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# ***Beauty Before the Eyes of Others***

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ABSTRACT. This paper pursues the philosophical significance of a relatively unexplored point of Platonic aesthetics: the social dimension of beauty. The social dimension of beauty resides in its conceptual connection to shame and honour. This dimension of beauty is fundamental to the aesthetic education of the *Republic*, as becoming virtuous for Plato presupposes a desire to *appear* and to be admired as beautiful. The ethical significance of beauty, shame, and honour redound to an ethically rich notion of appearing before others which corresponds to a public conception of virtue. I suggest how this dimension of beauty in Plato – particularly the emphasis on beautification – proves fruitful for reconsidering the scope and the nature of aesthetic experience.

Inquiries into the concept of beauty in Greek antiquity quickly find themselves in foreign territory. The ancient concept (*to kalon, kallos*) is not – and could not have been – centrally related to categories of art and nature, the fine arts and taste, or autonomous aesthetic experience that have inflected the concept of beauty since the eighteenth century. This observation has often been marshalled toward the conclusion that *if* ancient Greeks possessed a concept of beauty at all, it must be incongruent with or even less developed than its modern cousin. Several philosophers and classical scholars have recently inverted the terms of this argument, however. Rather than presupposing the boundary lines now thought to demarcate beauty, these thinkers have appropriated ancient discussions to criticize what they regard as overly narrow or abstracted modern notions of beauty and the aesthetic. Others have relied on Platonic criticisms of poetry or the relation between the beautiful and the good to show the contiguity of aesthetic and ethical evaluation. Still others have reinvigorated Plato's

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view that beauty is the object of erotic love, particularly as against disinterested judgment.<sup>1</sup> I would like to explore the connection for Plato between beauty and shame and honour to evoke the *social dimension* of beauty.

## I.

I begin from a programmatic passage in Book 3 of the *Republic*. Here we find Plato acutely aware that material culture – buildings passed, clothes worn, prayers sung, music heard – imperceptibly and gradually moulds character. Not only poets, Socrates states, but painters, architects, and all other craftsmen embody images of character in their crafts (*Rep.* 401b). His point is that all corners of a culture decisively impact the kind of person one admires and aspires to be, or can even imagine as a viable way of life. This horizon constitutes a foundational sense of what is beautiful (*kalon*) and ugly (*aischron*), from which one's attractions, aversions, beliefs, values, and self-image will grow. The aim of musical-poetic education is to direct this sensibility to what is *genuinely* beautiful:

... we must seek out craftsmen who have a natural talent for capturing what is truly beautiful and graceful (*tēn tou kalou te kai euschēmonos phusin*) so that our young, dwelling as it were in a healthy place, may be benefited from all over. Something of those beautiful works will strike their eyes and ears (*tōn kalōn ergōn ... ti prosbalē*) and, like a breeze bringing health from good places, will bring them unawares (*lanthanē*) right from childhood on to likeness, friendship, and concord with beautiful reason (*eis homoiotēta te kai philian kai sumphōnian tō kalō logō agousa*).<sup>2</sup> (*Rep.* 401cd)

<sup>1</sup> Incongruence and underdevelopment: see notably Croce 1995, pp. 156-66 and Kristeller 1951, pp. 498-506, whose continued influence is felt in Kosman 2010. Halliwell 2002, pp. 6-13 excellently outlines the critical strategy and its need. Hanson 1998 provides an exemplary defence of a Platonic view that ethics and aesthetics are contiguous, Nehamas 2007 that beauty is the object of love; but see Murdoch 1970 for a stimulating, if idiosyncratic, attempt to unite Platonic *erōs* and Kantian disinterest.

