



The *Hippias Major* and Aesthetics

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The *Hippias Major* is a natural place to look for insight into Plato's aesthetics.¹ 'What is *beauty*?' the dialogue asks. What do beautiful things all have in common, that warrants their being called 'beautiful'? Socrates is ashamed not to know the answer, so he solicits the expertise of Hippias of Elis, the greatest polymath of his day. What follows, however, is bound to leave the student of aesthetics quite cold.² For the beauty Socrates is after is not the kind one finds in a piece of music, or a landscape, or an old town square. The Greek noun for 'beauty' is *to kalon*, from the adjective *kalos*. While its use in Homer is predominantly aesthetic, by the classical period *kalos* had become, as one scholar puts it, 'a blanket term of approbation, wider in application than any corresponding English adjective.'³ In the *Hippias Major* alone it applies to everything from quails to customs to kitchen utensils, with no clear connotation of aesthetic value. A more reliable translation of *kalos* would be 'fine' or 'admirable', words which better reflect the versatility of the Greek.⁴ In asking after the essence of the *kalon* itself, Socrates wants to know what it is, in the most general way imaginable, for a thing to be an object of value. Beauty is only a species of value: the *kalon* 'in appearance'.⁵

This is not to say that beauty is ignored in the text. A proper account of the *kalon* must explain why beautiful things are indeed beautiful. But there is always the question of whether a thing of beauty is genuinely *kalon*. Plato presents us with a striking example of this problem in the character of Hippias. His dazzling appearance, encyclopedic knowledge, and rhetorical skills have earned him huge sums of money and widespread fame, yet there are plenty of reasons to doubt his moral integrity.⁶ While



the portrayal of Hippias is mostly light-hearted, his hypocrisy can be seen to have a darker side—as when he boasts about a recent trip to Sparta:⁷

Just now I made a great impression there speaking about the activities a young man should take up. I have a speech about that I put together really beautifully, and I put the words particularly well. My setting and the starting-point of the speech are something like this: After Troy was taken, the tale is told that Neoptolemus asked Nestor what sort of activities are kala – the sort of activities that would make someone famous if he adopted them while young. After that the speaker is Nestor, who teaches him a very great many kala customs. (286a5–b5)

The irony of Hippias' choice of dramatic setting would not have been lost on Plato's audience. In Greek mythology, Neoptolemus was infamous for his atrocities during the aftermath of the war, including the brutal murder of Priam, the old Trojan king, at the altar of Zeus *Herkeios*.⁸

Hippias has been asked to give the same speech at a schoolroom in Athens in two days' time, and so he invites Socrates to come and judge its merits for himself.⁹ Now is the chance for the expert to be put to the test. It so happens that Socrates was recently ridiculed for trying to do just that—for 'finding fault with parts of some speeches for being *aischra* ('ugly' or 'contemptible'), and praising other parts as *kala*' (286c6–7). He recounts the episode as follows:

The man questioned me this way, really insultingly: 'Socrates, how do you know what sorts of things are kala and aischra? Look, would you be able to say what the kalon is (ti esti to kalon)?' And I, I'm so worthless, I was stuck and I wasn't able to answer him properly. As I left the gathering I was angry and blamed myself, and I made a threatening resolve, that whomever of you wise men I met first, I would listen and learn and study, then return to the questioner and fight the argument back. (286c7 ff.)

Luckily, Socrates now has the famous Hippias alongside to teach him 'what the *kalon* is itself' (*auto to kalon hoti estin*), so that he can avoid becoming a 'laughingstock for having been refuted a second time' (286d8–e2). The anonymous questioner is, of course, Socrates' *alter ego*; and it is Hippias who will be turn out to be the laughingstock.

