

The Meaning of *Kalon* in Aristotle's Ethics

Introduction

I. The Meaning of *Kalon* in an Ethical Context

Aristotle defines moral virtue in relation to *to kalon*. As Alexander of Aphrodisias puts it: “[V]irtue does all things for the sake of what is *kalon* insofar as it is *kalon* since it does what is *kalon* in terms of action.” (*De Anima Libri Mantissa*, 154.31-2). But what exactly is *kalon* action? It is a common complaint that Aristotle fails to provide us a clear answer to this question. My goal today will be to make some progress toward sharpening our grasp of *kalon* so that we can more clearly understand Aristotle's account of moral virtue. My primary argument here will be that *kalon* bears two different senses in an ethical context—a broader non-moral sense and a narrower moral sense—that the narrower moral sense denotes a special instance or sub-class of the broader non-moral sense; and that when Aristotle defines moral virtue in relation to *to kalon*, he is using it in the narrower, moral sense. I will then conclude by exploring a possible tension that this narrower, moral sense of *kalon* may introduce into Aristotle's ethical thought.

II. The Broader Sense of *Kalon*

In an ethical context, *kalon* is often translated as “admirable,” “fine,” “noble,” or “honorable.” These translations are not wrong, but they don't provide us a very clear grasp of the term's meaning either. We can begin to sharpen our grasp of the term's meaning in an ethical context by paying attention to the following aspect of it. *Kalon*, in an ethical context, is related to what makes one look good or brings one a good reputation. Either this is simply one meaning of the term or it bears a meaning that is quite close to this. Consider Cicero's report that Epicurus

claims that “in everyday language, [*kalon*]¹ means no more than what wins renown in the popular esteem” (*On Moral Ends*, 2.48) as well as other examples from Greek literature that connect *kalon* with what brings one a good reputation.² But, as Cicero points out against Epicurus, the term can (also?) have a deeper meaning. Not what in fact brings one a good reputation, but what makes one *worthy* of a good reputation (2.45, 2.49-50). Perhaps the perfective, *-tos* adjectives are a good comparison here. *Philētos*, for example, can either mean something that is actually *loved* or it can mean something that is *lovable* or *worthy of love*. Likewise it may be that *kalon* can refer either to what, as a matter of fact, brings one a good reputation or to what makes one worthy of this, even if it doesn’t actually bring one a good reputation. At any rate, it will be this second meaning—worthy of a good reputation—that Cicero testifies to that I will focus on for the rest of this paper. Now, since having a good reputation is being collectively admired or collectively highly thought of, this meaning of the term is closely connected to what is admirable—what makes one *worthy* of admiration. And if we say, as Aristotle does, that praise is the declaration that someone is, or has done something, admirable (see *Rhetoric* 1358b27-8), then we can say that this meaning of the word bears a close relationship to “praiseworthy.”³

¹ Cicero writes *honestum*. But *honestum* is Cicero’s Latin stand-in for *kalon*; that is, since Epicurus wrote in Greek, this is a report, through Latin equivalents, about what Epicurus said about the meaning of the Greek word *kalon*.

² For example, *Laws* 732e7-733a1; *Rhetoric* 1267a16-17, 1390a1-3; *Rhetoric to Alexander*, 1.12.12.

³ For *kalon* as “praiseworthy,” see *Charmides* 160a1-b5, note the change from *kalon* to *axion epainou*; *Rhetoric* 1366a33-4; *Eudemian Ethics* (“EE”) 1248b18-20; Cicero, *ibid*.

III. The Narrower Sense of *Kalon*

We have now achieved a clearer grasp of one meaning of *kalon*—worthy of a good reputation, worthy of being highly thought of, worthy of admiration, worthy of praise. We should not assume that this genus as a whole is moral. There is, after all, such a thing as non-moral admiration.⁴ Let me give an example. We may admire someone for great intellectual achievements—for example, Albert Einstein’s theories of special and general relativity—or for great physical achievements—for example, Michael Phelps breaking records at the Olympics.

Aristotle sometimes calls on the general non-moral sense of *kalon* in his ethical works. For example, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he says that, “according to each character state (*hexis*), there are unique things that are pleasant and *kalon*, and presumably the biggest difference in the virtuous person is that they see the truth in these things, just as if they were a measure and rule of them.” (113a31-3). The idea here is that each (moral) character disposition has its own sense of what is admirable or shameful. The *akolastos* or lecherous person *admires* Don Giovanni for his ability and success at having affairs, and thinks that moderate, sexually moral people are fools who are depriving themselves of great pleasure. On the other hand, the *sophrōn*, or moderate, sexually moral person *looks down* on Don Giovanni for his immoral behavior.

