**The Straightedge of Virtue: The Role of the *Kalon* in Aristotle’s Ethics**

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1. **Introduction to the question**

According to Aristotle, the goal for the sake of which the virtuous person acts is *to kalon*: the beautiful, the splendid, the noble, the fine. As my waffling over the translation suggests, there is a fair amount of uncertainty concerning what exactly this value is, so central to Aristotle’s ethics. Is *kalon* simply a word for intrinsic value? Is the *kalon* more specifically an aesthetic property? Or, as the translation ‘noble’ might suggest, is Aristotle’s point that the virtuous person acts for the sake doing what deserves communal admiration and praise?

The debate about the *kalon* is often framed as turning on the question whether it is an aesthetic property which should or should not be translated as ‘beautiful.’[[1]](#footnote-1) It is not clear to me what exactly this question is asking. If we find that, according to Aristotle, the *kalon* has certain formal features (such as ordered wholeness) which give rise to pleasure independent of preexisting appetite, does that mean it *is* an aesthetic concept like ‘beautiful?’ And if we find that, according to Aristotle, *kalon* actions always benefit the agent’s community and are worth choosing for their own sakes, does that mean that it *is not* an aesthetic concept like ‘beautiful,’ but is rather a moral concept? In fact, Aristotle believes *all* these things. The problem is that the network of concepts in which the *kalon* finds its place is not the same as the one in which we moderns place aesthetic value. Given the distance between Aristotle’s network of concepts and ours, the question whether *kalon* can be adequately translated by ‘beautiful’ is likely to be more confusing than helpful. More fruitful, I think, is to examine the respects in which the *kalon* is (or is not) like the beautiful, the splendid, and the noble. That is what I am going to try to do here.

I will explore the possibility that the ethical *kalon* is a perceptible perfection, something we use our eyes and ears and perceptual self-awareness to access and enjoy. I will argue that it is, and so that it is in that sense an aesthetic concept. But, I will argue, when the virtuous person acts for the sake of the *kalon*, she is not (at least not in the first instance) aiming to produce an occasion for contemplative appreciation. The *kalon* *qua* perceptible perfection is something which matters from the standpoint of specifically practical, deliberative reason. What I say here is not intended to be a complete theory of what Aristotle means by the *kalon* in virtuous action. I will not say anything about its political dimensions, for example, or about what the texture of a *kalon* human life is like. But if what I do say is right, it has implications for Aristotle’s theory of moral psychology and education, and I will say something about that towards the end.

1. **Parallel cases: the *kalon* in art and science**

Before diving into the ethics, I want to take a look at Aristotle’s poetic theory, where these problems of translation might seem to be more straightforwardly resolved. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle says that a well-constructed plot must be *kalon*. This is not an idle or empty point.

**Passage 1**

Any beautiful (*kalon*) object, whether a living creature or anything composed of parts, must possess not only an ordered arrangement of these parts, but also a determinate magnitude. For beauty (*to kalon*) is a matter of size and order […] So, just as beautiful bodies and animals must be of some size, but a size that can be easily seen all together, so too stories/plots must be of some length, but of a length to be easily held in the memory. […] The limit (*horos*) which accords with the true nature of the matter is this: The longer [the story], consistently with its being comprehensible as a whole, the more beautiful (*kalliōn*)it is by reason of its magnitude. (*Poetics* 7 1450b34-1451a11; inspired by Bywater and Halliwell)

*To* *kalon* is a substantive notion which serves Aristotle as an argumentative fulcrum for discovering other features of well-made plots. He argues that, in general, the *kallos* of an animal or any other complex object is a matter of its (1) ordered wholeness being (2) conspicuously evident to the mind. Applying this general conception of the *kalon* to the case of tragedy, he concludes that the poetic theorist must consider (1) what the proper parts of a tragic plot are, how they relate to each other so as to constitute an ordered whole; and must measure a tragedy’s (2) proper size or length in relation to the spectator’s memory. As we will see in a moment, this conception of the *kalon* as easily evident ordered wholeness is the conception at work in Aristotle’s ethics, too.

Now, in the aesthetic context of the *Poetics*, no one hesitates to translate *kalon* as ‘beautiful.’ It is worth noting, however, that this quality is not an excellence of mere appearance or representation—that is to say, a tragedy’s being *kalon* is not a matter of its story merely appearing to be an ordered whole; it is rather a matter of its ordered wholeness being splendidly evident to the audience. The audience must grasp the wholeness of the dramatic action, how each episode, surprising as it may be, nevertheless follows almost inevitably from the previous episode and leads inexorably to the next. The objective reality of the *kalon* artwork’s ordered wholeness perhaps explains why Aristotle has a fairly intellectualistic theory of artistic pleasure:

**Passage 2**

We enjoy observing (*theōrountes)* the most accurately-wrought (*ēkribōmena*) images of things which, themselves, are painful to look at, for example the visible shapes (*morphas*) of the lowest animals and of corpses. And the cause of this, too, is that learning is the most pleasant thing not only for philosophers but also in the same way for everyone else, however small their capacity for it. For people enjoy looking at images because, when they observe, they are learning and figuring out (*sullogizesthai*) what each thing is, e.g., that this one is so-and-so. (*Poetics* 4 1448b10-17, inspired by Bywater)

Looking at images in some way engages the perceiver’s intellect; it is a pleasure of learning, akin to pleasure in philosophy. To be clear, Aristotle is not saying that the pleasure of looking at artworks is a pleasure of recollection (à la Plato). The visible shape of the original is painful to look at and so, presumably, insofar as a painting recalls that appearance to mind, it is painful too. Instead, the object of the spectator’s pleasure—what she attends to and learns about—is the artistic image, immediately present to perception. What delights us is not what it appears to be, but what it is, an image.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Notice that Aristotle describes the objects of the spectator’s pleasure as “precisely wrought,” i.e, wrought with *akribeia*. *Akribeia*—precision—is a specifically cognitive accomplishment.[[3]](#footnote-3) So Aristotle here suggests that the spectator delights in artworks *as* the products of superior cognition. But even though the pleasure we take in an artwork is an intellectual pleasure in a product of intellectual cognition, it is at the same time a pleasure in perceiving a perceptible object (“people *enjoy looking* at images,” he says). “Look!” the spectator might say, “how perfectly that painting captures the indignation and surprise on Holofernes’ face in the moment Judith cut off his head.” The *kalon* object here is the painted image, not the gruesome original it imagines; and since its being *kalon* is a visible fact, we need to look at it in order to enjoy it.

