nicomachean Ethics* (Indianapolis-Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1999), 328-9; Brian Donohue, "Beauty and Motivation in Aristotle," *Quaestiones Disputatae* 6, no. 2, (2016): 26.

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καλόν; but this problem is something ordinary and common for any translation. The second issue is the diversity of contexts in which Aristotle employs το καλόν. In fact, we have many occurrences not only in both of his *Ethics*, but also in *Topics*, *Rhetoric*, *Poetics*, *Politics*, *Metaphysics*, and *Parts and Movement of Animals*. Aristotle seems to apply this concept to a multiplicity of things such as: personal beauty, features of animals, forms of nature, a thing's proper functioning, music, dramatic performances, geometrical objects, and contemplative activity.[7] Therefore, we are faced with a heterogeneity of meanings that this term can have, something that reappears in the problem of the homonymy of πρὸς ἕν and its first meaning.[8]

I decided to translate the term καλόν as "beauty" in this paper because this was the primary literal meaning of the word in Aristotle's day, and it had been since Homer's, when the term indicated beauty in a general way to describe any kind of object.[9] This translation is intended to remain vague enough to maintain all the above-stated meanings. Now it is time to enter the heart of my argument and talk about beautiful action.

In the ethical works of Aristotle, the καλόν is expressly called the end or goal (τέλος) of the virtues. It is the purpose by which virtuous action is defined and its only motive. The virtuous person acts "for the sake of the καλόν" (τοῦ καλοῦ ἕνεκα), so the beauty of a certain action causes him to decide to act in a virtuous way.[10] We can see, for example, the case of courage in the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

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[7] Hermann Bonitz, *Index aristotelicus* (Graz: Akademische Druk-U. Verlagsanstalt, 1955[2]), 360.

[8] Donohue, "Beauty and Motivation in Aristotle," 26.

[9] The relative confusion concerning the meaning of καλόν is well represented by the Platonic aporetic dialogue of the *Hippias Major*, whose argument is in fact the definition for "beauty". See Jean Vanier, *Le Bonheur. Principe et fin de l'action morale aristotélicienne*, (Paris-Bruges : Desclée de Brouwer, 1965), 258-265; Konstan, *Beauty*, 115-119.

[10] Arist. *EN*, III 11, 1116a28, b2-3; 12, 1117b9, 14; 14, 1119a18, b16; IV 2, 1120a12, 23; 4, 1122b6; 6, 1123a24, V 12, 1136b22; *EE*, VIII 3, 1248b19; *MM*, I 19, 1190a29; 21, 1191b17. This formulation is problematic for Bernard Williams, *Acting as the*

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> The courageous person will be undaunted so far as is humanly possible; so, though he will fear even the things not beyond human endurance, he will stand his ground for the sake of what is beautiful (since this is the end of virtue) in the right way and as reason requires.[11]

Virtuous action is an end in the self, "to act well" (εὐπραξία);[12] it is not an external good, as would happen, for instance in the case of production (ποῖησις), where the product is useful to something or someone for a further purpose.[13] For Aristotle, in fact, action (πράξις) is distinguished from production precisely because of having in itself its own end. Acting for the sake of the καλόν is contrasted with acting under compulsion, and with acting for some further and external end to which the beautiful action is merely instrumental.[14] In addition, the beautiful is contrasted with the pleasant and the expedient,[15] and linked to leisure.[16]

In the previous lines we have seen how complex and intricate the network of relationships around the notion of "beautiful action" is. It is important to focus on at least two of these relationships: the one with usefulness and the one with good. So, what kind of link is there between beauty and goodness (τὸ ἀγαθόν)? Like 'beauty' and 'being,' 'good' also can be spoken of in many ways (πολλαχῶς λεγόμενον).[17] In the first place, we can say that the two concepts differ because the good always applies to actions, while beauty is also

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virtuous person acts, in *Aristotle and moral realism*, ed. Robert Heinaman (Boulder/San Francisco: Westview Press, 1995), 13-23.

[11] Arist. *EN*, III 7, 1115 (Crisp's translation modified). ὁ δὲ ἀνδρεῖος ἀνέκπληκτος ὡς ἄνθρωπος. φοβήσεται μὲν οὖν καὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα, ὡς δεῖ δὲ καὶ ὡς ὁ λόγος ὑπομενεῖ τοῦ καλοῦ ἕνεκα· τοῦτο γὰρ τέλος τῆς ἀρετῆς.

[12] Arist. *EN*, VI 2, 1139b3.

