

The Conflict Concerning the Ethical and Aesthetic View of *tò kalón* in Xenophon's *Symposium*

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El conflicto sobre la visión ética y estética del *tò kalón* en el Simposio de Jenofonte

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Abstract: The Greek term “*tò kalón*” has a wide variety of connotations, among which the ethical and the aesthetic aspects stand out. Scholars debate whether there is a clear separation between those two aspects, whether one subsumes the other, or more broadly what their relation is.

In this paper, I propose that Xenophon's *Symposium* is a good scenario to explore the intricacies between different aspects of *tò kalón*. Not because the dialogue offers any deep philosophical discussion about the nature of *tò kalón*, but because Xenophon presents this dialogue as an illustration of *tò kalón*.

Imagen superior: *Jenofonte* (430-354 a. C.) (detalle), circa 340/30 a. C., fotografía de la estatua en mármol blanco, 58 x 34 cm, Museo del Prado.

I shall argue that, even though it is generally agreed that *tò kalón* (fineness, beauty) elicits praise and commendation, experiencing or appreciating it does not necessarily lead to being able to provide its definition, just as having a definition of it does not necessarily affect our appreciation of it.

Keywords: *tò kalón*, kalokagathía, Xenophon, *Symposium*, ethics, aesthetics.

Resumen: El término griego “*tò kalón*” tiene una gran variedad de connotaciones, entre las que destacan los aspectos éticos y estéticos. Los estudiosos debaten si hay una distinción clara entre esos dos aspectos, si uno engloba al otro o, más ampliamente, cuál es su relación.

En este trabajo, se propone que el Simposio de Jenofonte es un buen escenario para explorar las complejidades entre los distintos aspectos del *tò kalón*. No porque el diálogo ofrece una discusión filosófica profunda sobre la naturaleza del *tò kalón*, sino porque Jenofonte presenta este diálogo como una ilustración del *tò kalón*.

Se discute que, aunque en general se acepta que el *tò kalón* (la finura, la belleza) suscita elogios y alabanzas, el hecho de experimentarlo o apreciarlo no conduce necesariamente a poder dar su definición, así como tener su definición no necesariamente afecta nuestra apreciación del mismo.

Palabras clave: *tò kalón*, kalokagathía, Jenofonte, *Simposio*, ética, estética.

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Introduction

It has been widely acknowledged by scholars that the Greek term “*tò kalón*” both challenges our understanding of Ancient Greek ethics and aesthetics, as well as illuminates the intricacies between these two aspects of Ancient Greek culture that, in our contemporary view, we simply assume to be different and separated.

For an aesthetic context, “beauty” is the preferred translation; for an ethical one, we find “noble” or “honourable”. But it is quite common amongst English translators and scholars to use “fine” in either context, to preserve the ample range of connotations.

Some scholars defend the view that “*tò kalón*” is homonymous and can be said to pick on ethical properties on the one hand and aesthetic properties on the other,

with different meanings.¹ This view is advanced mainly by Irwin (2010, 385, 390), who contends that the features picked up by “*tò kalón*” in an ethical context are praiseworthiness and admiration; whereas the main feature picked up by this expression in an aesthetic context is the disinterested pleasure that *tò kalón* arouses in the onlooker.

In contrast, some other scholars contend that, even though it is possible to identify clear instances of the aesthetic connotations of “*tò kalón*”, and that Plato’s philosophy, for instance, focuses more on the ethical aspect, nevertheless the link between the ethical and the aesthetic connotations are never broken (Reid and Leyh 2019, ix).

In this paper, I show that the challenge of translating and understanding the meaning of “*tò kalón*” is, indeed, rooted in a tension on how at least some Ancient Greeks used that concept. I have chosen Xenophon’s *Symposium*.

Xenophon lived between 431 BC and 354 BC, approximately. He was born in the Attic region and was amongst Socrates’ disciples, just as Plato.