This passage of the *Poetics* reminds us of another one in *Parts of Animals* I.5, where Aristotle again evokes the contrast between the pleasure of looking at an image and the pain of looking at the real-life animal it images (645a7-15). There, Aristotle finds his students’ revulsion towards lowly animals silly: if they enjoy looking at images which display the painter’s skill, so too they should be able to see and enjoy the astonishing beauties wrought by the hand of nature: “each and every animal will reveal to us something natural and something *kalon*.” I use the phrase “wrought by the hand of nature” advisedly (*dēmiourgēsasa phusis*, 645a 8). Aristotle does not believe in a creator god, but he does believe that living things possess and manifest intelligible structure—the well-formedness of plant and animal organs to their life activities—and it is this ordered wholeness which Aristotle thinks his students *should* enjoy looking at, just as they would enjoy looking at an accurately-crafted image. Now, the fact that Aristotle’s students are initially disgusted by lowly animals suggests that their being *kalon* isn’t immediately obvious to the untutored eye. The same is true for artworks: Aristotle says that we have to *learn* to enjoy the beauty of beautiful works of music and poetry (or perhaps what we learn is how to enjoy them better, *Politics* VIII.3 1338a30-1338b1). And yet Aristotle requires his students to *look* at these animals and tells them that if they look correctly, as scientists considering causes, they will see the sort of exquisite fashioning which, in a painting, produces pleasure. My point is that the *kallos*—the precisely-ordered wholeness—of a tragedy or painting, or of an ant or a bird, is something we access by looking and hearing; in that sense it is a perceptible, aesthetic quality. But it is not something we can grasp with the eyes and ears alone, without our faculty of reason. In fact, this seems to be a general point about appreciation of the *kalon*: it is a quality that can be literally perceived, but only by rational animals (*EE* 1230b36-1231a5; cf *Laws* 653e).[[4]](#footnote-4)

Turning now to ethics, we do—and Aristotle thinks we do—perceive actions. The question I want to address in this paper is whether their being *kalon* is likewise something we perceive. The point of this preamble has been to get clear on what kind of perceptible I am asking about. I have drawn your attention to the *Poetics* and *Parts of Animals*—his talk of beautifully-wrought images and the glorious intricacies of animals observed by science—in order to show that, at least sometimes, Aristotle thinks of the *kalon* as something we can literally perceive, but which we perceive and delight in precisely because it is something we care about as rational creatures. Virtuous actions may sometimes be *kalon* on account of the proper sensibles they display, their colors, sounds, and even smells, but on the other hand *kalon* actions are also sometimes performed by unattractive bodies, as Aristotle knows (cf. *Pol* 1254b27-1255a3).[[5]](#footnote-5) So when an action is *kalon* in the sense relevant to the virtuous person, that will not be (simply) because her embodied movement has a certain color or visible shape (*Politics* 1340a16-35).And yet, that does not settle the question whether its being *kalon* is a matter of having a perceptible perfection. Just as delighting in the beauty of a tragedy requires that we move up a level, beyond the proper and common sensibles, to the structured whole containing them, so too with *kalon* virtuous action, a complex, embodied movement structured by the agent’s decision. When we ask whether the ethical *kalon* is an aesthetic perfection, we should treat action, in the fullest sense of the word, as the perceptible object in question, not merely colors or juxtapositions of body parts.

1. **Pleasures of perceiving the *kalon* in virtuous action**

So does Aristotle believe that *kalon* virtuous actions have a perceptible perfection? Let us begin with a suggestive passage:

**Passage 3**

For a good person, insofar as he is good, delights in actions in accordance with virtue and is disgusted by ones that come from vice, just as a *mousikos* enjoys beautiful songs but is pained by bad ones. (*NE* 9 1170a8-10)

The *mousikos* is a connoisseur, the product of musical training, capable of appreciating qualities that others might miss. So, Aristotle here compares the good person’s pleasure in virtuous action to a pleasure of educated perception in beautiful songs. A simile is not an identity, of course. But in context, it is clear that Aristotle intends the comparison to be pretty close. This passage occurs in the midst of an explanation of the value of friendship between virtuous people. The details of his argument are complicated. What matters for our purposes is that, according to Aristotle, friends take pleasure in each other’s goodness precisely because they are able to perceive each other’s actions in much the same way as they perceive their own (*aisthanesthai, sunaisthanesthai,* 1170a16-1170b11).[[6]](#footnote-6) To be sure, we cannot recognize or “observe” (*theōrein*,1169b33, 1170a2*)* an action for what it is unless we grasp it as guided by rational choice, and so we are not in a position to be sure of the moral quality of another person’s choice unless we have observed them in action over time (1156b25-34). Seeing an action as *kalon* is always a matter of seeing it as part of a real or imagined pattern of action, and for this reason involves memory and reason. Still, a friend’s action is not an invisible act of the will, but a bodily movement or vocalization; it is the sort of thing which can be perceived. And Aristotle is clear that friends are in a position to observe and enjoy the *kallos* of each other’s actions because they “live together” (*sudzein*, 1170b10-11, 1171b29-72a1), spending their days in each other’s physical company. “Living together,” the activity of friendship, is not something people can do at a distance (1157b7-11) and the pleasure that comes from “perceiving” a friend’s *kalon* action cannot be obtained simply by *hearing about* what one’s friend has done. So this passage says that the virtuous friend is like the musical connoisseurin being someone who, due to his training, takes educated pleasure in perceiving something (or someone) *kalon*. And that at least suggests that the *kalon* is a perceptible, aesthetic quality of virtuous action.