For the remainder of the dialogue the two men take up the heckler's

challenge, testing several possible accounts of the *kalon*. The first three are offered by Hippias, who, though claiming to understand the question (287e2), refuses to give the sort of answer Socrates is after. His proposals—a beautiful girl, gold, and a long, illustrious life—are refuted on a variety of grounds, yet all display a common weakness. Socrates needs to learn the *essence* of the *kalon*: the one characteristic of all *kala* things that is responsible for their being *kala*.¹⁰ Hippias has given him only paradigm examples. The sophist's sole aim, it seems, is to make the anonymous questioner appear ridiculous (*katagelastos*: 288b2; 290a1; 292a1): anyone would look absurd denying that *those things* are *kala*.

Socrates' own definitions are of a different ilk and more promising. In each case, the *kalon* is identified with another *evaluative concept*: the appropriate (*to prepon*), the useful (*to chrêsimon*), the beneficial (*to ôphelimon*), and auditory and visual pleasure (*to di' akoês te kai di' opseôs hêdu*). With his initial three suggestions, Socrates seems to be progressing steadily toward a definition of the *kalon* in terms of goodness. But when his third attempt is defeated by a fallacious argument, he immediately changes course and tests a new definition in terms of aesthetic pleasure. It is as though Plato wishes to remind his readers one last time not to confuse beauty with the genuinely *kalon*. The proposal fails for two distinct reasons: it cannot account for the *kalon* in things like laws and actions, and it does not say what the two kinds of pleasure (auditory and visual) have in common.¹¹ In a last-ditch effort to save the account, Socrates suggests that they are both 'beneficial'. But 'beneficial pleasure' is open to the same objection as was 'the beneficial' only a moment ago. The dialogue ends in *aporia* – for Socrates, if not for Hippias, who is apparently unfazed by what has happened.

If the point of the *Hippias Major* is to get us to look beyond beauty, why should it hold any interest for the student of aesthetics? Before offering a reason of my own, I shall briefly consider one previous approach to this problem. In a 1977 article entitled 'Plato's Early Aesthetics: The *Hippias Major*', David Sider argues that the dialogue can be read 'as an early expression of Plato's views on aesthetic principles.'¹² While fully cognizant of the range of meanings that *kalos* takes on, Sider thinks there is enough in

the text about *beauty* to extract a coherent aesthetic theory. There are many points of interest in Sider's reading of the dialogue, but I shall restrict my focus to his central interpretive claim. Sider finds implicit support for a conception of beauty in terms of the harmonious arrangement of parts into a unified whole. Theories linking beauty to harmony and proportion were, of course, conventional in classical thought, and there is evidence from other dialogues to suggest Plato was attracted to such views.¹³ But on what grounds can we attribute a 'harmony' theory of beauty to the Plato of the *Hippias Major*?

The cornerstone of Sider's argument appeals to external sources, namely what little information we have about the writings of the historical Hippias. Sider finds it 'highly likely' that the *Hippias Major* was partly intended as a critique of the 'lack of artistic order and arrangement' typical of the sophist's compositions.¹⁴ Unfortunately, we know even less about the style of Hippias' writings than we do about their content. We do, however, have testimony that Hippias wrote historical and anthropological works, including a list of *Olympic Victors* and a *Nomenclature of Tribes*.¹⁵ Sider suggests that the 'genealogies of heroes and men' (285d6) which Hippias says he used to entertain the Spartans were probably of this type—that is, mere collections of facts thrown together with little regard for narrative form. More important for Sider's thesis, however, is a fragment from the introduction to a work known as the *Synagôgê* ('collection' or 'miscellany'):

It may be that some of this has been said by Orpheus, some briefly, here and there, by Musaeus, some by Hesiod and some by Homer, some in other poets and some in prose-writers both Greek and foreign. For my part, I have collected from all these writers what is most important and belongs together to make a new and composite work. (Fr. 6; trans, Guthrie.)¹⁶

Sider comments: 'Whether we think of this work as a florilegium or a hodgepodge, it looks as if the items, however intelligently arranged, would not form an artistic unity.'¹⁷ It is reasonable to suppose that Plato's readers would have known works like the *Synagôgê*. More contentiously, Sider suggests that Plato would have exploited this familiarity in order to motivate his own, anti-Hippias, aesthetic ideal. Plato's dialogue challenges

us to seek its own beauty, which 'must somehow be found in the hidden relationship between its elements.'¹⁸