Clearly, moral virtue bears some relation to what’s *kalon* in the larger sense, but when Aristotle declares that *to kalon* is the end of moral virtue, I don’t think he’s using *kalon* in this larger sense. That is, I don’t think that moral virtue aims at, and is productive of, *just anything that is admirable*. Rather, I think that it is directed toward a sub-class of what is *kalon* in the largest

⁴ For examples, see *Republic* 348e5-349a3; *Gorgias* 485a3-5, 509c2-5; *Rhetoric* 1367a23-33.

sense, a sub-class of what is admirable. In a way, this is trivial. Moral virtue aims at, and is productive of, actions. At the very least, moral virtue aims at this special sub-class of what is *kalon*: *kalon actions*; that is, actions that are worthy of admiration, worthy of esteem, worthy of praise. But I think that the sub-class of what is *kalon* in the largest sense that Aristotle has in mind is even narrower than this. It's not just *any sort of admirable* action that virtue aims at, and is productive of, but a special kind of *admirable* action—motivationally admirable actions.

Let's make the following distinction: there is an action and then there are its motives or intentions (I will put aside the question of whether these are an essential part of the action). We can now draw a distinction between actions that are admirable because of their motivations or intentions, which Aristotle tends to designate through the term *prohairesis* ("choice," but sometimes approaching "purpose")⁵ and actions that are admirable but not because of their motivations or intentions. The first class is what I have in mind by "motivationally admirable" actions. It is this sub-class of actions that are *kalon* in the broadest sense that the common translations "noble," "honorable," and perhaps "fine" are especially suited to; it is this sub-class that I think constitutes the meaning of the second, narrower sense of *kalon* in an ethical context; and it is this sub-class that is plausibly identified as "moral."⁶

⁵ Aristotle understands the end for which something is chosen as an essential part of that choice (see 1112b11-12, 1113a10-14; EE 1227b34-1228a4); that is, choosing x for the sake of y and choosing it for the sake of z are *different choices*. Indeed, he goes so far as to say that the end for which we choose something is more properly the object of choice than the things we are "choosing" for the sake of that end (see 1151a35-b3). For this reason, it's natural for him to use the term *prohairesis* to designate the act of "aiming at x" or "choosing for the sake of x"; compare Ross' occasional translation of *prohairesis* as "purpose." I owe this point to Adam Berseford.

⁶ That morality is the domain, at least in part, of motivationally admirable actions is not an uncommon view in the history of philosophy. Consider Kant's claim in the Groundwork that the good will is "a will that is to be esteemed in itself and that is good apart from any further purpose" (*Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Moral*, 10; see, also, 11, bottom paragraph) or Ross' claim that courageous or moderate actions are "morally good" because "when a man sets himself to master his fears or his passions, from a direct wish to do so, not from the sense of duty, he is

IV. Moral Virtue and Motivationally Admirable Actions

I will now present evidence that, when Aristotle defines moral virtue in terms of *to kalon*, he is really using *kalon* in the narrow, moral sense of “motivationally admirable actions.”

In the *Politics*, Aristotle describes *kalon* actions as essentially having certain motivations. He says that “many of the actions that are thought to be servant-like are actually [*kai*] *kalon* for those who are young and gentlemen (i.e., not slaves or occupied in “servile” occupations) to do. The reason is that, when it comes to being *kalon* or not, the difference is not in the actions themselves, but in the goal and the ‘that for the sake of which’” (1333a7-11). One could not hope for a clearer statement that what makes an action *kalon* is its motivation or goal. We also see a weaker version of this idea in Aristotle’s discussion of *kalokagathia* or “perfect virtue” in the *Eudemian Ethics*. He says there that the action of acquiring natural goods such as wealth or political power is *kalon* for the perfectly virtuous person but not other people. The reason is that “actions [though possibly “goods;” the subject of the verb is unclear] are *kalon* whenever that for the sake of which people do or choose them is *kalon*.” (1249a5-6). That is, the virtuous person acquires natural goods *because* it’s “right” or “appropriate” for them to have them, and these sorts of *kalon* motivations make their actions *kalon*.⁷

Now, I have left open the possibility that there are some actions that are *kalon* but not because of their motivations or intentions; for example, in the *Gorgias*, Callicles and Socrates agree that

exhibiting a quality which *we admire for its own sake*, and which has a goodness that only action can have.” (“The Nature of Morally Good Action,” 254, my emphasis).