Now, the *mousikos*’ pleasure in a *kalon* song is the pleasure of a disinterested spectator. Likewise, although not exactly disinterested, pleasure in a friend’s virtuous action seems to be contemplative, too. But by far the most frequent references to the *kalon* in the *Nicomachean Ethics* concern the virtuous person’s attitude towards her own action: the *kalon* is the goal she strives for. What shall we say here? Is Aristotle’s point that the virtuous person acts for the sake of giving contemplative pleasure to a spectator? And if so, who is the spectator?

There are two other passages in which the pleasantness of the *kalon* does argumentative work that can help us, Aristotle’s argument in *NE* III.9 that courageous actions in battle are pleasant and his argument in *NE* IX.8 that virtuous, apparently self-sacrificing action is in fact the truest form of self-love. In both cases, the person who takes pleasure in the *kalon* is the agent herself. For the purposes of time, I will limit myself to his *NE* IX.8 discussion of self-love. Aristotle claims that when the good person gives money, power, and even her own life so as to benefit others, she at the same time produces the *kalon* for herself (1168b27, 1169a21-22) and thereby assigns to herself the greatest benefit (1168b29, 1169a27-29; cf. 1169a34-b1; 1169a26); despite whatever pain may arise in the course of helping others, the virtuous person in fact chooses an enormous pleasure (1169a22) and gratifies her true self (*charizetai* 1168b30, b34).

This is an extraordinary and difficult argument. I want to focus on this: First, when Aristotle speaks of pleasure in *kalon* action, it is the agent’s pleasure he is talking about, not the pleasure of an admiring friend. Second, when he says that the *kalon* provides pleasure to the agent’s “true self,” the true self in question is “*nous*,” a part of the soul whose highest activity he will later call “contemplative” (*theōrētikē*,1177a18). That, combined with his talk of the agent “producing” and “assigning” the *kalon* to herself, might seem to suggest that Aristotle’s virtuous person is an aesthete, acting so as to generate beauty-in-action and then shifting to the spectator’s position from which she appreciates and enjoys contemplating the action she has done. However, although it is possible to interpret the agent here as enjoying disinterested contemplation of her own action, we should remember that, according to Aristotle, *nous* also plays a role in specifically practical reasoning. The job of practical *nous* is to “perceive” what is “last” in deliberation, i.e., “what [in particular] is to be done” (*NE* VI.11 1143a32-b14).So it is possible that when Aristotle speaks of the virtuous person “pleasing” *nous* by “assigning” herself the *kalon*, he has in mind the gratification of *nous* in its practical deployment. That is to say, the virtuous self-lover gives enormous pleasure to her *nous* not because she enjoys retrospective contemplation of how admirable her actions have been, but rather because *nous* shouts with the triumph of identifying the *kalon* action to be done. And in fact this interpretation may be preferable, since Aristotle writes that what pleases the virtuous person is the *kallos* of the particular self-sacrificing action she *chooses* (1169a22).

Note that if indeed the virtuous self-lover’s pleasure in the *kalon* is a pleasure of practical *nous*, that would support my earlier suggestion that the *kalon* is a perceptible perfection of action. Or at least, that the *kalon* is a feature of something perceptible.

Even though practical *nous* is an intellectual virtue, Aristotle is at pains to emphasize that *nous* grasps the particular action—that *this* is what is to be done—and that the particular is a domain over which perception is authoritative (*kuria*, NE 1147a25-26, 1143b2-5). Recall the lesson from our foray into the *Poetics*: the *kalon*, when it is embodied, is an object of *intelligent* perception, of which only rational animals like us are capable.We will come back to this later.

The two passages I have been discussing are in successive chapters of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The problems they address—self-love and the value of friendship—are distinct, but Aristotle’s approach to them is similar. In *NE* IX.8 he talks about the pleasure the virtuous person takes in her own *kalon* action; in IX.9 he talks about the pleasure the virtuous person takes in her friend’s *kalon* action. Furthermore, he says that the latter is the same sort of pleasure as the former. So we should expect Aristotle’s remarks about pleasure in *kalon* action to harmonize. Putting these passages together, what emerges is the idea that the virtuous person takes rational pleasure in perceiving the particular *kalon* action which she, or her friend, chooses. Like the *kallos* of a sophisticated musical performance, the *kalon* in action is a perceptible perfection which we must be trained to enjoy. Unlike the *kallos* of a musical performance, it is a perfection we may enjoy from a specifically practical, not contemplative, point of view. It is to this issue I now turn.

1. **Plato and Aristotle on craft and the *kalon***

I have been trying to provide *prima facie* support for the suggestion that Aristotle conceives of the ethical *kalon* as a perceptible and pleasant perfection. In this respect, it is an aesthetic quality. One might object, however, that this is not all that much like the modern aesthetic quality of beauty. For beauty is a matter of perceptible form, whereas the *kalon*-in-action as grasped by *nous* is its to-be-doneness, which has nothing to do with formal properties of ordered wholeness.[[7]](#footnote-7) Moreover, one might object, even if the virtuous person activates perception to recognize that *this* is the thing to be done, the action’s being perceptible is not relevant to its being considered *kalon*.

In the rest of this paper, I want to address these objections. I will examine how the *kalon* figures in specifically *practical* (as opposed to theoretical) reasoning and show that it figures there as a perfection of the perceptible form of action to be done. The desirability of the *kalon* is intrinsic to the perspective of practical reason because the *kalon* is, quite generally, the mark of a “well-crafted” product or action. And it matters that this form be perceptible in a broad sense because, when it comes to the goodness of action in its particularity, the virtuous person has no other measure—no other “straightedge”—than her own experiences of pleasure and pain on the basis of which to calculate her choice.