Unlike Plato’s, Xenophon’s dialogue *Symposium* does not offer a philosophical discussion. As I shall argue in the first section, Xenophon’s instructional style is more concerned with illustrating the subject matter –namely, the nature of *tò kalón*–, rather than lecturing about it.

For the purpose of this discussion, I shall comment on three aspects of *tò kalón* that Xenophon highlights throughout his dialogue. First, assuming the aesthetic perspective of *tò kalón*, I shall comment on the difficulties of defining the traits that make a thing beautiful. Second, I shall comment on the response that the appreciation of *tò kalón* arouses in the onlooker. Finally, I shall comment on the purported superiority of the ethical aspect of *tò kalón* over the aesthetic one, and its links with the concept of *agathía* (goodness, nobility, bravery, and positive qualities attributed to chiefs).

Especially in regard to the link between *tò kalón* and *agathía* in the Classical Period of Ancient Greece, Xenophon’s works are of the utmost importance, for this topic

¹ I adhere to the convention of using quotation marks when referring to the name; i.e., “*tò kalón*” vs. *tò kalón*, the latter when referring to the actual thing.

is present in all of his Socratic writings.² But above all, the *Symposium* is meant to show how *kaloì kagathoí* men and activities look like.

1. Defining “*tò kalón*”

Xenophon’s *Symposium* is a dialogue that takes place at Callias’ home. Callias is hosting a gathering in honour of Autolycus, his beloved, who has just won an important competition. At the gathering, in addition to Callias and Autolycus, we encounter: Lycon, Autolycus’ father; Niceratus; Critobulus; Hermogenes; Antisthenes; Charmides; and Socrates, of course. Later on, the entertainers join the party: Philip, the buffoon; and a Syracusan with a flute girl, a dancing girl, and a dancing boy. The guests will entertain themselves discussing whether nobleness and goodness can be taught (II.4); telling what each of them considers the most valuable thing in his possession (III); and listening to Socrates advice on loving the soul over loving the body (VIII.10–41).

Xenophon presents his *Symposium* not as a philosophical enquiry into the nature of *tò kalón*, but as a display of it. He wants to recount the activities of men he regarded as *kaloì kagathoí*.³

For Xenophon, it is a valuable thing to remember the activities in which noble men engaged – be it grave activities or rather light ones. There seems to be the suggestion that the activities of noble men are noble themselves, not merely in virtue of the object of the activity, but also in virtue of the character of the agent.

There is also the suggestion that grasping the value of *tò kalón* is better achieved not through arguments or definitions, but by experiencing the very thing. At least, this is what Xenophon says has happened to him: he got to know the value of *tò kalón* by witnessing the behaviour of noble men, not by being lectured by them. Hence,

² This link is so noticeable in Xenophon’s writings, that it has been suggested it was he who coined the abstract term *kalokagathía*, in his *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians* 10.4. See Reid (2022, 123) and Tomás García (2016, 18–19).

³ For Xenophon’s *Symposium*, I consult Xenophon (1997) and Xenophon (1971).

as Xenophon wishes to pass his knowledge on, he decides to recreate in words the activities of noble men, so that we readers can experience them as well (I.1).⁴

As Morgan (2007, 369, 375) explains, it is the use of narrative for moral instruction –and not a theoretical discussion– what teaches the readers how to relate to others. This literary device is present in all four of Xenophon’s Socratic works, for selecting anecdotes that illustrate Socrates’ exemplary life is more useful for the practice of virtue.⁵

In short, the opening lines of Xenophon’s *Symposium* already warn us about the complexity of the subject matter:

To my mind it is worth while to relate not only the serious acts of great and good men (*toôn kaloôn kagathoôn androôn*) but also what they do in their lighter moods. I should like to narrate an experience of mine that gives me this conviction (I.1).

On the one hand, defining the fineness or nobility of an activity does not seem to depend solely on the type of activity. On the other hand, grasping the nature of *tò kalón* is probably not a matter of understanding an argument or a definition.