⁷ For another example in which Aristotle ties *kalon* action to motivation, see 1162b34-1163a1. These last two examples are “weaker” insofar as they make the more limited claim that some actions are *kalon* because of their motivations. The stronger claim is that all actions are *kalon* because of their motivations.

having the ability to protect oneself and those one cares about from harm is *kalon* (i.e., “admirable,” 509b-c). They would presumably also agree that *successfully* protecting oneself is *kalon*.⁸ This is an example of an action that is *kalon* in a way that doesn’t depend on motivation or intention. It’s rather the *success*—successfully protecting oneself from harm—that makes these sorts of actions *kalon*. Or consider another example. Imagine Heracles wrestling, and defeating, a lion. This is a glorious, admirable, action. But, again, its the success, the *victory*, that makes this action *kalon*.

I would hesitate to say that Aristotle altogether denies this existence of this sort of *kalon* action. Nevertheless, he speaks above as if all *kalon* actions are motivationally admirable actions. Let me suggest that he does so because he is using *kalon* in the narrower, moral sense I described above: it is not actions that are admirable in *just any way* that virtue aims at and is productive of; it is rather the special class of actions that are admirable because of their motivations or intentions—noble, honorable, fine actions.⁹ An additional advantage of this interpretation is that

⁸ Maybe one could argue that, since in this case the “success” in question depends on the consequences of the action—preventing harm—the action isn’t actually admirable “just by itself.” Perhaps this distinction is what Cicero has in mind when he says that something is *honestum* by virtue of “the possession of a character that renders it praiseworthy in virtue of its own beauty and form” (*On Moral Ends*, 2.50). In this case, the relevant distinction would be between actions that are admirable “just in themselves” or “just because of themselves” and actions that are admirable because of their consequences. Motivationally admirable actions would then enter the picture insofar as (all?) actions that are admirable “just in themselves” are motivationally admirable.

⁹ Christine Korsgaard also argues for this view (“From Duty and For the Sake of the Noble,” 191) and so, in a way, does Joseph Owens (“The *KALON* in Aristotelian Ethics”). He observes that, “an action is right or morally good only insofar as its motive is the *καλόν*.” (272, second paragraph). However, he also thinks “right,” “morally good” is the meaning of *kalon* in an ethical context (see 264, third paragraph, 266, bottom paragraph and following). So, in effect, he claims that, for Aristotle, *kalon* actions involves acting with certain motivations or intentions, and he implicitly identifies the object of those motivations or intentions as *kalon* action itself. This makes the account circular. Distinguishing between noble/morally good/motivationally admirable action and right action would have helped Owens. It would be more plausible to identify *kalon* with “morally good” or “motivationally admirable” and account for this in terms of aiming at what is right (*dikaion*), though Aristotle seems to think that acting for the sake of what is right is not the only sort of motivationally admirable action (see the next section). On the other hand, Susane Sauve Meyer (“Aristotle on Moral Motivation,” 57) denies that actions are *kalon* because of their

it allows virtue to lay claim to a specifically moral character. As I mentioned in the previous section, it is the special sub-class of motivationally admirable actions—rather than the general class of admirable actions—that is plausibly identified as moral. Tying virtue to this special sub-class of admirable actions therefore allows virtue to take on a specifically moral character.

V. How did Aristotle’s Audience Understand Motivationally Admirable Actions?

Virtue is productive of *kalon* action. I have argued that, though *kalon* can have the general sense of “deserving of a good reputation, deserving of admiration,” when Aristotle talks about *kalon* action in the context of moral virtue he means, in particular, motivationally admirable action. But what sorts of motivations make an action motivationally admirable? As I mentioned in the first section, Aristotle does not give us a systematic account of this point. Instead, he appeals to the habitual views of his “well-brought up” audience (see 1095b2-7; Aspasius, *In Ethica Nicomachean Commentaria* 10, lines 2-8). Thus, instead of providing his own philosophical account of *kalon* action, he grants the views about this subject already possessed by his gentlemanly audience. What were those views?