The key to my argument lies in Aristotle’s craft analogy. Consider this passage concerning the virtuous person’s ability to face misfortune:

**Passage 4**

We think the truly good and sensible person bears all chances gracefully (*euschēmonōs*) and always makes the most *kalon* things possible from his circumstances, just as…a cobbler makes the most *kalon* shoes from the skins he is given. (*NE* I.10 1100b35-a5)

Aristotle’s point here is that the virtuous person’s life will never become thoroughly wretched, not even in terrible circumstances, because virtue is a power to make one’s actions and life *kalon*.The analogy between craft and virtue is supposed to make his point plausible. What I ask you to notice is that it is a presupposition of this analogy, and thus a presupposition of Aristotle’s argument concerning the imperviousness of virtue to misfortune, that craft reason aims to create things that are *kalon*. A *kalon* product is the artisan’s goal and what craft knowledge enables her to achieve.

The idea that craft produces *kalon* products is one which Aristotle inherits from Plato. Since Plato is more fulsome on the topic, let us look briefly at what he has to say. Here is Socrates in the *Gorgias*, making his own use of the craft analogy:

**Passage 5**

Won’t the good man…say whatever he says not randomly but with a view to something? And just like all the other craftsmen, each of whom keeps his own work (*ergon*) in view and so does not select randomly what he applies, but so that he may give his product a certain form (*eidos*)? Take a look at painters, for instance, if you would, or housebuilders or shipwrights or any of the other craftsmen you like, and see how each one places what he places into a certain organization (*taxis*) and compels one thing to be suited (*prepon*)and fit together with (*harmottein*) another until the entire object is put together in an organized and orderly way (*tetagmenon te kai kekosmēmenon*). The other craftsmen, too,…the ones concerned with the body, physical trainers and doctors, no doubt order (*kosmousi*)and organize (*suntattousin*) the body. (Plato, *Gorgias* 503d-504a, Zeyl trans. modified)

According to Socrates, the craftsman as such—the person who does not act at random or on the basis of wild guesses, but who acts deliberately from knowledge—such a person characteristically imposes order, molds and fashions his materials into parts that are suited to each other, and fits them together in such a way as to make a whole. The verbs I have translated as ‘fit’—*harmottein*—and ‘order’—*kosmein*—frequently have aesthetic connotations. A *kosmos*, an ordered whole, is also something lovely to look at. Socrates’ point here is that the virtuous person also acts in a way that is “fitted” and “orderly,” because like the craftsman, he acts on the basis of knowledge.

This idea is pervasive in Plato’s dialogues, that craft as such “looks to” the form or essence of the product in question and seeks to realize it in given materials by making proportionate, well-ordered parts that fit together into a sharply delimited whole. This idea underlies Socrates’ arguments in the *Gorgias* and *Republic* that the disorderliness of the intemperate person and the unlimited graspingness of the unjust person mark them as ignorant and irrational. It is a crucial assumption of arguments that the physical cosmos is the creation of divine *nous*. And it lies behind his assertion that throughout the dynamic process of production, craft knowledge aims to achieve “due measure” (*to metrion*), adding and subtracting and generally doing neither too much nor too little so as to generate well-proportioned parts and fit them together precisely into a structured whole:

**Passage 6**

I imagine all such sorts of crafts (*technai*)guard against what is more and less than what is in due measure (*metrion*)…It is by preserving measure (*metron*)in this way that they produce all the good and beautiful things they do produce. (Plato, *Statesman* 284a-b, Rowe trans.)

Craft knowledge aims to produce proportionate, well-ordered, measured products—in a word, it aims to produce things that are *kalon* in the very sense we saw Aristotle talking about in the *Poetics*.

In Plato’s view, this is not a contingent fact.Knowledge aims to make things that genuinely are what they are (at least as far as possible). For example, a cobbler aims to make something that really is a shoe, not something that merely appears to be a shoe or plays the role of a shoe for only a short time. A real shoe has parts structured so as to enable it to protect the foot while walking. And precision (a cognitive value) in proportioning the shape of the parts to each other and to the whole, and in fitting them together—harmonizing them—makes that structure stable. Orderly structure holds together the product as the object it is. What I am suggesting, then, is that according to Plato there is an intrinsic connection between craft and the *kalon* because there is an intrinsic connection between genuine, stable being and intelligible order. The *kalon* is therefore a mark of something’s being precisely crafted.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Setting aside the details of Plato’s metaphysics, notice that conspicuously precise orderliness is part of our concept of “artisanal” craftsmanship, too: joints that are seamless, so to speak, the result of knowing precisely what is needed, neither too much nor too little, and resulting in a product that is durable. The master-jeweler does not try to cram as much gold as possible onto what she is making, on the grounds that gold is good. Getting as much as possible is never the desideratum of the skilled craftsman; the goal is having the *right* amount. Nor, having brought into being a harmoniously constructed piece of jewelry, is there any impulse intrinsic to craft as such to produce another one, unless having another one is called for. I suspect that this points to a very deep difference between Plato’s craft-based conception of reason and a modern, decision-theoretic conception of reason. Decision-theoretic models can accommodate the value of form by making a certain combination of the agent’s preferences itself one of the over-riding preferences, but even so, the guiding assumption is that in principle more is better. An agent who values an overall balance of preferences will arrive at limits to the pursuit of any particular preference, but those limits are contingent, not dictated by the very nature of practical rationality.[[9]](#footnote-9) For Plato, by contrast, craft reason aims not to maximize good, but to perfect form, i.e., ordered wholeness. He draws an analogy between craft and wisdom *tout court* precisely for this reason, so as to argue that the wise person, like a craftsman, lives a life that is delimited, measured, fair, in a word, *kalon*.

Returning now to Aristotle’s ethics, we saw in Passage 4 above that the virtuous person is like the master craftsman in having the power to create something *kalon*, even in unpropitious circumstances. What I want to show now is that Aristotle makes this claim because he, like Plato, has a craft conception of reason as being intrinsically aimed at embodying harmonious, *kalon* order in the relevant materials.

