

**Jonathan Fine**  
**DISSERTATION ABSTRACT**

BEAUTY ON DISPLAY: PLATO AND THE CONCEPT OF THE *KALON*

To become virtuous, Plato holds, one must desire the *kalon*. Translations of *kalon* capture what are often distinguished as aesthetic, ethical, and social dimensions of the concept: *beautiful*, *fine*, *admirable*, *honourable*, and *noble*. How are these dimensions related? What would it mean for Plato to prioritize aspects of *beauty*, if these seem to pull apart from an ethical life? My dissertation shows that, for Plato, the concept of the *kalon* regulates the public context in which to recognize and aspire to the beauty of virtue. Becoming virtuous involves aspiring to *appear* beautiful before others. But if beautiful appearance tends toward superficiality or vanity, how can it also be indispensable to living well? Analyzing how Plato uses the *kalon* to contest social practices of esteem, we come to see the tensions in our own concept of beauty.

**Chapter 1** argues for a reorientation to the *kalon* in Plato. The concept remains obscure because connotations of beautiful appearance are presumed distinct from praise of conduct and character. Yet, as each of the following chapters show, the use and abuse of beautiful appearance underlies how Plato connects the *kalon* to shame, honour, and esteem; to sensory pleasure and fascination; and to erotic desire – all in pursuit of a good human life.

**Chapter 2** examines the place of beauty in the regulative of the *kalon* in acculturation in the *Republic*. Cultural images of beauty not only make a way of life attractive but structure shame and honour in the pursuit of a public conception of virtue. Shame and honour presuppose collective identities in which one aspires to be admired for the beauty of one's virtue. Motivation for the *kalon* is captured far less well by modern emphases on moral and aesthetic autonomy and far better by the dynamics of beauty in socialized modes of self-presentation.

Aware of the social psychological pressures to appear beautiful in the wrong way, Plato employs the concept of the *kalon* as a philosophical antidote to contest cultural conceptions of beauty and liberate a distinctly 'philosophical' sensibility. **Chapter 3** examines how Plato reconfigures the heroic ideal of a glorious death. He disgraces the figure of Achilles reconstruct the nature and proper objects of honour and to undermine a tragic attitude that renders human flourishing impossible.

**Chapter 4** demonstrates that norms of simplicity and unity work to sever a conceptual connection between beauty and 'fascinating variegation' (*poikilia*) in archaic and classical arts and politics. Retrieving this background shows that, far from unambiguously denying the beauty or rejecting the pleasures of 'variegated' poetry, Plato lays bare the problem that fascination in beauty can be edifying or lead to our psychological demise.

The ambivalent character of beauty complicates its relation to the good. Though Plato is often thought seamlessly to correlate beauty and goodness, **Chapter 5** shows that the *Symposium* emphasizes their *distinct* roles in the psychology of erotic desire. Beauty's immediate attraction raises the worry that its pursuit may *fail* to conduce to one's life going well. To the extent that our attempts to live well are motivated 'under the guise of the beautiful,' human agency remains risky, uncertain, and blind.

By according due priority to aesthetic dimensions of the *kalon* in Plato, we achieve a richer account of the ethical functions and social context of the concept, its range of historical connections, and the depth of the philosophical problems it traces. We also rehabilitate vital ethical aspects of beauty in our aspirations to live well.