While our historical knowledge of Plato's characters can often be very helpful for understanding a dialogue, in this case the evidence is too thin to be of much use. In addition to composing the kinds of work mentioned above, Hippias was a prolific writer of tragedies and dithyrambs.¹⁹ Why suppose that his poetic creations displayed a 'lack of artistic order and arrangement'? As a matter of fact, the only reference to his artistic style in the dialogue itself weighs against Sider's view. At 286a5–6, Hippias boasts that his *epideixis* is 'put together really beautifully (*pankalôs sunkeimenos*)'. Perhaps we are not supposed to take the sophist at his word. We have no reason to doubt, however, that Hippias is beautifully dressed. We should also assume that his speech really *is* a work of art. It is another way in which his refined appearance hides a contorted soul.

Even if we reject Sider's suggestion that the *Hippias Major* was intended as a critique of Hippias' literary style, his more general thesis—that the dialogue conceives of beauty in terms of the harmonious arrangement of parts into a unified whole—may still be defensible. Curiously, Sider never makes use of the passage which seems to best support his view. That is the discussion of Pheidias' famous state of Athena.

When Hippias' first attempt at a definition ('a beautiful girl') falls flat, Socrates kindly clarifies the question. The task, he explains, is to name 'the *kala* itself by which everything else is beautified and seen to be *kalon* (*kosmeitai kai kala phainetai*) when that form (*eidos*) is added to it' (289d2–4). Hippias conveniently ignores the demand for an *eidos*, a 'form' or 'characteristic', and instead exploits an ambiguity in the verb *kosmeô*. Obviously, the answer is gold! 'Because we all know, don't we, that wherever it is added, even if the thing was seen to be *aischron* before, it will be seen to be *kalon* when it has been adorned (*kosmêthen*) with gold' (289e4–6). Hippias' point is probably that any object is *worth more* when adorned with gold.²⁰ In his refutation, however, Socrates appeals to the aesthetic sense of *kalos*.

Socrates: *Well, that answer he [i.e. Socrates' alter ego] certainly will not accept, my friend. And what's more, he'll jeer at me, and say, 'Are you*

crazy? Do you think Pheidias is a bad craftsman?' And I think I'll say, 'No, not at all.'

Hippias: *And you'll be right about that.*

Socrates: *Right enough. Then when I agree that Pheidias is a good craftsman, this person will say, 'Next, do you think Pheidias didn't know about this kalon you mention?' 'What's the point?' I'll say. 'The point is,' he'll say, 'that Pheidias didn't make Athena's eyes out of gold, nor the rest of her face, nor her feet, nor her hands—as he would have done if gold would really have made them be seen to be most beautiful—but he made them out of ivory. Apparently he went wrong through ignorance; he didn't know gold was what made everything beautiful, wherever it is added.' What shall we answer when he says that, Hippias?*

Hippias: *It's not hard. We'll say he made the statue right. Ivory's beautiful too, I think.*

Socrates: *'Then why didn't he work the middles of the eyes out of ivory? He used stone, and he found stone that resembled ivory as closely as possible. Isn't a stone a beautiful thing too, if it's a beautiful one?' Shall we agree?*

Hippias: *Yes, at least when it's appropriate.*

Socrates: *'But when it's not appropriate it's ugly?' Do I agree or not?*

Hippias: *'Yes, when it's not appropriate anyway.*

Socrates: *'Well,' he'll say. 'You're a wise man! Don't ivory and gold make things be seen to be beautiful when they're appropriate, but ugly when they're not?' Shall we be negative? Or shall we agree with him that he's right?*

Hippias: *We'll agree to this: whatever is appropriate to each thing makes that particular thing beautiful. (290a2–d6)*

Gold does not make a statue beautiful 'wherever it is added', but only where it is appropriate. The same is true of ivory and stone, and anything else Pheidias might have used. Hippias seems to draw the right conclusion: 'whatever is appropriate to each thing makes that particular thing beautiful.'²¹ The example of the Athena shows that gold cannot be the *kalon* for two distinct reasons. First, adding gold to something might instead make it uglier: set next to Pheidias' masterpiece, an Athena with golden eyes and golden skin would look absurd. Second, other stuff besides gold (e.g. ivory) can make a thing beautiful. But the *kalon* itself,

whatever it is, is both responsible for the beauty in all beautiful things, and can never be seen to make a thing ugly.