Recall that, famously, Aristotle defines moral virtue as a state that targets the intermediate (*to meson*, 1106b28). When the desiring part of the soul is in a virtuous condition, the agent does and feels neither too much nor too little, but exactly as wise reason would determine (1107a1-2). Importantly for our purposes, Aristotle does not simply assert this “doctrine of the mean;” he argues for it on the basis of the craft analogy, just as Plato had done before him:

**Passage 7**

It is in this way, then, that every expert (*epistēmōn*) tries to avoid excess and deficiency, and instead seeks the mean and chooses this; the mean (*meson*), that is, not in the object, but relative to us. If, then, it is in this way that every kind of expert knowledge accomplishes its product/work (*ergon*) well, by looking to the mean (*pros to meson blepousa*) and guiding what it produces by reference to this (which is why people are used to saying about produces of good quality that nothing can either be taken away or added to them, because they suppose that excess and deficiency destroy good quality, while intermediacy preserves it—and skilled experts (*technitai*), as we say, work by looking to this, and if virtue is more *akribēs* and better than any craft, just as nature is, it will be effective at hitting upon what is intermediate. I mean virtue of character; for this has to do with affections and actions, and it is in these that there is excess and deficiency and the mean. (*NE* II.6 1106b5-18, Rowe trans., modified)

Notice how Aristotle emphasizes the equilibrium and wholeness of craft products and virtuous actions alike—nothing need be taken away or added. Immediately after this passage, he will point out how complex the equilibrium of a virtuous action is: virtue strikes the intermediate “mid-point” at the right time, in relation to the right people, with the right manner, etc. Complex well-proportioned wholeness is a mark of being caused by knowledgeable cognition keeping its eye on delimiting due measure. Aristotle’s argument is that since craft aims and is effective at generating intermediate products, so too virtue, which is also an excellence of our rational nature and more precise than craft, is productive of intermediacy. (Note that he compares virtue and craft in terms of *akribeia,* a cognitive excellence.)

In this chapter, where he argues that moral virtue is an intermediate state (*mesotēs*) productive of intermediate (*meson*) actions,Aristotle does not describe the goal of virtue as *kalon*. But I would suggest that in *NE* II.6 he speaks the language of the mean rather than of the *kalon* because here he is defining the virtue of the desiring, emotional part of the soul which can obey reason but does not engage in reasoning. He is at pains to stress that even though virtuous desire and emotion are not themselves acts of reasoning, the actions they produce have complex, intelligible structure. Intermediate action is the sort of action to be shaped and given determinate form by wise deliberation. Indeed, this is the very next move of Aristotle’s argument. Having used the craft analogy to establish that moral virtue is productive of intermediate actions, Aristotle introduces a new idea: “moral virtue is productive of decisions (*prohairetikē*)…whose intermediacy is determined by *logos* and however a practically wise person would delimit it” (1106b36-1107a2). Emphasizing the intelligible structure of the sort of actions virtuous people wish to perform, Aristotle is able to claim with some plausibility that virtue typically decides (*prohairesis*), i.e., desires in a way that is shaped by knowledgeable deliberation (1113a10-11).In other words, virtuous emotions and desires do indeed participate in reason and so manifest our human characteristic *ergon* and, at the same time, display the delimitation and measuredness typical of rational control.

But although Aristotle’s emphasis in *NE* II.6 is on the intelligible delimitation and order of virtuous desire, there is no reason to doubt that he, like Plato, assumes that in describing virtuous actions as whole and intermediate, he is describing them as *kalon*.[[10]](#footnote-10) Elsewhere, he speaks interchangeably of craft products such as health and strength as being *kalon* and as possessing order (*taxis*, *EE* I.8 1218a15-24). And if he were making that assumption, it would explain why, when he turns to the detailed discussions of the individual virtues in *NE* III-V, he so frequently remarks that the virtuous person acts for the sake of the *kalon*, but says nothing about acting for the sake of the intermediate.[[11]](#footnote-11) The doctrine of the mean is in effect a doctrine of the *kalon*.

Let me pause to take stock of where we have come. I have argued that Aristotle’s claim that the virtuous person acts for the sake of the *kalon* is of a piece with his craft analogy to virtue, inherited from Plato. Because it aims to generate genuine beings, craft knowledge aims to produce harmoniously-ordered, delimited wholes. And that is just to say that craft reason is generative of the *kalon*. Since human virtue is a rational excellence more precise and more admirable than any special craft, it too typically produces actions with the formal features of order, proportion, and delimitedness which we saw at work in the *Poetics* and which in the *Metaphysics* Aristotle calls “the chief forms of the *kalon*” (1078a36-b1).

If my interpretation is correct, then it has important implications for our understanding of Aristotle’s moral psychology. One of the identifying marks of the virtuous person is that she delights in the *kalon*. As we have seen, she is like a musical connoisseur of her friends’ *kalon* actions, and the sweetness of the *kalon* in her own choices is a benefit that outweighs the sacrifice of any other good she may be called upon to make, including even her own life. But we are not born with a propensity to notice and enjoy the *kalon*. Aristotle says we must develop a “taste” for it via habituation (1179b15-16). Now, if the *kalon* is the sort of ordered wholeness that matters to craft, then what Aristotle is saying is that moral education develops one’s taste for the works of reason.