Yet, Xenophon takes great care in describing the nature of the activities those noble men engaged in, as well as in recording the discussion and the reasons put forth in order to state the nature of *tò kalón*. The difficulty of reasoning about *tò kalón* is illustrated first in the beauty contest between Critobulus and Socrates.

Chapter v of Xenophon’s *Symposium* is dedicated to illustrate that being able to appreciate physical beauty does not necessarily lead to being able to provide a

⁴ Whether we should understand that Xenophon himself witnessed the drinking party he is about to recall, makes no important difference for the purpose of this paper. But, as V. Gray (2004) has pointed out, the dramatic date of this drinking party is around 422 BC, and Xenophon was too young to remember it (he was actually too young even to have been there, for he was born in the 431 BC).

Gray (2004, 377) suggests that, in all four of Xenophon’s Socratic works —*Memorabilia*, *Oeconomics*, *Apologia*, and *Symposium*— the primary narrators are actually anonymous; it is a narrator called “Xenophon”, speaking in first person to secure an impression of objectivity.

⁵ “The narrator at each [of the Socratic works] makes it clear that the conversations have been selected for their exemplary qualities: that of the *Symposium* for its presentation of good men at play, that of the *Oeconomics* because it distills management experience, that of the *Apology* because it cristalizes Socrates’ heroic virtue in the face of death. The multiple conversations of the *Memorabilia* present examples of Socratic usefulness to his friends and controvert general misapprehensions about Socrates” (Morgan 2007, 375).

definition of it, just as having a definition of beauty does not necessarily affect our appreciation of it.

As the dining party progresses and each guest states what he takes pride in, Critobulus says that he takes pride in his beauty insofar as beauty –he argues– inspires people into bettering themselves, as well as grants the beautiful boy the power of attaining his desire with the good will of the giver (IV.15-19). To which Socrates replies that Critobulus is boasting as though he thought himself more handsome than Socrates (IV.19).

Critobulus takes Socrates' words as a challenge into a beauty contest, for which the other guests will serve as judges. The rule is that Socrates must provide an argument to persuade the judges that he is the most handsome of the two.

Socrates starts by asking Critobulus how can it be that objects of different nature, despite their differences, can be equally regarded as beautiful. Critobulus answers that things are beautiful, regardless of the kind they belong to, insofar as they are well-equipped to fulfil their function. This is the criterion Socrates will adopt and put to the test in the beauty contest. And it has been Critobulus, not Socrates, who has decided on it.

According to this performative criterion, Socrates's protruding eyes should be regarded as more beautiful than Critobulus', insofar as they, purportedly, are better equipped to see; Socrates' snub nose should be regarded as more beautiful than Critobulus' straight one, insofar as Socrates' is wider and, thus, better equipped to perceive smells; and Socrates' wide mouth and thick lips should be regarded as more beautiful than Critobulus', for Socrates' are better equipped to eat and even to kiss. All in all, Socrates' exaggerated features suggest that his organs are better equipped to perform their corresponding functions.

Yet, when the time to vote is come, Critobulus is elected the most handsome of the two, by unanimity. Socrates complains and says that Critobulus must have bribed the judges. But he is teasing, for surely he did not think that he stood a chance to win the beauty contest over Critobulus. Critobulus' beauty was evident to everyone before the beauty contest, and Socrates' argument did not change in the least anyone's judgment.

But Socrates' point is not to convince people that he too is beautiful. Perhaps, his point is to show that, despite the fact that everybody is ready to cast their vote, and that they all agree about Critobulus' beauty they cannot explain what makes

Critobulus more beautiful than Socrates — not even Critobulus himself, who is indubitably self-confident in his beauty.

Thus, Xenophon illustrates the distance between our ability to perceive beauty and our ability to account for what makes things beautiful.

2. Responding to *tò kalón*

In the previous section, we found the suggestion that appreciation of beauty seems to be an experience accessible to anyone — at least to anyone at this drinking party.

Xenophon's illustration shows everyone agreeing in their judgment about beauty. But this is an uncommon situation. People not always agree on what they find to be more beautiful. Even if there is agreement at the level of a general judgment, people do not necessarily agree on the finer details concerning their appreciation of beauty, nor in the way they respond to their presence.