A good sculptor like Pheidias does not simply know what materials to use, but how to use them *appropriately*. Whether a certain artistic choice is appropriate, moreover, depends on the aim of the work as a whole. A parallel passage from the start of *Republic IV* makes this last point clear. Socrates explains to Adeimantus that, as creators of the ideal city, they should not aim to make only a few of its citizens happy (i.e., the guardian class), but instead to have ‘the whole city’ be as happy as possible (420b5–6). He then goes on to draw an analogy (420c4–d4):

Imagine we were putting the colours on a statue of a man, and someone came along and told us we were doing it wrong, since we weren't using the most beautiful colours for the most beautiful parts of the living creature. The eyes, the most beautiful feature, had been coloured black, not purple. We would regard it as a quite reasonable defense to say to him: 'Hang on a minute. You surely don't think, do you, that we should make the eyes—or any of the other parts of the body—so beautiful that they don't even look like eyes. The thing to ask yourself is whether by giving the appropriate colours to everything (ta prosêkonta hekastois apodidontes) we are making the whole thing beautiful (to holon kalon).

Here Plato uses the participial adjective *prosêkôn* instead of *prepôn*, but the thought is exactly the same as in the Pheidias passage. The painter's aim is to make the whole statue beautiful (perhaps when viewed from a certain distance), and his decisions about how to deal with individual parts must be subordinated to that end.²²

The discussion of the Athena Parthenos, fleshed out by *Republic IV*, appears to support Sider's thesis that the *Hippias Major* sees beauty in terms of unity and harmony. An object is not beautiful simply in virtue of having beautiful parts; it makes all of the difference whether those parts are arranged to create a beautiful whole. But even if Sider is right on that score, I believe the Pheidias passage can be seen to suggest a far more interesting aesthetic theory.

We have seen that gold, ivory, and stone make a thing beautiful or ugly, depending on the context in which it appears.²³ Hippias does not

want to accept this, however, since it implies that gold and ivory are really no more beautiful than stone.²⁴ Socrates must give a separate argument before Hippias is forced to (silently) concede that gold is no more *kalos* than wood from a figtree (291c7–8). Why does Socrates keep insisting on these strange sounding claims? One would think that even if gold can sometimes be ugly, it is more beautiful than ordinary stone ‘on the whole’ (cf. 288e6). But that is not Socrates’ position. For him, since neither gold nor stone is *always* beautiful, it would be wrong to say that one property is more *kalos* than the other.

By provocatively putting gold and stone on an equal plain with respect to beauty, Socrates invites us to ask whether we can push the point further. Does *every* property behave like gold and stone? Or, on the contrary, do some properties always make things beautiful, while others always make things ugly? This is the dispute between ‘holists’ and ‘atomists’ about the nature of aesthetic reasons.

An aesthetic reason is any consideration that supports an aesthetic judgment. In the normal case, an aesthetic reason will cite some feature of the thing being judged. For example, if I wanted to defend my admiration for a particular performance of the ‘Hammerklavier’ sonata, I might point out the sense of urgency in the opening bars. Here ‘urgency’ is the feature cited as a reason for my approval. In another context, however, a sense of urgency might ruin a piece—for example in the finale of the ‘Tempest’ sonata. So a property like urgency has no inherent *valence* in the domain of aesthetic judgment. The kind of aesthetic reason it furnishes, for or against, varies according to context. *Holism* is the thesis that all aesthetic reasons are variant, because any ‘feature that in one place adds something of aesthetic value may in another make things worse’.²⁵ (In still another place the same feature may make no evaluative difference at all.) *Atomism* is the view that certain features keep their valence irrespective of context, so some aesthetic reasons must be invariant.²⁶

The holism-atomism distinction is central to the debate between ‘particularists’ and ‘generalists’ about aesthetic judgment.²⁷ Broadly speaking, the particularist holds that the rationality of aesthetic judgment does not depend on the truth of any principles. (Generalists deny this.)