One of the perplexities of Aristotle’s moral psychology is that, on the one hand, he insists that the end of wise deliberation is set by the virtue of the desiring part of the soul. Unless wish “makes the goal right,” reason will not have the starting point for its deliberative calculations. But on the other hand, he also insists on characterizing the virtue of the desiring part of the soul as “obedience” to reason. Indeed, it is only by being capable of obedience that our emotions and desires count as expressions of our rational human function at all (1102b25-1103a3; *NE* IV.12; *Politics* 1254b5-6). Several recent interpretations have tried to resolve this problem by appealing to the *kalon*. David Charles has argued that because the *kalon* is “an essentially pleasure-involving way of being good,” it is impossible to know that an action is *kalon* without desiring to do it or, vice versa, to have the *kalon* as an object of desire without understanding that it is good. There is therefore no need to ask which faculty of soul serves which, since they come together in a “third-way” amalgam desiderative-thought or deliberative-desire (“Aristotle on Practical Knowledge”). Ursula Coope has argued that the *kalon* is a way of being good which gives rise to a specifically rational pleasure and desire. Perhaps from this point of view there is no need to worry about which part of the virtuous soul rules which, since the desire in question is a rational one.[[12]](#footnote-12) Jessica Moss, on the other hand, has pointed to the overwhelming textual evidence to the effect that habituation proceeds via repeated perceptual exposure to the sort of virtuous actions the learner must become disposed to desire. It is non-rational imagination and desire which set the end of deliberation. But since the human good is *kalon*, and therefore pleasant, the virtuous person can be assured of harmonious relations between the parts of the soul. I cannot discuss the details of these proposals here, but I have learned much from all of them. My interpretation is closest to Coope’s, who emphasizes that the *kalon* gratifies our rational nature*,* but I think Moss is quite right about the unavoidably perceptual character of moral habituation. Her quasi-Humean interpretation leaves the alignment between virtuous desire and wise reason quite contingent, however, which is exactly what provokes the worry about whether reason genuinely rules in the virtuous soul.

On my craft interpretation of the *kalon*, by contrast, the point of moral education is to draw attention to and develop admiration for the exquisite formal perfection of wisely decided action, the way in which all the important features of the agent’s situation are acknowledged and all the facets of her response precisely fit together into a single graceful (*euschēmenos*) form.[[13]](#footnote-13) We—not any animal, but we rational animals—can perceive this, and as our love for it strengthens, our eye for it sharpens, through practice and the guidance of those who understand what we are looking at better than we do.[[14]](#footnote-14) While it is true that, as Aristotle says, desiderative virtue “makes the goal right,” the goal in question is *kalon*, precisely what wise intelligence as such tries to determine. When desire is habituated to love this, it will call out for the rule of rational deliberation.

Let me hasten to add a caution: I have been emphasizing the formal quality of *kalon* actions and things, the fact that their parts are well-proportioned and harmoniously organized into a whole. But for any given class of things, there will be much more to say about what makes it *kalon* than that. Channeling Aristotle’s spirit, there is no single account to be given of the *kalon*, no single ratio or set of ratios that makes all things well-ordered. The proper account will depend on the kind of thing in question. The child who is trained to virtue develops a taste for *kalon* action specifically, and there will be no way for her to learn to notice and enjoy the *kalon* intermediacy of virtuous actions without at the same time learning to recognize what factors are relevant—for example, she will notice that the intermediacy of kind gestures depends on the degree of intimacy between the parties; the fairness of distributive decisions depends on differentials of power and effort; that precisely calibrated courage in strident confrontation depends on the seriousness of danger. There is no way to understand whether anything is *kalon* without taking into consideration what you are talking about. Still, it is the work of practical wisdom to work out what all these relevant features are and how they interact. An advantage of the view I have attributed to Aristotle is that it allows him to allocate to desire the job of orienting us to the goal, without locking himself into an overly conventional view of virtue, according to which we are all limited to pursuing actions that look and feel in a substantive way like ones we encountered in our upbringing. Moral education teaches children to delight in actions that have the hallmarks of being precisely determined by knowledge. We can persist in aiming at that goal, even as altered circumstances or greater understanding lead us to make decisions quite different from those our parents would have made.[[15]](#footnote-15)

1. **Perception and the Measure of the *Kalon*-in-Action**

I argued in section 2 that—in the contexts of artworks and natural organisms—the pleasure of perceiving something *kalon* is a rational pleasure in seeing intelligible structure (and in the case of artworks, intelligently-created structure) manifested in the object in question. In section 3 I argued that, according to Aristotle, the virtuous person takes pleasure in literally perceiving their friends’ *kalon* actions in much the same way, he says, as they take pleasure in perceiving their own *kalon* actions. We wondered whether Aristotle thinks—implausibly—that the virtuous person adopts a contemplative, externally spectating attitude towards their own lives. But we saw, in our examination of his discussion of virtuous self-love, that the part of the soul gratified by one’s own *kalon* actions is *nous*, apparently in the act of decision. This suggested to us that pleasure in perceiving one’s own *kalon* action is one that arises from a specifically practical, agential standpoint. Finally, in section 4 I have argued that the *kalon*—conceived as perfection in embodied form—is indeed assumed by Aristotle to be the proper object of craft reason and, by extension, of practical wisdom. So it is understandable why Aristotle would claim, in his discussion of virtuous self-love, that *kalon* actions are enormously gratifying to *nous* in its specifically practical deployment. The *kalon* in the sense I have been explaining is a cognitive achivement.

In this final section of my paper I want to argue that the perceptibility of the *kalon*—or perhaps it would be better to say, the proprioceptive, imaginative availability of the *kalon* to the desiring part of our souls—is of the utmost importance *from the standpoint of wise deliberation*.

Let us return to Aristotle’s virtuous deliberator:

**Passage 8**

But we deliberate not about ends, but about what forwards those ends. For a doctor does not deliberate about whether he’ll make his patients healthy, nor a public speaker about whether he’ll persuade his audience …but rather they take the end for granted and examine how and by what means it will come about; and **if it appears as coming about by more than one means, they look to see through which of them it will happen most easily and most *kalon***. (*NE* III.3 1112b11-17, Rowe trans.)

According to Aristotle, deliberation cannot get started unless we have some goal in view. For understanding what the goal is and why it is good explains why a particular action towards that goal is worth choosing (*EE* II.10 1226b25-30; I.2 1214b6-11). The wise deliberator therefore begins with a true conception of the goal, provided by virtuous wish, and reasons backwards until she arrives at some action she can do here and now which will bring that goal into being. Now I want to draw your attention to the sentence I’ve bolded in passage #8. Aristotle says that when the deliberator discovers multiple routes to her end, she will choose the one that is easiest *and* most *kalon*. I have always wondered about this remark. I think I understand why being easy would be a rational constraint on the selection of means, but what about being *kalon*?

