Kalokagathia – beauty is more than just external appearance

M-A Dürrigl
Old Church Slavonic Institute, Zagreb, Croatia

Summary

Notions of beauty have evolved through history and are culture-specific. In the Western world one concept which has been linked to beauty is that of kalokagathia, an ideal that unites physical beauty and moral value in a human being. This notion was inherited from Antiquity and was modified during the Middle Ages, when much more attention was paid to the fate of the soul, and further modified during the Renaissance, when concepts of beauty and of moral responses, utility and good gradually became separated. A glance at an ancient notion, such as kalokagathia, has its value in trying to understand modern perceptions of beauty.

Keywords: beauty, history of ideas, kalokagathia, medicine, philosophy

Introduction

From time immemorial, human beauty has been one of the central issues of self-perception (even self-esteem). Concepts of beauty, in the sense of: what is beauty? what is beautiful, desirable and attractive?, have changed throughout history and are always culture-specific. In the Western world, speculation concerning beauty begins in ancient Greece and it has been part of the ‘triad of fundamental values – the good, the true and the beautiful’. Throughout history the issues of objectivity and subjectivity of beauty have been elaborated.

One concept fundamentally linked to beauty in the Western world has been the concept of kalokagathia, καλοκαγαθία, a philosophical notion inherited from Antiquity. We are under no illusion that we can comprehensively elaborate the complex aspects of and different viewpoints from which kalokagathia can be studied (e.g. philosophy, aesthetics, ethics, art history, literature and medicine). The aim is to point to a few aspects pertinent to the scope of this journal.

Antiquity

Kalokagathia as a term reflects ideals highly valued in Antiquity – particularly in ancient Athens – ideals of harmony and unity. The word/noun itself is Greek, and can roughly be translated as ‘moral value’, ‘honesty’, ‘virtue’ (Fig. 1). It is a complex word, derived from two adjectives: kalós = beautiful, pretty, handsome (outwardly), decent, honest, noble (inwardly) + agathós = honest, good, noble, courageous, worthy of admiration. It is interesting to note that the word kalós partly already includes the values contained in the semantic field of agathós. Hence, kalokagathia as ‘the beautiful and the good’ was an ideal to be achieved through education and lifestyle – in Platonistic thinking that which is good (as a ‘reflection’ of the ideal Good) can only be beautiful, and vice versa. Plato wrote in Lysis: ‘For I affirm that the good is the beautiful’. It united the outward appearance with an inner quality. In a simplified manner one could say that only he who possesses both qualities (who is handsome, fair, but also honest and upright) can be considered beautiful. From a large number of quotations let us choose Sappho: ‘He who is fair to look upon is good, and he who is good will soon be fair also’. The ugly and malformed (lacking proportion) did not fit into this category. (Sometimes the concept of kalokagathia took on an ironic taste, but that is a different issue.) It pertained to men (women were not considered) of good heritage.

Correspondence: Marija-Ana Dürrigl, PhD, Demetrova 11, 10000 Zagreb, Croatia; E-mail: duerrigl@hfi.hr
Accepted for publication 19 August 2003
and good upbringing, thus *kalokagathía* included moral and social perfection; not only ‘a sound mind/soul in a sound body’ (*mens sana in corpore sano*), but also a moral and social dimension.

Neoplatonist philosophers took up the notion of *kalokagathía* in late Antiquity and the Middle Ages (from Dyonisios Areopagites on) and fundamentally Christianized it. Attention shifted to what one may term ‘inner beauty’, the beauty of the soul and its virtues. Preserved medieval works often view physical beauty in its negative connotations: vanity, lust, and corruption of the flesh, so there are many pages devoted to criticising adornments, fancy dresses, perfumes, make-up, etc. The more beautiful someone was, the greater danger there was for them losing their souls. Numerous hagiographical texts narrate how saints lived lives of deprivation and self-mortification in order to achieve salvation. One need only remember the touching story of ‘Mary of Egypt’: the once so beautiful prostitute is later not even recognized as a human; by living a life of penance in the desert, she is mistaken for a beast.5

**Middle ages**

It would be wrong to think (as modern readers often do) that *all* medieval authors spoke with one voice. The underlying philosophical–theological ideas in the body–soul relationship was the Augustinian idea that *both* the body and the soul are *good*, only the body was of ‘lesser good’, because it is temporal, mortal. Temperance, moderation and modesty were preached all throughout the Middle Ages. St Bernard of Clairvaux wrote, for example: ‘The body is an image of the mind ... shining through in action, discourse, appearance, movement – even in laughter’.6

In numerous medieval discourses the sense of external, physical beauty was linked to the sense of its passing, its transience – there lies one reason for turning away from physical appearance and for concentrating on inner beauty. Late medieval works of art and literary texts incessantly seemed to repeat that subject, asking *Ubi sunt?* ‘Where are they now?’, referring to the mighty, to the beautiful, the attractive ... who lose their beauty during their lifetime and end up as ashes and dust. But there is also a melancholy undertone in this, a sadness of beauty passing, which the modern reductionist view overlooks. Many mystical works, from Erigena to Hildegard of Bingen, reflect on the human beauty that becomes visible and active when the soul ‘shines through’ in harmony with the object.

The subject of female beauty was frequent in the Middle Ages; many moralists attached a negative aspect to it, one of danger and temptation – yet some authors did not hesitate to praise it, e.g. Baldwin of Canterbury and Gilbert of Hoyt.7

When trying to understand the medieval notion of beauty from a modern standpoint, the fundamental problem is that in medieval times there was a clear absence of delineation between beauty and utility or goodness (as indeed there was no strict delineation between good and beauty in Antiquity). The moral and aesthetic responses to things were united, intertwined. Therefore, for example, many saints were depicted not only as pious, virtuous, good, chaste, but also as beautiful – Agnes, Agatha, Ursula, St Bernard of Clairvaux in his youth, etc.8 A special case in point is the martyr Apollonia, an elderly virgin whom later medieval legend ‘transformed’ into a pretty young girl. In martyrdom accounts, the *body* was central, because it was tortured and attempts were made to corrupt it – but by divine intervention, and no matter how horrible the torture/mutilation is – the body of the saint is never corrupted.9,10

The Neoplatonist philosophical concepts survived well into the Modern Age; one of the leading humanists Marcus Marulus Spalatensis in his copious work *Repertorium*, written arround 1500, cites Plato under the headword ‘*Bonum. Pulchritudo est summum bonum splendor*’ (beauty is the splendour of the highest good);11 in the semantic
meaning of ‘the beautiful’, notional traits of perfection and nobility often play a part.

Scholastic authors (Thomas Aquinas, Albertus Magnus) wrote about beauty as being transcendental. Thomas held that beauty and good differ logically and maintained ‘... beauty to be a transcendental property also, but a property which is disclosed in relation to a knowing subject’.12 This view is an important move in the direction of humanism.

Renaissance

As time progressed, and ideas changed, the notion of kalokagathía filtered more toward the realm of an aesthetic force, as can be read from works of Dante. The concept of beauty from the Renaissance on became more a ‘realm of its own’, a disinterested pleasure.13 It seems that, the more the cultural niveau is lifted, the more distinguished/separated various types and kinds of beauty become from one another (beauty of the human body, of nature, landscape, art, buildings, etc.). Dante’s works herald new notions and concepts, which gradually developed into modern aesthetic sensibilities with still unanswered questions, open problems and ongoing debates.

Conclusion

This short exposé attempts to outline an ancient concept which sheds light on periods long past, but which is also pertinent to the consideration of beauty in all its complex aspects in the present day.

References