[13] Carlo Natali, *La saggezza di Aristotele*, (Napoli: Bibliopolis, Napoli, 1989), 136; Bressan, *Aristotele e il bello*, 58.

[14] Arist. *EN*, III 11, 1116b2, IV 6, 1123a25.

[15] Arist. *EN*, II 2, 1104b31; VIII 15, 1162b35; IX 9, 1169a6.

[16] Arist. *Pol.*, VII 14, 1333b1.

[17] Arist. *Top.*, 107a3; *EE*, I 8, 1217b26; VII 2, 1236a6; *MM*, I 2, 1183b20.

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in unmoved realities.[18] But it is in relation to the concept of καλοκἀγαθία that we can clearly see the distinctive traits of each term.[19] According to chapter VIII.3 of Aristotle's *Eudemian Ethics*, there is indeed a difference between being simply "good" (ἀγαθός) and being "beautiful and good" (καλός κἀγαθός). For this reason, the two terms have a difference not only as names but also as concepts:

> For of all goods, the ones which are worth choosing for their own sakes are goals, but of these, the beautiful are all those which are praiseworthy on their own account, since the actions they generate are praiseworthy and so are they themselves: justice, both itself and the actions based on justice, and temperate actions (for temperance too is praiseworthy). But health is not praiseworthy, since neither is its product. Nor is acting strongly praiseworthy, since strength is not. They are good, but not praiseworthy.[20]

The goods, therefore, are not for their own sake, but possibilities and capacities (δυνάμεις) that man possesses to act in accordance with virtue in the best possible way. Good things are therefore wealth, command, fame, honor, strength, health, power and good luck, while beautiful things are the virtues and all the concrete actions deriving from virtues.[21] For Aristotle it is concrete action that counts, and the

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[18] Arist. *Metaph*., XIII 3, 1078a37; III 2, 996a20-b1; *EE*, I 8, 1218a22. See Donald J. Allan, *The Fine and the Good in the Eudemian Ethics*, in *Untersuchungen zur Eudemischen Ethik*, Akten des 5 Symposium Aristotelicum, ed. Paul Moraux, Dieter Harlfinger (Berlin: 1971), 64-68.

[19] For the concept of καλοκἀγαθία see Walter Donlan, "The Origin of Καλὸς κἀγαθός," *American Journal of Philology* 94, (1973): 365-374;

[20] Arist. *EE*, VIII 3, 1248b18-25 (Inwood-Woolf's translation modified). τῶν γὰρ ἀγαθῶν πάντων τέλη ἐστίν, ἃ αὐτὰ αὑτῶν ἕνεκά ἐστιν αἱρετά. τούτων δὲ καλά, ὅσα δι' αὑτὰ ὄντα πάντα ἐπαινετὰ ἐστίν. ταῦτα γάρ ἐστιν ἀφ' ὧν αἵ τε πράξεις εἰσὶν ἐπαινεταὶ καὶ αὐτὰ ἐπαινετά, δικαιοσύνη καὶ αὐτὴ καὶ αἱ πράξεις, καὶ οἱ σώφρονες· ἐπαινετὴ γὰρ καὶ ἡ σωφροσύνη. ἀλλ' οὐχ ὑγίεια ἐπαινετόν· οὐδὲ γὰρ τὸ ἔργον· οὐδὲ τὸ ἰσχυρῶς· οὐδὲ γὰρ ἡ ἰσχύς. ἀλλ' ἀγαθὰ μέν, ἐπαινετὰ δ' οὔ.

[21] Arist. *MM*, II 9, 1207b28; *EE*, VIII 3, 1248b28.

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action is beautiful if it is accomplished in view of beauty. When the virtuous person acts for the sake of beauty she also acts in accordance with virtues, and vice versa. Beauty is never in conflict with virtues and it seems that the two things, beauty and virtue, are strongly related each other. Aristotle also defines good things as "external goods" or "natural goods": they are means that can be used to do good and beautiful actions, but also evil.[22] We can say that, in some cases, the goods are a necessary condition for beautiful action, while on the other hand is not sufficient to have goods such as health or strength to define a man as "beautiful and good." So the Stagirite can state that: "goods are beautiful when the aim in acting and choosing them is beauty. That is why the natural goods are beautiful for the καλός κἀγαθός."[23]

We have said that beauty does not differ only from good but also from usefulness and advantage. There is a clear statement about this distinction in the *Rhetoric*, where Aristotle is exposing the reasons for which we praise someone for his actions:

> In like manner those who praise or censure a man do not consider whether his acts have been expedient or not, but often make it a ground of actual praise that he has neglected his own interest to do what was beautiful. Thus, they praise Achilles because he championed his fallen friend Patroclus, though he knew that this meant death, and that otherwise he need not die: yet while to die thus was the more beautiful thing for him to do, the expedient thing (τὸ συμφέρον) was to live on.[24]

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[22] Kelly Rogers, "Aristotle on Loving Another for His Own Sake," *Phronesis* 39:3, (1994): 301; Bressan, *Aristotele e il bello*, 21; Arist. *Rh.*, 1355b5-7; 1360b25-29.