<sup>2</sup> All translations are my own. 'Beautiful reason' for *tō kalō logō* at *Rep.* 401d is meant to convey both a substantive conception of reason, on which one acquires rational capacities, and associations of *logos* with proportion and order. A difficulty here is that the phrase looks forward to *logon* and *tou logou* at 402a, neither of whose senses is obvious. Many take *tou logou* as *the* reason or explanation why something is beautiful and ugly. Even

Socrates assumes that one will recognize, be attracted to and emulate the beautiful character of a virtuous person if and only if surrounded by what is truly beautiful. Part of the reason why *beauty* should be privileged is that it makes virtue – more specifically, an ideal of a ‘graceful’ *kalos kagathos* – sensible and attractive. Beauty is particularly apt for structuring one’s most elemental perceptions, pleasures, and desires toward a good and flourishing human life. But this explanation, though correct, is limited. To invest interest in beauty in its relation to virtue and the good is to pass over what is distinctive about this concept and perhaps most illuminating for us: its social character.

The classical Greek concept of beauty (*to kalon, kallos*) is a thick, not a thin, evaluative concept. By this I mean that it fuses description and evaluation and, more significantly, that its content and force depend on its role within concrete social practices.<sup>3</sup> One function of the concept is to mobilize admiration (and, by contrast, disgust), envy, and emulation, all of which in this conceptual scheme bring ethical evaluation under the rubric of shame and honour. This connection to shame and honour has been thought to take us too far from beauty indeed, either because we are now on ethical terrain or because we do not call deeds or deaths ‘beautiful’ so readily as Pericles would call them *kalon*. Most therefore designate the *kalon* as the *fine, noble, or admirable* – and *beautiful* only derivatively in erotic or ‘aesthetic contexts.’<sup>4</sup> But we might instead consider the fact that Socrates moves from a clear concern over beautiful environs *without changing step* to the claim that if an older male lover does not consort with his beloved “for the sake of what is beautiful” (*tōn kalōn charin*), he will be reproached as “uncultured through music and poetry and inappreciative of beauty” (*amousias kai apeirokalias, Rep. 403bc*), for want of the acculturation Socrates was just discussing.<sup>5</sup> We are uneasy claiming that the older

so, emphasis should rest on the notion that one ‘embraces’ reason as such if and only if already familiar with or akin to it (*di’ oikeiotēta malista, 402a*).

<sup>3</sup> Here I follow Williams 1985, pp. 128-9, 141, 218 n7 and, before him, Geertz 1973, pp. 3-30.

<sup>4</sup> This position has become standard in translations and commentaries. See for a defence Woodruff 1982, pp. 110-11 and Konstan 2014, esp. p. 39. Kosman 2010 presents well the conceptual difficulties.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. the rare noun *apeirokalia* (lack of experience or appreciation of beauty) again at *Rep. 405b*: this aesthetically and ethically vulgar condition disposes one to a petty and

male should act for the sake of the beautiful, and unsure about what this could mean. But that is the point. The point has little to do with pederasty and everything to do with the fact that we insist on a border between the aesthetic and the ethical that Plato does not draw. That border is particularly problematic when we feel at home on one side but not the other, and so unclear how we might get across. What is needed is to recover a concept of beauty rich enough to support the kind of considerations that bind it to shame and honour.

What kinds of considerations are those? Primarily concerns over preserving self-image and status. We may come to this point by noticing that the principal target of the aesthetic education is what Plato calls spirit or the spirited element of the soul, *thumos* or *to thumoeides*. The many powerful manifestations of spirit, such as anger, shame, pride, and competitive desire, organize around a sense of shame and honour. On account of spirit, adult human beings aim to *stand out* and to be admired as beautiful and not to be considered ugly and thus shameful. This they do first and foremost in terms of *shared* norms of beauty that circulate throughout a culture and that underlie their identities as members of that culture.<sup>6</sup>

I want ultimately to pose the question of what, philosophically, we might learn from this historical connection between beauty, shame, and honour. But I must first develop its contours and its significance for Plato's ethical psychology, at least in the *Republic*. I will suggest that the use of beauty to educate primarily spirit reflects that an ethical life requires identities that centrally involve self-presentation; and that this is ultimately so because virtue is a public affair. Beauty, on this picture, does not simply make virtue sensible and attractive. It is the currency of a fundamentally human activity to live in community and contest *before the eyes of others*.

shameful life exploiting legal loopholes.