When *kalon* is interpreted in a highly moralized way, then it seems it could function in deliberation only as a side-constraint imposed by a prior commitment to virtue, which is as much as to say it is not a requirement of practical reason as such. The problem, however, is that here, as elsewhere, Aristotle uses examples from craft to illustrate his point. Why should the doctor *as such* limit herself to morally virtuous means of improving her patient’s health? If we adopt the non-moralized interpretation of the *kalon* which I have been urging, however, there may be a solution to this problem.

Suppose you are making a loaf of bread. You’ve done it many times before, so you have a knack for it and don’t use a recipe. But neither do you have knowledge of what it is about good balls of dough that makes for good loaves of bread, and so you lack knowledge of the final cause which would enable you to guide your actions in a knowledgeable way. You mix up some yeast and warm water, then add some flour and a bit of salt…whoops, too much salt! You decide to rectify by adding some molasses—that will make for a nice country loaf anyway—but now the dough is too stiff. You dilute with water…whoops! Now there’s not enough flour. Back and forth you go, straining to adjust the proportions so as to form a harmoniously-composed ball of dough. This is a pretty amateurish way to proceed. But with more experience you get better and better at adding exactly the amount of each ingredient needed to be in proportion to the others. You acquire the ability to notice and adjust for variations in your ingredients, e.g., this flour seems more glutenous, so you should add less water. You as a baker will try to achieve this precision because, after all, you’re trying to make a real loaf of bread, not play around with flour and water.

What I am trying to demonstrate is that precision in selecting intermediate means is something that the practical reasoner *as such* cares about; it is an expression of taking oneself to be in the process of making a structured, unified thing. To put the point another way: it is because reason’s goal is *kalon* that the deliberator will prefer more precisely calibrated, intermediatemeans. Aristotle is right, therefore, to make the *kalon* a rational constraint on deliberation, along with the efficient.

Here is where the ineliminable perceptibility of the *kalon* comes in. As my colleague Anton Ford (2016) has argued, drawing on Aristotle, decision is not the product of desire and any old kind of belief; it requires specifically *perceptual* belief. That is because the object of decision is a particular action, the interaction of the agent’s embodied and perceptible self with her particular perceptible environment. If the wise deliberator is to bring her reasoning back to some particular *kalon* action she can choose here and now, she must be able to cognize its *kalon* intermediacy *in* the particular act; otherwise, she will not know that the act she is doing is the one to be done. And since there is no way to grasp particulars except through perception, the perceptibility of *kalon* order is of the utmost significance from the standpoint of practical *nous*. The *kalon* must be perceptible so that reason can guide the agent’s action all the way through to the movement of her body in relation with the world.

Here, I imagine my opponent objecting: not so fast! Yes, wise reason must be able to determine that this perceptible action falls under the concept *kalon*. So the role of perception in deliberation is ineliminable. But it does not follow from this that what the agent perceives is the action’s *kalon* orderliness. The baker knows that the flour must stand in a ratio of 2:1 with the water; and she must have a common measure that allows her to see, literally, that she has flour and water equal to that measure; and she must have proprioceptive-perceptual awareness and memory that she has measured out the flour twice, but the water only once. But the baker never sees the flour and water standing in the ratio of 2:1.

Now let us leave aside the fact that highly skilled practitioners *can* see such embodied proportions.[[16]](#footnote-16) Our question is whether Aristotle thinks this perceptual ability is *necessary* for practical wisdom. I believe he does. For according to him, the factors relevant to wise, virtuous decision are legion and various. There is no universal account that covers them all; the best we can do is speak “roughly and in outline” (1094b14-22). And yet, since the goal set by virtuous desire, and intrinsic to knowledgeable practical reason, is a precisely measured intermediate action, some “tool” for measurement must be found. But this measuring tool must have a special property. As Aristotle says in his discussion of the virtue of equity, which concerns this very problem of the inadequacy of universal rules for figuring out what to do in particular situations:

**Passage 9**

The straightedge (*kanōn*)of what is indefinite is itself indefinite, like the lead straightedge used by builders on Lesbos that adapts itself to the shape (*schema*) of the stone and does not stay rigid. (CE IV/V.10 1137b29-31, Inwood &Woolf trans.)

Aristotle does not advise giving up on universal measure. Universal knowledge of the human good is what constitutes a person as wise, rather than merely experienced (*NE* VI.7). So what the virtuous deliberator requires is a tool that retains the relevant internal proportions, but which is sufficiently flexible to capture the vagaries of the perceptual particulars, a tool which can bend and vary in accordance with circumstances while all the while retaining the stability to ensure that all her choices are “in a line,” manifesting the same, virtuous form. Where will the wise person find this measuring tool, if the relevant variations come down to the perceptible particulars?

In a famous passage, Aristotle says that the virtuous state of the desiring part of the soul is a “straightedge” and “measure” of that is genuinely *kalon* and pleasant:

**Passage 10**

…for the person of virtue the object of wish is the one that is truly so, … just as on the physical level too the things that are truly healthful are healthful for people in good condition, whereas a different set of things is healthful for those that are diseased; and similarly too with bitter, sweet, hot, heavy, and every other sort of thing; **for the good person discriminates correctly in every set of circumstances, and in every set of circumstances what is true is apparent to him. For each disposition has its own corresponding range of *kala* and pleasant things, and presumably what most distinguishes the good person is his ability to see (*horan*)what is true in every set of circumstances, being like a carpenter’s rule (*kanōn*) and measure (*metron*) for them**. (*NE* III.4 1113a25-33, Rowe trans.)

Straightedges and measures are tools of *rational* calculation. So who is the reasoner who uses morally virtuous desire and pleasure as a tool for measurement? I suggest it is the wise deliberator herself.