Aesthetic principles come in two varieties: 'absolute' and 'contributory'.²⁸ An absolute principle specifies some feature and states that whenever that feature is present, there is overall reason to admire/condemn the object which bears it. A contributory principle makes a weaker claim: the specified feature gives us *some* reason to admire/condemn the object which bears it, *in so far as* it is present. But that reason may be counteracted by other considerations. Thus a generalist might think that 'unity' always gives us a reason to admire a work of art, while allowing that many unified works are condemnable overall.

Arguments for aesthetic particularism are often based on a holistic theory of reasons. Thus in a classic statement of the particularist position, Mary Mothersill writes: 'There is *no* characteristic which is amenable to independent explanation [of its value] and which by its presence enhances the aesthetic value [of an artwork].'²⁹ If that is right, then there is also no characteristic that could be specified in an aesthetic principle, absolute or contributory. We are left with two alternatives: either the rationality of aesthetic judgment does not depend on principles, or else aesthetic evaluation is arbitrary ('the result of personal whim'³⁰). Finding no grounds for supposing the latter, Mothersill concludes that reasonable criticism has no need for 'aesthetic norms'.³¹ Generalists also want to preserve the rationality of aesthetic judgment, so their best option will be to attack holism. (I should note that the particularist need not follow Mothersill and insist that there are *no* invariant reasons, as long as he can show that invariance is itself strictly irrelevant to a reason's normative force.)

We need not enter any deeper into the debate between generalists and particularists to consider where Plato might stand with respect to the issues it raises. I shall argue that the Pheidias passage in the *Hippias Major*, taken in conjunction with passages from the *Phaedo* and *Republic*, supports a holistic conception of aesthetic reasons. I do not, however, think this gives us sufficient warrant to interpret Plato as an aesthetic particularist, for reasons I shall explain.

Let us begin with what seems least controversial. Socrates appeals to the Athena of Pheidias to show that gold (as well as ivory and stone) can make

something either beautiful or ugly, depending on how it is used. Hippias had given his definition in the form of an absolute principle: for any object, he claims, 'even if it was seen to be *aischron* before, it will be seen to be *kalon* when it has been beautified with gold' (289e5–6). Any example of a gold thing which is nonetheless foul would have been a sufficient refutation. (A badly designed statue is not made beautiful by applying a coat of gold.) Instead, Socrates gives a hypothetical example in which the addition of gold *itself* would have made something worse. He thereby undermines the weaker, contributory version of Hippias' principle, which says that gold makes things beautiful *in so far as* it is present. So there is no suggestion in this passage that gold always adds some aesthetic value, which may then be outweighed by other considerations. On the contrary—Socrates argues that gold is no more beautiful than stone, since neither is inherently beautiful. Here, at least, gold, ivory, and stone are treated in the manner of the holist, as were colours in the *Republic IV* passage.³²

Does the *Hippias Major* therefore allow us to read Plato as a holist? Now is when we need to start using caution. For everything we have seen so far is consistent with an atomistic theory. Remember: the atomist only insists that *some* aesthetic reasons are invariant. Purple is sometimes beautiful and at other times ugly, but that could be due to some deeper invariant truth about the proper use of colour. So the question to ask is whether Socrates' analysis of purple and gold can be extended to other properties.

Unfortunately, the *Hippias Major* will not provide any answers. Once the Athena Parthenos has performed her task, Socrates quickly moves on to other matters. The only relevant statement we find is Hippias' remark: 'whatever is appropriate to each thing makes that particular thing beautiful.' But that does not exclude the possibility that certain properties are always appropriate—and therefore make things beautiful—wherever they appear. The text simply has nothing to say on this issue. In order to further pursue the question of Plato's holism, we will have to look to other dialogues for help.