For instance, all the guests at the drinking party agree on their general appreciation of the dancing boy: he certainly is a good-looking young man (*panù kalós*, II.1). The musicians bring enjoyment to the guests. But the sheer sight of them arouses pleasure in the onlooker, and as Charmides remarks, the physical aspect of *tò kalón*, i.e., beauty, arouses also an erotic desire (III.1).

However, as soon as we question what in the dancing boy makes him beautiful, we face a challenge. It is clear that praise and compliment are addressed to his body. But what makes it a beautiful body, is less clear.

Socrates points out that the dancing boy appears even more beautiful when he is dancing (II.15). One way to read Socrates' remark is as though the features that make the dancing boy's body beautiful were better displayed while he is in motion. Indeed, Socrates highlights that the dancing boy's body is well-proportioned as a whole, unlike a wrestler's body for instance, which is overdeveloped in the upper area, or a runner's body, which is overdeveloped in the lower area (II.17). Head to toes, the dancing boy's body is well-developed, and this becomes clear as he dances, for he involves his body in its entirety in the dance (II.16).

Another way to read Socrates' remark is as though he were saying that the beauty of the dancing boy's body consisted in that, in its entirety, it is well-fitted for the

purpose intended, namely, dancing.⁶ Indeed, the skill of the dancing boy elicits admiration in Socrates and makes him feel the urge to dance so that he can improve his own body⁷ (II.17–19). By the way, Callias joins Socrates in his resolution (II.20).⁸

Thus, physical beauty might elicit pleasure, erotic desire, admiration and general commendation in the onlooker, even though it is not easy to point out exactly what makes a body beautiful.

But this is not the whole story. The appreciation of beauty can elicit deeper feelings. So it seems to suggest the response Autolyclus elicits not only in Callias – his suitor – but practically in all the guests at the drinking party. Here is Xenophon’s description of the scene:

A person who took note of the course of the events would have come at once at the conclusion that beauty is in its essence something regal, especially when, as in the present case of Autolyclus, its possessor joins with it modesty and sobriety. For in the first place, just as the sudden glow of a light at night draws all eyes to itself, so now the beauty of Autolyclus compelled everyone to look at him. And again, there was not one of the onlookers who did not feel his soul strangely stirred by the boy; some of them grew quieter than before, others even assumed some kind of a pose. Now it is true that all who are under the influence of any of the gods seem well worth gazing at; but whereas those who are possessed of the other gods have a tendency to be sterner of countenance, more terrifying of voice, and more vehement, those who are inspired by chaste Love have a more tender look, subdue their voices to more gentle tones and assume a supreme noble bearing. Such was the demeanour of Callias at this time under the influence of Love; and therefore he was an object well worth the gaze of those initiated into the worship of this god (I.8–10).

⁶ Recall that, as we saw in the previous section, Critobulus shall propose this performative criterion for the beauty contest.

⁷ Cf. Reid’s analysis on the appreciation of the Terme Boxer, a sculpture portraying an athlete with bleeding cuts, a broken nose, cauliflower ears, and massive muscles. She brings up the question of whether the spectator finds beautiful the realism of the sculpture, the example of athletic beauty, or the suggestion of virtue: “the toil, the endurance, the ability to deal with pain” (Reid 2019, 78).

⁸ This scene of Socrates pretending that he wants to learn dancing has drawn considerable attention over time. Some scholars take at face value Xenophon’s record of a dancing Socrates, whereas others consider that Xenophon meant to ridicule Socrates’ attitude. More recently, Bernhard Huss has proposed that Socrates is merely joking when he says he would like to dance. Cf. Huss (1999).

As Morgan (2007, 376) points out, in this scene, the general admiration elicited by the beauty of the young boy is so powerful, and everybody is so absorbed, that the narrative in the dialogue makes it necessary to break the mood with the entrance of a buffoon; had it been further extended, this scene would have undermined the promised conversation.

