GOODNESS AND BEAUTY IN PLATO

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1. Introduction

In this paper I would like to explore the relation between goodness (*to agathon*) and beauty (*to kalón*) in Plato. In the first place it will be argued that the evidence suggests that at the very least Plato believed there was a biconditional relation between goodness and beauty. That is, everything that is beautiful is good and everything that is good is beautiful. However, the evidence concerning the relation between beauty and goodness almost always has to do with concrete particulars, as opposed to Forms. In other words, it is almost always the case that where Plato speaks about the relation between beauty and goodness he is speaking about concrete particulars, whether these be persons, actions, or other objects of the sensible world. Very little, if anything, is explicitly said about the relation between beauty and goodness in the intellectual realm, the realm of the Forms. There are only a few passages where Plato could be taken to be speaking about beauty and goodness in the intellectual realm, and even in these few passages it has to be argued that he is in fact referring to the Forms. Thus when I say that beauty and goodness are biconditionally related in Plato, this has to be taken as referring to the sensible realm of concrete particulars.

Abstract: In the first part of this paper I argue that beauty and goodness are at least coextensive for Plato. That means that at least with respect to concrete particulars, everything that is good is beautiful and everything that is beautiful is good. Though the good and the beautiful are coextensive, there is evidence that they are not identical. In the second part of the paper I show significance of this relation. In ethics it implies that the good is the right. It also allows one to see how platonists can believe that goodness exists in mathematics. And it explains the usefulness of mathematics in moral education.

Keywords: Plato, beauty, goodness, coextension, mathematics

Resumo: Na primeira parte deste artigo argumento que o belo e o bem são, pelo menos, coextensivos para Platão. Isso significa que, pelo menos no que diz respeito às características concretas, tudo o que é bom é belo, e tudo o que é belo, é bom. Embora o bem e o belo sejam coextensivos, há evidências de que não são idênticos. Na segunda parte do artigo, mostro o significado desta relação. Na ética implica que o bem é o correto. Permite também ver como é possível aos platônicos acreditar que exista bondade nas matemáticas. E isso explica o uso das matemáticas na educação moral.

Palavras-chave: Platão, a beleza, a bondade, co-extensidade, matemática

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particulars. Of course, what we would perhaps most like to know is how beauty and goodness are related at the level of the Forms. In particular we would like to know whether there are two Forms or one, i.e. whether the Form of the Good is the same as the Form of the Beautiful. Unfortunately, Plato says next to nothing about this, and thus the most we can do is speculate about the relation of the Forms. In the final analysis, I will argue that the evidence suggests that there are two Forms, and that the Form of the Good is distinct from the Form of the Beautiful. However, it seems that this was not at all a major concern of Plato and that he was much more concerned to show the closeness, if not virtual identity, between beauty and goodness, than he was to explore the question concerning the identity or difference between their Forms.

But, having shown the biconditional relation between beauty and goodness in Plato, the question becomes, what are we to make of this? What are the consequences of this for Plato’s thought? I want to argue that this fact has consequences for two areas of Plato’s thought: ethics and mathematics. As it does for Aristotle, to kalon for Plato has above all to do with mathematics and mathematical concepts. The consequences of this for Plato’s thought turns out to be that goodness in ethics has to do with mathematics, Aristotle argues that there cannot be goodness in mathematics because mathematical objects cannot desire. At 1218a24-26, he states,

And it is a bold way to demonstrate that unity is the good per se to say that numbers have desire; for no one says distinctly how they desire.

In this paper, then, I will argue that Plato and Aristotle had remarkably similar understandings of beauty (to kalon), but this passage from Aristotle shows that they differed in their understanding of goodness. For Aristotle goodness, as the final cause, always has to imply some sort of desire and ability to achieve, it is implicit in the very concept of goodness. Thus where there is no desire or ability to achieve, it is inappropriate to apply the concept of goodness. In fact this is precisely how he criticizes the Platonic view that goodness exists in mathematics, in his Eudemian Ethics. In the context of an argument against the academic application of goodness to mathematics, Aristotle argues that there cannot be goodness in mathematics because mathematical objects cannot desire. At 1218a24-26, he states,

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In this paper, then, I will argue that Plato and Aristotle had remarkably similar understandings of beauty (to kalon), but this passage from Aristotle shows that they differed in their understanding of goodness. For Aristotle goodness, as the final cause, always has to imply some sort of desire, but this seems not to have been true all the time for Plato.

2. The Translation of Kalos

Before beginning this investigation however, a word must be said about the vexed question of the correct translation of the Greek word kalos. Kalos is