The first relevant passage comes at *Phaedo* 100c,³³ after Socrates recounts his youthful disillusionment with the physicists. Anaxagoras' theory had purported to explain the universe in terms of Mind (*nous*), but instead

gave only *material* causes (*aitiai*): 'air and ether and water any many other strange things' (98c1–2). Socrates quips: 'That seemed to me much like saying that Socrates' actions are all due to his mind, and then in trying to tell the causes of everything I do, to say that the reason that I am sitting here is because my body consists of bones and sinews' (98c2–8). These 'bones and sinews' could have just as easily carried him off to Megara. What really caused Socrates to stay and face his death was nothing but his 'belief as to what is best' (99a1–2). The theories of Anaxagoras and others gave only necessary conditions of events, failing 'to distinguish the real cause (*to aition tōi onti*) from that without which the cause would not be able to act as a cause' (99b2–4). A 'real cause', according to Socrates, would explain why something is for the best, which ultimately depends on an account of 'the common good for all' (98b2–3).

Socrates never found the grand teleological explanation he was after, so he chose to embark on a 'second voyage' (99d1) of causal discovery. That is his famous 'method of hypothesis', the difficulties of which we can thankfully set to one side. What matters for the present argument is the notion of a 'safe' cause, which Socrates illustrates through the example of the *kalon*. He begins by assuming the existence of 'a *kalon* itself by itself (*ti kalon auto kath' auto*)' (100b6)—the very thing investigated in the *Hippias Major*.³⁴ In the absence of a teleological account, Socrates believes, the best explanation for why something is beautiful will simply refer to the *kalon*. Here is the crucial passage (100c4–e3):

It seems to me that, if there is anything beautiful besides the kalon itself, it is beautiful for no other reason than that it shares in that kalon (itself) [...]. I no longer understand or recognize those other sophisticated (sophas) causes, and if someone tells me that a thing is beautiful because it has a bright colour or shape or any such thing, I ignore these other reasons—for all these confuse me—but I simply, naively and perhaps foolishly cling to this, that nothing else makes it beautiful other than the presence of, or the sharing in, or however you may describe its relationship to that kalon we mentioned, for I will not insist on the precise nature of the relationship, but that all beautiful things are beautiful by the kalon (itself) (tōi kalōi panta ta kala kala). That, I think, is the safest answer I can give myself or anyone else. And if I stick to this I think I shall never fall into error. This is the safe



answer for me or anyone else to give, namely, that it is through the *kalon* (itself) that beautiful things are made beautiful.

The 'sophisticated' causes that Socrates rejects are of the order of Hippias' claim that gold is what makes things beautiful. Why does he deny that colours and shapes can be genuine causes of beauty, and rely on his safe cause instead? The answer, we may infer, is that colours and shapes are like bones and sinews. Just as Socrates' bones and sinews could have helped him flee to Megara, the colours and shapes of a beautiful object could have been used to make something ugly. There must be something further which explains why one possibility was realized and not the other. In Socrates' case, it was his belief about the best thing to do. In the case of beautiful objects, however, the best answer Socrates thinks he can give is 'the *kalon* itself'. The precise relationship between the *kalon* itself and all of the many beautiful things is left unspecified. It is more important to Socrates that he 'never fall into error' by confusing the genuine cause of beauty with something it is not.