<sup>6</sup> Spirit and love of honour: *Rep.* 545a, 548cd, 550b-551a, 553b, 554e-555a; anger, shame, and high-mindedness structured: 439e-440d, 549d, 550b, 560a, 563d; primary target of primary education: 376ab, 401e-402a, 410c-412a, 429d-430c. On this view, the *kalon* is the formal object of spirit. This is to appropriate yet contest a tradition in which honour is eminently *kalon* and spirit the seat of social emotions structured by honour-based institutions; cf. Renaut 2014, pp. 26-46, 182-97, 249-60, despite his neglect of the *kalon* in this connection.

**2.**

One passage of the *Republic* makes particularly vivid the conceptual tie between beauty and shame. Socrates tells the tale of Leontius (appropriately named ‘Lion-like’) to introduce spirit as a third source of human motivation distinct from reason and appetite. Notice, please, the central theme of vision and visibility:

But I once heard a story, and I believe it, that Leontius, the son of Aglaion, was going up from the Piraeus along the outside of the northern wall when he saw some corpses lying at the executioner’s feet. He desired to look at them but at the same time he was disgusted and turned himself away (*duscherainoi kai apotrepoi beauton*). For some time, he struggled and covered his face (*parakaluptoito*), but finally, overpowered by the desire, with eyes pushed open wide he rushed toward the corpses and said, “Look for yourselves, you evil wretches, take your fill of the beautiful sight! (*emplēsthēte tou kalou theamatos*)”

Glaucon: I’ve heard that story myself. (*Rep.* 439e-440a)

Leontius is ashamed at wanting to gaze at the corpses, as suggested by his attempt to hide (*parakaluptoito*) and more clearly by his disgust with himself, or with his eyes. Scholars have by and large groped for a sexual explanation of his psychology, according to which Leontius feels shame at being titillated by the pallor of the corpses or by the prospect of necrophilia. More promising, I believe, is that Leontius savors the morbid thrill of the public execution, as one might a car crash, but finds it indecent to linger over the sight. The corpses, after all, are exposed for people to notice, but *only* to notice, what happens to the worst offenders in imperial Athens.<sup>7</sup>

The precise details of his motivational conflict need not detain us, however. What merits our attention is the complex role that beauty plays in

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Rep.* 605a, 606ab for a link between appetite and theatrical spectacle. My interpretation is closest to Ferrari 2007, p. 181, who adapts the excellent insight of Allen 2000, pp. 245-46, 251-52 into the historical legal context. The traditional interpretation depends on sexual desire being the best fit among paradigmatic appetites, but a paradigmatic appetite is not compulsory.

the mechanisms of shame, focused in Leontius' bitterly ironic and indeed very *public* cry that his eyes take their "fill of the beautiful sight." There are two inseparable aspects of his shame. The first faces Leontius himself. Leontius feels he has done something beneath himself. His ironic use of *kalon* labels not just the corpses but his desire to gaze at them ugly. This is to say that his shame discloses values that delimit the boundaries of his practical identity – what he can and cannot live with – and his shame motivates him, though ineffectually, to live up to that self-image.

The concept of beauty is central to these mechanisms. It introduces discriminations among pleasures. Beauty is pleasurable but also normative. It excludes certain pleasures as not to be pursued, particularly those one has been brought up to distaste as ugly. But such discriminations serve primarily to ennoble, to elevate. A beautiful self-image in shame attracts one toward those aspects of oneself with which one is identified or wants to identify. If properly reared in beauty, Socrates hopes, an ennobling self-image in shame can lead one closer toward developing a fully human nature, whatever that may be.

