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## Aesthetic Implications of *Kalokagathía* in Ancient Greek Culture

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This article discusses the aesthetic implications of *kalokagathía* in Greek culture and some of its implications for Modernity. The concept of *kalokagathía* is a compound of the Greek words *kalós* and *agathós*. Both can be translated as “excellent, worthy, good”. However, if we try to look for the fine difference that separates both words, *kalós* refers to the excellence of something through their appearance, and on the other hand, *agathós* is used in reference to human behaviour. Someone was identified as *agathós* if he was a good citizen. Thus, we can confirm that for the classical idea of *kalokagathía*, ethics and aesthetics are not different: they were the models to be followed by the heroes, citizens, and craftsmen. The literary evidence of Homer, Hesiod, Plato, Aristotle and Xenophon help us to raise a wide range of analysis chronologically and conceptually.

**Keywords:** Homer, Plato, Aristotle, citizen, *kalokagathía*.

In the nineteenth century, the french philosopher Victor Cousin wrote *Du Vrai, du Beau et du Bien* (1854), which achieved tremendous success (29 editions were published) and exerted great influence through its translation into English. The title of his work expressed the belief that that philosophy is centred on the true, the good and the beautiful. Cousin had been a student of Hegel, although his principles had always occupied a place in philosophical thought from Plato and Aristotle. Since Plato first invented this triad in *Phaedrus*, philosophers have linked the discussion of beauty to the other two cardinal values of truth and goodness.

Why were the notions of “true”, “good” and “beautiful” gathered in a triad? The reason for this is not immediately evident, as the history of philosophy shows that

there are other key issues such as the question of “being” and the idea of “unity”. It is remarkable that metaphysics (next to psychology and logic) is related, in the triad of Cousin, to the idea of truth. In the famous essay *The Modern System of the Arts*, Paul Kristeller (1951) supports the view that the triad of truth, good, and beauty is a modern invention, a discovery of the nineteenth century. Cousin’s book offers support to this position, in that it relates the idea of beauty to aesthetics: the author refers to the adage “l’art pour l’art”. Let us consider, first, what is the latest on the aesthetic study of this triad of concepts in ancient Greek tradition. Two fundamental concepts in the aesthetic thought of the West are the *kalokagathía* and the *kalokagathós*. The meaning of both concepts can be translated as “beautiful soul,” that is, as a synthesis of the beautiful (*kalós*) and the good (*agathós*).

*Kalokagathía* represents conformity between internal and external values, that is, the unity of moral beauty and sensation. The concept belongs to the time before the break between morality and aesthetics, between soul and body, being and seeming, matter and form (Bynum 224). Beltran identifies traces of *kalokagathía* in Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, *Dissoi logoi* by an unknown author, *Hippias Major* and *Phaedrus* of Plato and Xenophon’s *Symposium* and *Economic*. After the emergence of the historical world, the concept of *kalokagathía*, articulations of traditional aesthetics disintegrated, and the concepts of classical and imperial aesthetics were born. From the antiquity to the present day, the figure of *kalokagathós* usually presides over all genres linked to biographical time and public space.

*Kalokagathía* as a term reflects the ideals of harmony and unity that were highly valued in the antiquity, and particularly in ancient Athens. The word/noun itself is Greek (καλὸς κἀγαθός) and can be translated as “moral value”, “honesty”, “virtue”. It is a complex word, derived from two adjectives: *kalósas* beautiful, pretty, handsome, honest, noble, and *agathós* as honest, good, noble, courageous. It is interesting to note that the word *kalós* already includes the values contained in the semantic field of *agathós*. Hence, *kalokagathía* as “the beautiful and the good” was an ideal to be achieved through education and lifestyle: in Platonic thinking, that which is good (as a reflection of the ideal Good) can only be beautiful, and vice-versa (Marrou 13). Neoplatonist philosophers took up the notion of *kalokagathía* in the late Antiquity and the Middle Ages and fundamentally Christianized it. Attention shifted to what one may call “inner beauty”, the beauty of the soul and its virtues (Eco10).

What meaning could the word *kalós* have? In Homer, the adjective appears to have been applied to people (Il. 21.108; Od. 9.513; 13.289; 15.418), but also referring to buildings, manufacturing and weapons (Il.11.137; Od. 14.75, 21.447). *Agathós*, on the other hand, is someone illustrious, brave, skilled at his birth and is

good in his own right in Homer (Il. 1.131; 1.275, 21.180; Od. 18.276). According to some characterization, to be *agathós* is to be courageous, skilled and fortunate in war and peace; possess wealth and leisure (Conche 119). Thus, attributed to a person's quality, *agathós* is equivalent to a descriptive statement, something which can be determined by the actions of that person.