[23] Arist. *EE*, VIII 3, 1249a5-7. καλὰ γάρ ἐστιν ὅταν, οὗ ἕνεκα πράττουσι καὶ αἱροῦνται, καλὰ ᾖ, διότι τῷ καλῷ κἀγαθῷ καλά ἐστι τὰ φύσει ἀγαθά.

[24] Arist. *Rh.*, I 3, 1358b38-a5. ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ οἱ ἐπαινοῦντες καὶ οἱ ψέγοντες οὐ σκοποῦσιν εἰ συμφέροντα ἔπραξεν ἢ βλαβερά, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐν ἐπαίνῳ πολλάκις τιθέασιν ὅτι ὀλιγωρήσας τοῦ αὑτῷ λυσιτελοῦντος ἔπραξεν ὅ τι καλόν, οἷον Ἀχιλλέα ἐπαινοῦσιν ὅτι ἐβοήθησε τῷ ἑταίρῳ Πατρόκλῳ εἰδὼς ὅτι δεῖ αὐτὸν ἀποθανεῖν ἐξὸν ζῆν. τούτῳ δὲ ὁ μὲν τοιοῦτος θάνατος κάλλιον, τὸ δὲ ζῆν συμφέρον.

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This example of the choice of Achilles going further than usefulness to perform a beautiful action was a *topos* for the time of Aristotle.[25] To desire to act in a beautiful way is therefore substantially different from wanting what we believe is useful for us.[26] But this does not at all mean that here Aristotle professes a modern form of altruism. Doing a certain action because it is beautiful is not to be opposed to doing the same for its own sake. Hence the virtuous person's concern with the beauty does not conflict with his deciding on virtuous actions for their own sake. Therefore he decides on them for their own sake and, for this same reason, he acts for the sake of the καλόν.

This is evident in the pages that Aristotle dedicates to egoism (φίλαυτον) in book IX of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Excellent men are concerned with doing beautiful actions more than anyone else and one could say that they are "selfish" to the maximum degree, since they attribute to themselves the best and most beautiful things (τὰ κάλλιστα).[27] He who performs a beautiful action then is not an altruist in the modern sense of the term, but his goal is to act for the sake of the καλόν and, secondly, to be admired by others, according to the Homeric model, which is characteristic of ancient Greek culture.[28] So, the beautiful action must be something that the agent can be praised for, as a result of his own voluntary action, expressing his virtuous character and decision.[29]

There is also a clear link between activity and beauty, so that for Aristotle, an active life is a beautiful life and, moreover, is a happy

[25] Hom., *Il.*, XVIII, 148 ff.; Pl., *Ap.*, 28B-C; *Smp.*, 179E-180.

[26] Arist. *EN*, IX 8, 1169a5.

[27] Arist. *EN*, IX 8, 1168b25-1169b1.

[28] Rogers, *Aristotle's concept of* Τὸ καλόν, 371; Natali, *La saggezza di Aristotele*, 137; Bressan, *Aristotele e il bello*, 71-2. On the contrary Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *Aristotle's Theory of Moral Insight*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 47. For the Homeric references see Hom. *Il.*, XII, 310 ff.; XIII, 270-273; XVII, 209-214.

[29] There is a clearly public dimension in Aristotle's ethics. Rogers, *Aristotle's concept of* Τὸ καλόν, 369-371; Id., *Aristotle on Loving Another for His Own Sake*; Bressan, *Aristotele e il bello*, 62 and 270.

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life.[30] Therefore a beautiful and happy life, which includes pleasure, is a life in which man acts to the best of his capacities. Aristotle also rejects all forms of asceticism, for he states that what is beautiful and pleasing is preferable to what is only beautiful.[31]

> Actions done in accordance with virtue are beautiful and done for the sake of what is beautiful. So the generous person will give for the sake of what is beautiful and in the correct way – to the right people, in the right amounts, at the right time, and so on, with the other qualifications that attach to correct giving. And this he will do with pleasure, or at least without pain, because what is done in accordance with virtue is pleasant or painless, and certainly not painful.[32]

In fact, man feels pleasure whenever he performs those activities in which his nature is expressed: such are beautiful actions, which are the best activities, those that in accordance with virtue. Happiness consists in the actual exercise of these actions.