Moral education, repeated practice in doing and feeling as a virtuous person would, generates a stable disposition in the agent to desire and enjoy *kalon* orderliness in action. But at the same time, moral education turns the agent’s capacity for desire and pleasure and pain into a well-calibrated instrument for noticing when *kalon* intermediacy is present. At a certain point, the wise deliberator *has no better, more authoritative “straightedge”* than her own desiderative intuition.[[17]](#footnote-17) In retrospect or from a third person standpoint, she may be able to explain why correct actions are virtuous or how incorrect actions go wrong. But prospectively, as she tries to figure out what to do and to guide her action all the way through to interaction with particulars, she will have no better touchstone than her own virtuous taste for the *kalon*. This is why it is no exaggeration when Aristotle says that temperance (*sōphosunē*), the virtue concerned with appetitive pleasures and pains, is the preserver of practical wisdom. Without a firm and well-calibrated tendency to feel pleasures and pains, we will find it difficult, and sometimes even impossible, to actualize our general knowledge of human life in the selection here and now of actions that are *kalon.* If the *kalon* were not perceptible in a broad sense (up a level from the proper sensibles, engaging rational concepts, and involving proprioception and desire), the desiring part of the soul could not play this role of straightedge in deliberation, no matter how virtuous it was.

The following passage about the virtue of wit provides an especially clear example of the phenomenon I have in mind:

**Passage 12**

This *horos* for wit is better than prescribing that whatever is said should not displease the butt of the joke no matter what he is like. It should rather please the one who is at the mean point, since that’s the person with good judgement. (*EE* III.7 1234a18-23, I&W trans.)

The wise person is able to articulate what is wrong with a cruel or buffoonish joke, but what general articulation can she give ahead of time to help her figure out exactly what timing, tone of voice, words, subject matter, and so forth will be witty here and now? She has no better method of measuring the intermediate than appealing to her own sense of humor. This is not reason’s capitulation to desire—it is not a matter of saying, “here are various options; take which one you like.” The wise person’s desire is flexible but also well-calibrated and she uses it as a tool, in the same way as the healthy person uses her faculty of taste to identify which foods are bitter or sweet. When her perceptual-desiderative imagination shows her the action she is looking for, it is a source of enormous noetic pleasure.

**\*\*\***

This concludes my argument that the *kalon* as it appears in Aristotle’s ethics is indeed an aesthetic concept. It is a perfection of perceptible form, but in a special sense. Actions are *kalon* when they manifest harmonious, determinate order and intermediacy in a way that is conspicuous to the intelligent perception of a virtuous person. Should we call this the morally beautiful? The noble? The fine? The splendid? None of these seems quite right, and yet—as is so often the case—we can get a handle on what Aristotle is talking about by reflecting on the craft analogy.

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1. Kraut, Crisp 2014. Irwin 2010, Ford 2010, Cooper 1996. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Warren 2014, 71-77. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. On the relation between *akribeia* and (degree of) cognitive excellence, see *Posterior Analytics* I.27, *NE* I.3, and *NE* I.7. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Warren 2014, 74 for discussion. If I am correct, thenit is not correct to say that we perceive and enjoy *kalon* sights in virtue of our capacity for perception *rather than* in virtue of our capacity for reason, any more than in the case of *boulēsis* it is correct to say we desire in virtue of our (non-rational capacity) for desire *rather than* in virtue of our rational capacity for conceptualizing objects as good (*contra* the letter of Coope 2012, 155-7, although she might well be willing to adjust in accordance with what follows). These are perceptions, pleasures, and desires which only rational animals can have and so in some way engage our rationality. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Granted, Aristotle regards this fact as hard to understand and has an odious tendency to see laborers’ bodies as ugly. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Moss 2012, 206-19 for more discussion. I agree with Moss that the pleasure of “observing” *kalon* action is a pleasure which attends perception, but disagree in thinking that it is therefore not a rational pleasure. As we will see, Aristotle describes perceiving one’s own *kalon* actions as a reward for *nous*. He does not mean that it is a pleasure of thinking about one’s *kalon* action (so that there are two pleasures, one of perceiving and one of thinking). He means that *nous* is presented in perception with its pleasurable object and intuits it. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Crisp’s 2014, 233 n.7 objection to treating *Metaphysics* M.3 as relevant to the ethical *kalon*. Re another point Crisp raises: *Politics* 1255a1 speaks of the *kallos* of body and soul. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Johansen 2014, 304-310. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Heckman forthcoming. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The argument I make here is also made by Kraut, Cooper; see Lear 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Actually justice, the virtue of equality—proportionate and numerical—comes closest to the *NE* II general account of virtue as an intermediate state productive of intermediate actions, but it is an unusual virtue for other reasons and I will set it aside for now. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. This is my conclusion from Coope’s interpretation, not one she explicitly states. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Earlier, I believed virtuous pleasure in the *kalon* would have to be non-rational in the sense of being independent of our innate love of knowledge. For this reason, I interpreted Aristotle as ascribing a (Platonic) *spirited* love of the *kalon* (Lear 2004, 137-146). Similarly, Moss 2012, 216-219 describes virtuous pleasure in the *kalon* as a kind of pride. Although no doubt Aristotle *does* attribute pride to the virtuous person, I now believe that this misses the point of the *kalon*’s role in moral virtue. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. A way of elaborating Burnyeat’s influential interpretation. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Sarah Broadie on reason’s role in specifying the end set by virtuous desire (CITE). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Plato seems to have thought so too, which is why in the *Philebus* he counts perceptual knacks, such as the ability to tune an instrument by ear, as very low-grade forms of knowledge. They may not calculate, but they nevertheless discern intelligible measure. CITE [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. My thought that Aristotle is quite serious about the epistemic use of the virtuous soul as a “measure” of *kalon* action is inspired by Sean Kelsey’s (2022) argument that our perceptual faculties are “measures” of the proper sensibles and by Joshua Trubowitz’s (2023) discussion of the “authoritativeness” of the senses so conceived. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)