What, then, is the significance of the concept of *kalokagathía*? We can notice that this concept does not appear in Homer, but was introduced in the fifth century, in the Works of Herodotus, Xenophon, Aristotle or Isocrates. *Kalokagathía* denotes the perfect gentleman (in the literal sense: one who has enough wealth to pay for horses), the worthy noble honours, and the character and conduct of a person (a personality). While in Homer the adjective *agathós* was applied to a hero *only if* he exercised his true function and *while* he exercised that, now *kalokagathía* designates one who has descended from the lineage of a hero, regardless of the role they play and their personal qualities. Then, *kalokagathía* is the marker of heroic values of the classical times, in the remote economic and political conditions of the Homeric world.

Aeschylus and Sophocles introduced the concept of human greatness in the Greek theatre, expanding the concept of beauty, associated with morality and duty. These are the first expressions of the relation between the aesthetic and the ethical, the beautiful in identity with kindness and goodness. A confrontation between the ethical, physical and psychological characteristics of the Homeric hero and the Stoic sage necessarily lead us to the establishment of a dedicated model, not only for the literary tradition but beyond the socio-political or cultural paradigm. The manifestations of Greek art outlined the links established between beauty and the need for a canon in creative freedom; in this sense, it is interesting to note the thought of Hesiod.

The Greek conception of *kalokagathía* is present in Greco-Roman thought, especially in the Socratic dialogues of Plato and the works of Aristotle (Bourriot 56). In this very elitist and undemocratic conception, the perfect citizen should possess both the qualities of good citizenship (value, loyalty, etc., all within the term "goodness") as well as the qualities of physical beauty. The virtuous man is, therefore, excellent not only in the spiritual but also the physical qualities. An important corollary of the *kalokagathía* was the thesis of the impossibility of teaching virtue: the Greeks did not have the Christian meaning of free choice of the good, but insisted on the excellence of performance, the ability to achieve success in a given area. In the later aristocratic conception, the political virtues, the ability to control, imperturbability that comes from the awareness of his own superiority, can not be acquired through education but is inherited through the blood of the

parents.

Plato identifies *kalokagathía* as an indissoluble unity. In this sense, the *Timaeus* should be read as a key work in understanding why the good and the beautiful are the ontological attributes that give order and meaning to the universe (Inwood 122). Each of the component parts is ordered according to the goodness and beauty through the intelligence of the demiurge, the supreme architect of the universe, who takes the ideas as a model, order and print a form in unorganised matter. A characteristic teaching of the *Symposium* is that the beautiful always involves the good (201c). A human being who has seen the beauty itself is capable of producing “true virtue” [*areté*] (212a); he or she is good. For Greek thought, in contrast to the modern, the beautiful does not have a primarily aesthetic significance. Plato adopts a very critical attitude to art which is expressed through the typically Greek concept of *kalokagathía*, which shall gather as the comprehensive notion of spiritual perfection, the beautiful [*kalós*] and good [*agathós*]. Apparently, for Plato, the beautiful is a particular paradigm for the metaphysics of ideas. Modern commentators have interpreted this statement as the first formulation for the “true-good-beautiful” triad, but this is overkill. *Phaedrus* does not contain any explicit formulation of the classical triad, and a clear confirmation can not be found in any other of his works. This does not appear to be a coincidence (Dover 56).

This vision will permeate Aristotle’s description of the *megalopsychos*, “the magnanimous man”. The ethical thought of Plato and Aristotle, based on many aspects of the aristocratic ethics of ancient Greece, stresses that magnanimity is a moral virtue: it is indeed a virtue that presupposes all virtues. It is at this point that Jaeger identifies the ethics and aesthetics in Greek thought, as the supreme unity of all the virtues is in Plato and Aristotle’s *kalokagathía* (Bouvrie 45). Aristotle’s thought is different from Plato’s in respect of the intellectual principles of creation.