It is to be noted that, even though Xenophon highlights the importance of a good character –modesty (*he aidóōs*, shame, self-respect) and sobriety (he soophrosúnee, prudence, discretion, self-control)– this scene, no doubt, refers to Autolycus' physical beauty. For Xenophon uses “*tò kállon*”, not “*tò kalón*”. Yet, Xenophon brings his understanding of physical beauty close to the ethical dimension identified in *tò kalón*, which makes this passage all the more relevant to see the intricacies between Ancient Greek ethical and aesthetic values. For the suggestion is that good character traits make physical beauty even more valuable.

But the relevant aspect for us, as of now, is that Autolycus' physical beauty elicits not only praise and commendation, but even love. In the passage above, Xenophon describes two general attitudes. The one, in which the onlooker experiences a strong physical attraction to the body of the beautiful boy. The other, in which the onlooker experiences a peaceful delight in the contemplation and thought of the beautiful boy.

Xenophon suggests the first kind of attitude might be due to a divinity other than Love, whereas the latter is, without a doubt, a signal of the presence of Love. This duality in the kinds of erotic desire is resumed in VIII.9-10:⁹

Now, whether there is one Aphrodite or two, Heavenly and Vulgar, I do not know; for even Zeus, though considered one and the same, yet has many by-names. I do know, however, that in the case of Aphrodite there are separate altars and temples for the two, and rituals, those of the Vulgar Aphrodite excelling in looseness, those of the Heavenly in chastity.

At this point, one can envisage that Socrates esteems the erotic desire that is grounded on the love for the soul of the beloved, higher than the erotic desire that is grounded on the love for the body of the beloved. Yet, there is no explanation as to why or how the contemplation of physical beauty moves the onlooker in one direction or the other.

⁹ The duality of Aphrodite is an allusion to the duality of both Eros and Aphrodite proposed by Pausanis in Plato's *Symposium*, 180c-185c.

3. *Tò kalón*: ethics vs. aesthetics

According to Xenophon's recollection, all the guests at the drinking party are frank witnesses of Autolycus' physical beauty, a situation which does not escape Socrates. Socrates is well aware of Autolycus' attractiveness and of the variety of responses it elicits in the onlookers. Some of the guests even try to tease Autolycus a little bit and make him blush (III.9,12). This modesty is strongly contrasted with Critobulus' pride about his attractiveness.

Critobulus states that physical beauty is good, both for its possessor and for the onlooker. For the possessor, because being beautiful grants him the attention and favours of whom he wants –or so Critobulus argues. For the onlooker, because the desire for the beautiful boy makes him put an effort into becoming braver and more modest and self-controlled (IV.15).

Notwithstanding Critobulus' reasoning, undeniable dangers come with being beautiful, especially at a young age, as is Autolycus' case. So much so, that his father does not leave Autolycus' side, be it day or night (IV.53–54). Due to Autolycus' beauty, he has several suitors. The greatest danger Lycon fears is that those suitors might do wrong Autolycus, for they seem to be interested only in sleeping with him (IV.52).

Socrates' view on the matter is —and he shall address his speech especially to Callias, Autolycus' suitor— that loving the beauty of the soul is better than loving the beauty of the body. And this is so for both the lover and the beloved.

Firstly, loving the soul is better than loving the body because the former love is longer lasting than the latter. Even if one grants that there is physical beauty at any age, as Critobulus says (IV.17), nonetheless, the lover gets satiated from the pleasures of the body, whereas pleasures of the soul do not allow for weariness:

... in the enjoyment of physical beauty, there is a point of surfeit, so that one cannot help feeling toward his favourite the same effect that he gets toward food by gratification of the appetite. But affection for the soul, being pure, is also less liable to satiety, though it does not follow, as one might suppose, that it is also less rich in the graces of Aphrodite... (VIII.15).

Therefore, this is the only kind of love that has a chance of growing and becoming stronger in time.