We can get some insight into this question from the *Rhetoric*. A whole section deals with what is *kalon*, and a part of that section deals with actions that were popularly considered to be *kalon* because of their motivations—that is, a part deals explicitly with what was popularly considered to be motivationally admirable. It reads in full:

And as many things are *kalon* as, being among the things chosen (i.e., things involving deliberate purpose), someone does them not for the sake of himself; and the things that are good generally (*haplōs*) [i.e., not necessarily good for oneself], and also as many

motivation. I cannot adequately address this debate here, but I think that I have provided good evidence that this is wrong.

things as someone does on behalf of his fatherland while disregarding what concerns himself (i.e., his own good); and the things that are good by nature [i.e., not necessarily good for oneself]; and the things which are not good for oneself, for one does the things that are of this sort (i.e., good for oneself) for the sake of oneself; and as many things as can belong to someone who is dead rather than to someone who lives, for the things that belong to the one who lives have more of the “for the sake of oneself”; and as many actions as are for the sake of others, for they are less for the sake of oneself; and as many things as are good deeds concerning others but not concerning oneself, and concerning those who have done a benefit, for it is right (I.e., “fair”?, *dikaion*); and benefactions conferred (*ta euergetēmata*), for they are not towards oneself. (1366b36-1367a6).

The moral of the passage is obvious. Selfless motivation makes action motivationally admirable. Aristotle’s brief reference to doing what is right or fair (*dikaion*)—(because it’s right or fair?)—is perhaps the sole exception.¹⁰ But, given the context of the reference, and also some additional considerations I will mention shortly, it’s plausible that he means *selflessly* doing what’s right or fair. Now, if Aristotle’s gentlemanly audience shared this popular view about admirable motivation, we have answered our earlier question. But did his audience share this view?

There are reasons to think that it did. I will discuss two . I will not pretend that they are conclusive, but they indicate, at least, that a case can be made for this view. The first reason is that the above passage exhausts the account of motivationally admirable actions that we get in the *Rhetoric*. As far as we can tell from the work, this is the extent of popular views about the subject. But if there were other popular views—even a view limited to the upper class or

¹⁰ Compare the discussion of the EE passage in the previous section.

gentleman—we would expect Aristotle to include it. The gentlemen were, after all, an important part of the audience of popular oratory.

The second reason is that it is independently plausible that self-interested actions are not motivationally admirable. Of course, self-interested actions can be admirable. But they are not admirable *because* one is aiming at one's own good. Rather, they are admirable *because* one secures what is good for oneself—the mere intention of securing something good for oneself is not admirable. Let me go into more detail. Suppose that there are certain motivations or ends that make our action motivationally admirable. Clearly enough, self-interest, or what is good for oneself, is not one of those ends. Suppose that “what is right” is. Suppose, further, that I am motivated to do an action simply because it's right—I aim at doing what is right *as* what is right. Clearly, my action—my dedication to what's right—would be motivationally admirable. Now imagine that I am not motivated simply by the fact that something is right, but by the fact that what is right is an intrinsic part of my good. In other words, I aim at doing what is right *as* an intrinsic part of my own good. It's true that in this case I take a non-instrumental attitude toward what's right. I'm not merely pursuing it for the sake of some further thing. In this sense, we can say that I'm choosing what is right “for its own sake.” But I'm not really dedicated to what's right either. What I'm really dedicated to is my own good. I pursue what's right *as* something good for myself. Thus, if I become persuaded that doing what is right is not good for myself—if I fall prey to Thrasymachus, say—I will no longer aim at what's right. It's plausible that this sort of self-interested “dedication” is no longer motivationally admirable. And if so, it's plausible that motivationally admirable actions are not self-interested.

Now, if it's correct that Aristotle's gentlemanly audience considered motivationally admirable actions to be selfless actions, then we've identified a tension around *to kalon* in Aristotle's ethics. Aristotle famously holds that the ultimate aim of our (non-akratic) action is our own eudaimonia or happiness. This appears to leave no room for selfless action. On the other hand, Aristotle claims to adopt his gentlemanly audience's views about what actions are motivationally admirable, and they may very well have considered these actions to be those that fail to aim ultimately at one's own good or happiness. And to my knowledge, this is an issue that Aristotle never directly addresses.

Conclusion

Let me sum up my conclusions. I argued in the first section that *kalon* has the general sense of "deserving of a good reputation, deserving of admiration." I then argued in the second section that, by "*kalon* action," Aristotle often has in mind not the general class of actions that are deserving of admiration, but a certain sub-class of these actions, namely, actions that are deserving of admiration at least in part because of their motivations—"noble," "fine," or "honorable" actions. I then argued that it is this special class of admirable actions that he claims virtue aims at and is productive of. Finally, I argued that there were reasons to think that Aristotle's gentlemanly audience, whose views he claims to adopt, understood motivationally admirable actions as selfless. These reasons were not conclusive. However, if they point in the right direction, then we arrive at a certain tension or difficulty in Aristotle's ethics. Moral virtue requires selflessness, yet, on Aristotle's account of human motivation, all (non-akratic) actions aim ultimately at one's own happiness; they therefore fail to be selfless.

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