We have seen that for Aristotle, the καλόν is the ultimate goal for which every virtuous action is performed: every correctly educated man sees the beautiful action as something that *ought* to be done.[33] But to return to the initial question and conclude this intervention, what is the first meaning of beauty? I think that, as we have seen in relation to performing beautiful actions, beauty in Aristotle is always connected to what is the best that the agent can

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[30] Natali, *La saggezza di Aristotele*, 308. Arist. *EN*, X 6, 1176a30-b8; *Pol*., VII 3, 1325b15-23; *Ph*., II 6, 197b5

[31] For Aristotle a beautiful action can be pleasant or painless, but hardly it can be painful. See Arist., *EN*, IV 2, 1120a25-28; VII 13, 1153a20-23; X 5, 1175a17-22; *MM*, II 7, 1206a20-25. For a case of beautiful action that involves experiencing pain see *Rh*., I 3, 1358b38-a5.

[32] Arist., *EN*, IV 1, 1120a23-27 (Crisp's translation modified). Αἱ δὲ κατ' ἀρετὴν πράξεις καλαὶ καὶ τοῦ καλοῦ ἕνεκα. καὶ ὁ ἐλευθέριος οὖν δώσει τοῦ καλοῦ ἕνεκα καὶ ὀρθῶς· οἷς γὰρ δεῖ καὶ ὅσα καὶ ὅτε, καὶ τἆλλα ὅσα ἕπεται τῇ ὀρθῇ δόσει· καὶ ταῦτα ἡδέως ἢ ἀλύπως· τὸ γὰρ κατ' ἀρετὴν ἡδὺ ἢ ἄλυπον, ἥκιστα δὲ λυπηρόν.

[33] Owens, *The* ΚΑΛΟΝ *in the Aristotelian* Ethics, 40. See Arist., *EN*, IV 1, 1120a9-1121a4.

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do, according to his nature, that is, his essence. It is not a coincidence that beauty is the end (τέλος) of virtuous action, that is, the fulfilment, the attainment of the best expression of human nature. Therefore the first meaning would be that of "excellence," or perhaps even better, that of "actualized excellence," in the sense of the first act that has attained its full purpose: ἐντελέχεια. This meaning seems to me to cover all the semantic area in which the concept of beauty appears. We can read, for example, this declaration contained in the *Parts of Animals*:

> the *for-something's-sake*, is present in the works of nature most of all, and the end (τέλος) for which they have been composed or have come to be occupies the place of beautiful (τὴν τοῦ καλοῦ χώραν).[34]

Accordingly, when something has reached its perfect state and has therefore realized its potentialities, it can be said, with good reason, that that certain thing is beautiful, as it has fulfilled its own essence.

In my contribution I have tried to show how it is possible to circumscribe beauty's unity of meaning by emphasizing its intimate connection with teleological achievement. If indeed we analyze the question within ethics, for Aristotle every virtuous action is performed for the end or goal (τέλος) of the καλόν. There are substantial differences between the beauty of an action and other characteristics of human conduct such as usefulness and goods. But there are nevertheless relationships between the capacities and goods that an agent possesses and his ability to perform beautiful actions. The person defined as καλός κἀγαθός certainly embodies the model of maximum moral perfection for an ancient Greek, since he is the one who, possessing the appropriate goods to act, decides to act in view of beauty. Such a beautiful action is not necessarily conceived as an altruistic action, since the virtuous man who has the aim of beauty is for this same reason appreciated and praised by the

[34] Arist., *PA*, I 1, 645a23-26 (tr. D. M. Balme). ἀλλ' ἕνεκά τινος ἐν τοῖς τῆς φύσεως ἔργοις ἐστὶ καὶ μάλστα· οὗ δ' ἕνεκα συνέστηκεν ἢ γέγονε τέλους, τὴν τοῦ καλοῦ χώραν εἴληφεν. See also Wolfgang Wieland, *Die aristotelische Physik* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992), 275.

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community of men in whom he lives. Finally, the proposal to identify the unity of beauty's meanings with the "actualized excellence," (ἐντελέχεια) can be applied not only to ethics, but also to other areas of Aristotle's philosophy, such as his biology.

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