Secondly, the love for the soul is the only one that can be genuinely reciprocated. Socrates explains that, when the beloved knows that he is being courted by someone

who is after bodily pleasures, even if the lover offers the young boy some benefit in return of his favours, the young boy might feel as merchandise and might grow resentful toward such a lover.¹⁰ The fact that the lover obtains the favours of the young boy not through physical violence but through persuasion makes things even worse, because it means that the lover has corrupted the young boy in his soul (VIII.20).

In the third place, the love for the soul is more beneficial than the love for the body, for the lover himself. It is only when the lover really cares for the young boy's well-being that he feels compelled to be a morally good person himself, so that he can set a good example for the beloved:

But the greatest blessing that befalls the man who yearns to render his favourite a good friend is the necessity of himself making virtue his habitual practice. For one cannot produce goodness in his companion while his own conduct is evil, nor can he himself exhibit shamelessness and incontinence and at the same time render his beloved self-controlled and reverent (VIII.27).

Socrates thinks that these should be powerful reasons for the lover to prefer beauty of the soul over beauty of the body.

As for the young boy, the same arguments show that procuring himself the company of those who care for the beauty of his soul is the way to preserve it free from corruption.

Socrates' speech makes evident that he himself is concerned with the beauty and excellence of souls. As such, he praises Autolycus' good nature, discipline, and bravery, for those traits should bestow admiration upon him, his father, and his friends (VIII.38).

Autolycus' father, Lycon, is also concerned for the beauty of Autolycus' soul. Having heard Socrates' speech, he says that, in his opinion, Socrates is the man who is truly beautiful and good (*"hoô Soôkrates, kalós ge kagathòs dokeîs moi ánthroopos eînai"*. IX.1).

Reid suggests that, for Xenophon, *kalokagathía* is an innovative educational ideal. She points out that "The gentleman conception of the *kalos kagathos* typically associates moral goodness with inherited qualities such as wealth, high birth,

¹⁰ This argument is partly grounded on Socrates' assumption that sexual intercourse is not as pleasant for the one performing the passive role as it is for the other (VIII.21).

and physical appearance”.¹¹ But —she argues— Xenophon does not use the term to justify the essential uniqueness or superiority of the aristocrats; instead, he uses to describe the conduct expected of prominent men. Xenophon’s *Symposium* is an illustration of such a conduct, and Socrates is the one who best exhibits it (Reid 2022, 122–126).

At the end of the drinking party, it seems as though Socrates wins the contest proposed by Critobulus, for he is the *kálliston*, in the relevant sense.

4. Final remarks

The Greek term “*tò kalón*” displays a wide range of connotations that go from qualifying aesthetic aspects to praising character traits, always with a general sense of commendation.

In some cases, context makes it clear enough that *tò kalón* refers either to physical beauty or to moral nobility. But some other cases seem to dwell in the ambiguity.

This paper has explored Xenophon’s approach on the matter. His recollection of gentlemen in their spare time is offered as an illustration of *tò kalón*. For it seems as though defining it is much more difficult than experiencing it.

Xenophon portrays Critobulus as rather self-confident in his own beauty. Even though he seems to know that physical beauty can help him get some benefits, yet he is incapable of accounting for what exactly makes him beautiful.

Likewise, all the guests at the drinking party respond to Autolycus’ beauty. But not everybody exhibits the same response. Some of the guests experience a rather strong physical attraction to the boy, whereas others are moved into a quiet admiration.

Xenophon does not advance any suggestion, either as to how to define physical beauty or as to why it might elicit different responses. Nor does he comment on why it can be that Lycon concludes that Socrates is the *kalós* man, in the relevant sense.

Neither Xenophon nor the guests elaborate on philosophical questions about the nature of *tò kalón*. That does not seem to be the purpose of this dialogue. But it does

¹¹ Unlike Aristotle’s concept, in which *kalokagathia* is a philosophical goal obtain through education, not through social status (Reid 2022, 126).

succeed in showing the intricacies between beauty, nobility, honour, excellence, all of which are aspects of *tò kalón*. —

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