The self-directed aspect of shame reinforces a point that Bernard Williams argued with characteristic incisiveness in *Shame and Necessity*, that the Greek understanding of shame was too psychologically complex and ethically rich to be considered "unacceptably heteronomous, crudely dependent on public opinion" (Williams 1993, p. 97). Williams wanted to reject the view, which remains prevalent, that shame depends on fear of 'external' sanctions such as the reproach of witnesses, and so is less ethically mature than guilt, supposed to rely on an 'internal' individual conscience.<sup>8</sup> Williams objected that the charge that shame is heteronomous presupposes a problematic notion of autonomy that ignores the way in which our identities are contingently formed by and necessarily situated in concrete social formations. Chiefly relevant for us is that the nature of spirit registers this point, not only because spirit is particularly sensitive to cultural upbringing but also, and more significantly, because its charac-

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<sup>8</sup> This view was expressed with particular intensity in classical scholarship by Adkins 1960. Adkins followed E.R. Dodds in taking the importance of shame at Athens to signal an early stage of ethical development, with Plato and Aristotle as intermediate figures in the 'discovery' of specifically *moral* notions of autonomy, responsibility and duty centred on the concept of the will.



teristic expressions of shame and honour are not adequately described at the level of individual psychology. These attitudes disclose a self-image, but the relevant conception of the self essentially refers to how one stands in relation to others.

Plato ensures the point is not lost. For the story of Leontius is about the eyes of others as much as his own. Notice first that when he rebukes his eyes, the executioner would have been in mind and perhaps literally in view. It does not matter whether Leontius actually notices the executioner or anyone else for that matter. As Williams duly emphasized, shame does not essentially involve fear of being seen by actual witnesses. It suffices to *imagine* how one would seem to someone, often someone whom one respects, for just the reason that one shares or aspires to share her standards of evaluation. The imagined other could even be a more abstracted ethical reference point or role model, figured perhaps – to take some choice examples from the *Republic* – as a mythic hero or god, the graceful *kalos kagathos* embodied in the cultural imagination, or, like the executioner, the instrument of Law. But what is absolutely critical to the phenomenology of shame according to Williams is that the other in shame must be genuinely other, and that means somebody who is “not just a screen for one’s own ethical ideas but is the locus of some genuine social expectations” (Williams 1993, p. 98).<sup>9</sup>

These psychological complexities, I propose, help us understand why Leontius cries out publicly, and in the language of beauty. Leontius is concerned with how he *appears to* some real or imagined others. Thus he humiliates himself by his outburst. He is in effect trying to save face by declaring, through his ironic use of *kalon*, that he knows what he is doing is shameful.<sup>10</sup> More than that, the concept of beauty figures crucially because its outward vector as *appearance* captures the outward-facing aspect of his shame. This element of publicity assumes greater significance when we note, finally, that Plato has carefully framed the entire episode by

<sup>9</sup> This paragraph draws also from Williams 1993, pp. 81-4.

<sup>10</sup> Here I develop a suggestion of Burnyeat 2006, p. 11, though I disagree that Leontius is presented as being seen opening his eyes wide. It suffices to associate wide eyes with shamelessness, as does Galeottus Martius, for example, in his 1490 *De homine*, a.iii: “if the white of the eye is widely extended and visible all round, this shows shamelessness.” (Quoted in Baxandall 1988, p. 58.)

the eyes and ears of others. He stresses at the start that Socrates heard the story from somewhere, at the end that Glaucon had heard it too. Whether Leontius himself, the executioner, or someone else spread the tale (as we now do further: poor Leontius), this framing device trains *our* gazes onto the way in which self-images are informed by and presented to the evaluations of others.

This last insight brings home the full force of the conceptual connection between beauty and shame. So tight is this connection that Sophocles' Ajax, to cite an example of Williams', could express his shame at the thought of returning home stripped of glory – naked, in his words (*gumnos, Aj.* 464) – by proclaiming, “the noble man must either live *kalōs* or die *kalōs*”; we might now venture to translate, ‘live beautifully or die beautifully’ (*all' ē kalōs zēn ē kalōs tethnēkenai ton eugenē chrē*, 479-80). The words of Ajax remind us that Leontius's fear of disgrace takes its bearing from an honour-based aspiration to perform beautiful deeds. To perform beautiful deeds means, in this context, to be and to *seen* to be outstanding. These are not two separate motivations but one, complexly structured. If we clinically prise apart the self- and other-directed aspects of shame or honour, we risk obscuring a profound reason why these attitudes, and hence beauty, should hold such significance for Plato.