The *kalokagathía* is contrary to the concept of *hybris*, which we understand as a lack or excessiveness. This notion appears in several works of the classical period such as the dialogue *Symposium* by Xenophon around 380 BC, in which the philosopher Socrates represents a *kalokagathós* par excellence. Xenophon’s educational text written in classical Athens consists of nine books and is structurally divided into three parts. The first part is the presentation of the characters; the second deals with various topics such as the feminine nature, dance, wine and drunkenness, philosophy and sports, which are always guided by the importance of temperance (*sophrosine*). In the third and final part (specifically Book VIII) Socrates elaborates on his ideas of love, especially the love between an adult man (*erastés*) and a young man in the social formation process (*erómenos*). The thread of the work is the *kalokagathía*, achieved through a process of education of future

citizens. *Symposium* begins with the appreciation of *kalokagathós*: Xenophon says that not only the serious actions of virtuous men (*kalon kagathon*) are worthy of memory, but also their amusements (*paidiais*): “There are only, in my view, serious actions of virtuous men who are worthy of memory, but also their amusements. I know for testifying, and my desire is now known to do” (*Symposium* I.1). Both the serious action as well as the leisure time of a *kalokagathós* are worthy of memory, an example to serve others. Thus, Xenophon feels the duty to make public what he knows. Although the argument has been inspired by a real event and ontologically autonomous characters, it is clear that elements created and/or adapted by the author to give fluency and coherence to the facts narrated.

In the case of Xenophon’s *Symposium*, *kalokagathía* is present throughout the dialogue, whether in action of the characters, or in his speeches in order to demonstrate that such virtue should be pursued and practised by the Athenian citizens. Preparing its text, Xenophon selected elements in the temperament of his characters who sought to awaken his readers to identify with and /or differentiate from them, so that, through reflection, their own acts were analysed. I would like to highlight three figures which represent the highest expression of a *kalokagathós*: Callias, Autolycus, and Socrates. Although Callias and Autolycus possess numerous qualities and stand out among the guests as those who are more virtuous, Socrates is to Xenophon the embodiment of *kalokagathía*. The philosopher has a good mood, concerned with health, is temperate and always involved in discussions in order to add something or to call attention to some unseen aspect.

The last example that expresses weighting of disability due to the presence of *hýbris* in their behaviour is Critobulus, the son of a close friend of Socrates called Crito, and whose membership can be confirmed in Book I of *Memorabilia* (I.3.8). Critobulus, proud of her beauty (*Symposium* III.7), ensures many received praise refer to *kaloikagathoi* (*Symposium* IV.10-11). This statement seems, at first, naive, however, it is justified by Critobulus through their uncontrolled love for Clitias. Critobulus is overcome by *hýbris* and so love without measure, claiming to be able to trade their freedom for slavery if Clitias wanted to be its owner (*Symposium* IV.14).

After analysing the profile of Critobulus, we find that the receiving of a quality education and the mere possessing of physical beauty were not enough to be a virtuous man. Of course, these are the key factors expected in a *kalokagathós*, but without self-control and wisdom these predicates can deteriorate into harmful elements. In comparison, we use the example of Alcibiades in Plato’s eponymous dialogue: Eupatrid, one of the most distinguished families of Athens, the patrons of the highly intellectual and aesthetically beautiful arts and philosophy, was repre-

sented as being self-centered and intemperate. Although it does not have as many vices as Alcibiades in Plato, Niceratus and Critobulus are portrayed by Xenophon as individuals taken by *hýbris*, illustrating that a smaller amount in disproportion to occur, that undertakes the activity of a citizen in the polis.

Thus, as a conclusion of the above, the word *kalós*, which we translate as “beautiful”, actually had a broader meaning than the current one: it included not only what is pleasing to the eyes and the ears, but also the character and the qualities of the human mind. Ancient Greek culture also separates the sphere of beauty and the sphere of art to give an ontological foundation for nature and, in particular, in the body of man, the noblest and highest among natural beings. The Greek citizen were able to express their beauty, in the proportion of physical forms as well as the dignity of practical behaviour. Hence the link between good and beautiful, that in classical Greece finds its supreme expression in the ideal training of *kalokagathía* — the very condition of those who know they can be, at the same time, beautiful and good. *Agathós* is the moral aspect, combined with the nuances that come from the social and worldly origins of the beautiful. *Kalós* is physical beauty, with the inevitable erotic and sensual aura that accompanies it. The education of man is complete; he has spent years making his body a perfect war machine but did not neglect his mind. The beauty and spiritual strength of the Homeric characters originate above all from harmony and inner balance. Achilles is the perfect example, who knows how to put the body in the service of the mind and, conversely, how to make the brain conform to the physical needs. Greek culture and its aesthetics identify these men as the most attractive and desirable, because of the inner harmony that characterised Achilles and continues to divide society into winners (rare, unfortunately) and losers.

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