A firm sense of shame and honour is vital to becoming virtuous for Plato. I have already intimated one reason for this, namely that its absence results in an indiscriminate pursuit of any and all pleasure. But in the conceptual background behind this negative reason lies a more positive and I believe fundamental reason. Plato assumes, following a long tradition stretching back to Homeric glory, that a fully human life must be lived in concert with others and before their eyes. The ethical importance of beauty, shame and honour thus redounds to a *public* conception of virtue. Indeed, classical descriptions of virtue alight on its beauty to stress how virtue shines forth, is *manifest* or *displayed* to an *audience* struck with *delight*, as Phaedrus does for example when he praises Alcestis for sacrificing her life for her husband's, Admetus:

her deed was judged so beautifully done (*to ergon... kalon edoxen ergasthai*) not only by mortals but even by the gods that, although the gods have given the prize of sending the soul back up from Hades to

but a select few of the many who do very beautiful things, they sent her soul because they were delighted (*agasthentes*) by her deed. (*Symp.* 179cd)

The idea in this passage, sounded more loudly in funeral oration, is that virtue is in some sense *incomplete* if there are few or no eyes to see it. The salient point is not so much that all should ideally see, and be educated to have eyes to see, the “most beautiful sight”, as Glaucon calls it, of a virtuous person (*Rep.* 402d). Nor that spirited bonds of shame and honour create the social space in which beautiful deeds are to make their appearance. It is that, if virtue is a public affair, one *should* be concerned to some degree with the regard of others, rather than unconcerned or positively *not* concerned with it. That is a job of spirit.

### 3.

It may seem there should be greater distance between the idea that virtue is such as to be seen and the idea, altogether less savory to the moralist, that a virtuous person should care whether her virtue is seen. The thought owes its urgency to a modern private conception of virtue. Some variants of this conception treat the social as a realm of appearances in opposition to reality, on the one hand, and to an interiorized and moralized conception of the self, on the other. It bears repeating that this framework does not belong to Plato. His lines between appearance and being are drawn in rather different places, and not in dichotomy. He admits in turn a less morally inflected, more nuanced, more ethically significant notion of *appearing before others*.<sup>11</sup> Frank Chapman Sharp hit upon this crucial difference between tendencies of classical Greek and modern ethical thought

<sup>11</sup> Plato could not have made, or not made decisive, the same set of distinctions that Kierkegaard, for example, was at pains to make when he asked in his *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, “What is it to be more ashamed before others than before oneself but to be more ashamed of seeming than of being?” (Kierkegaard 1993, p. 53). Plato does not have, ultimately, the relevant distinction between inner and outer. There is in this area a difficult question to what extent Plato thinks the ‘other’ in shame or honour should become identified with one’s own reason and so lose its tether to social reality. I would suggest the agonism which circumscribes a philosophic life (*cf.* esp. *Rep.* 403e, 608bc) tells against a strongly affirmative answer, *contra*, e.g., Williams 1993, pp. 98–100, 159–63. The model of an ‘objective-participant’ self in Gill 1996 is also relevant.

when he lamented in 1893 that “the ability to gaze upon our own superior moral excellencies with all the calm self-complacency with which a Beau Brummel might contemplate the beauties of his attire in the glass, this is gone, and we instinctively shrink back at the very idea of making an attempt in this direction...” Our ruling principle, Sharp continues, is now “Above all, no posing – not even to one’s self!” (Sharp 1893, p. 99).

I shall not pursue the question of whether we should want to inject into our contemporary climates some of the (idealized and misrepresented) grandeur and ease that Sharpe found in antiquity. I would like to consider instead whether and how the strand of Platonic thought I have been explicating might illuminate aspects of the reach of beauty beyond art and nature and into the whole of our ethical, social, and political lives. There is often a gap between what we think about beauty – how it figures in our experience – and what we *think* we think about beauty – how it figures or is disfigured in reflection, philosophical or otherwise.<sup>12</sup> Plato can throw some useful light on this gap. Perhaps nowhere more so than on the significance of *beautification*, arts of making and enhancing beautiful appearance.

We began from a point about the beautification of a culture, a concern we preserve, if in more local and democratic forms, through street murals, architectural design, green spaces, public parks and the like. I have wanted to emphasize how natural it was for Plato to develop from this point a line of thought about the beautification of oneself. It betrays a deep prejudice that I am tempted to qualify immediately that we are not speaking about cosmetics but the performance of beautiful deeds. It would also betray a simplistic interpretation. For the social dimension of beauty in Plato is oriented from the fact that concepts of beauty and ugliness which inform our self-images are grounded in quotidian practices of beautification, of cosmetics and costume, learned from images in movies and magazines with titles such as *Self*, *Essence*, and of course, *Beauty*. We tend to distrust this arena – what Arthur Danto termed the Third Realm of aesthetics between Art and Nature – as artifice, vanity, or worse (Danto 2003, pp. 61-80). Distrust is warranted when issued against corrupt beauty norms, as well as the debilitating sense of shame that too often they produce. Plato too is

<sup>12</sup> This image owes to Williams 1993, pp. 7, 91.

deeply concerned about the prevailing norms of beauty in Athenian culture; the *Republic*, especially the early books, may be profitably read as an attempt to weaken their hold. But it is worth noting that Plato's critique does not arise *per force* from a general prejudice against appearance or appearing before others, a prejudice which I have suggested goes hand in conceptual hand with moralized views of shame, of the self, and of private virtue. Plato rather takes to heart an insight that Danto found in even diminished forms of beautification, that "we look into the mirror not merely to see how we look, but how we expect others to see us, and, unless amazingly self-confident, we attempt to modulate our appearances in order that others shall see us as we hope to be seen" (pp. 69-70). If the mirror was for Sharpe a site of calm self-complacency, Plato and Danto – and all of us perhaps – know it to be far more fraught. Yet these thinkers remind us not to distort the character and complexity of our psychological lives by reducing the ethical importance of beauty in our socialized modes of self-presentation.

One shape that this complexity takes subtends an important difference between the Platonic social psychology of beauty and dominant models of aesthetic experience inherited from the eighteenth-century. The difference is not in relating beauty to sociality. This relation was, of course, dear to British sentimentalists such as Hutcheson and Hume, German thinkers such as Kant and Schiller, and French theorists such as Rousseau and Voltaire, all of whom engaged beauty in an Enlightenment project to cultivate cultural taste and the communication of sensibility. But this social role often begins from a concern to make private sensation and taste communicable in the first place. It does not begin, as does Plato, from a concept of beauty already socially transacted. This is a consequence of not yet having the early modern framework of subject and object, and there is a consequence in turn for the structure of aesthetic experience. Plato does not privilege the standpoint of a spectator but concentrates equally on the agential standpoint from which one performs beautiful deeds. Beauty in this scheme does not belong primarily to an object. It belongs to a subject, if I may use that term, appearing to other subjects. I have emphasized that the concept of beauty must be sufficiently thick to accommodate the fact that this psychology draws on, negotiates, or contests live norms of beautiful appearance which implicate the perspective of another. Both

the social situation of beauty and these psychological dynamics may prove fruitful points of departure if we wish to consider, or as some have recently urged, to reconsider the nature and scope of aesthetic experience. The internal connection between beauty and shame and honour for Plato might then help us render more clearly the complex ways in which we live under the sign of beauty before the eyes of others.

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