How does the *Phaedo* passage add to what we gathered from the *Hippias Major*? There we found Plato treating gold and ivory as a holist would, and the question was whether that analysis could be generalized. Now in the *Phaedo* Socrates denies that any 'bright colour or shape or any such thing' could be a genuine cause of beauty, and the reason seems to be that none of these is by its nature *such as* to make things beautiful. To see this last point better, let us turn to what Socrates says about the 'more refined' type of cause introduced at *Phaedo* 103e. The completely safe account of why an object is hot is that it shares in the form of the hot (or 'the hot itself'). But Socrates believes that a somewhat more informative answer can be given, namely that *fire* makes it hot. Why does he think that? Because fire is *by its very nature* hot: it cannot become cold and still be fire. 'Fire, as the cold approaches, will either go away or be destroyed; it will never venture to admit coldness and remain what it was, fire and cold' (103d10–12). Thus fire will make things hot *in so far as* it is present. It is among the things that 'is not the form but always has its character (*morphên*) wherever it exists' (103e4–5). That is why Socrates is comfortable



naming fire as a cause of hotness, in addition to the hot itself: 'If you should ask me what, coming into a body, makes it hot, my reply would be that safe and ignorant one, that it is heat, but our present argument provides a more refined (*kompsoteran*) answer, namely, fire [...]' (105b8–c2). The key question for our purposes, then, is whether Plato believes there is an analog to fire in the case of beauty. Is there any property that will always make an object beautiful in so far as it is present, and which by its very nature can never be ugly?³⁵

We find nothing in the text of the *Phaedo* to suggest that there is such a property. The only cause of beauty mentioned is the *kalon* itself. To my mind, that is a good reason to suppose that Plato did not think a 'more refined' cause could be found. Before we conclude that he was a holist, however, it would be better to have some *positive* evidence that Plato believed nothing apart from the *kalon* itself was of its nature beautiful. For that we can turn to *Republic V*, where Socrates discusses the lovers of sights and sounds.

Socrates introduces the 'lovers of sights and sounds' (*philêkooi kai philotheamones*) towards the end of *Republic V* as a foil for the philosophers—the men and women who will be called upon to rule Kallipolis. The lovers of sights and sounds could easily be confused for philosophers, since they appear to take great pleasure in learning: 'They behave as if they had rented out their ears to listen to every chorus they can find. So they do their round of the festivals of Dionysus, never missing one, either in town or country' (475d4–8). But unlike true philosophers, they take pleasure in 'beautiful things (*kala pragmata*)' (476c1)—'beautiful sounds, colours, shapes, and everything which is created from these things (*ta ek tôn toioutôn dêmiourgoumena*)'—with minds that are 'incapable of seeing, and taking pleasure in, the nature of the *kalon* itself' (476b5–7). In fact, the lover of sights and sounds does not even *believe* in such a thing; it is as though his life were a dream (476c1–3). The philosopher, by contrast, who believes in the *kalon* itself, 'can look both at it and at the things which share in it without mistaking them for it or it for them' (476c7–d1).

We have encountered the lover of sights and sounds before: he is the purveyor of 'sophisticated' causes in the *Phaedo*; or Hippias when he



refuses to give an account of the *kalon*, and instead names beautiful things like ivory and gold.³⁶ In the conversation that follows, Socrates argues that the lover of sights and sounds cannot have knowledge (*epistemê*) of the things he admires, but only opinion (*doxa*). That is because the proper object of knowledge is 'what is' (*to on*), but the many beautiful things take up 'an intermediate position between what purely and simply is something and what is not something in any way at all' (478d6–7). The explanation for this latter claim comes at 478e7–479b2, when Socrates says:

I have a question to put to that fine fellow who does not believe in the kalon itself, a form or character of the kalon which remains always the same and unchanging, who thinks that the kalon is plural – that born spectator who cannot tolerate anyone saying that the kalon is one [...]: 'Well, my friend,' we shall ask him, 'is there any of these many beautiful things which cannot on occasion appear ugly? [...]' No. They must necessarily appear to be both beautiful and ugly.

The many beautiful things cannot be objects of knowledge because they both are and are not beautiful, while the form of the *kalon* itself 'remains always the same and unchanging'.

There is a long-standing debate over whether 'the many beautiful things' (*ta polla kala*) are meant to be particulars or universals.³⁷ When the lovers of sights and sounds are introduced, however, Socrates clearly has *both* in mind: 'sounds, colours, shapes' (universals), and 'everything created out of these things' (particulars). My argument requires only that *ta polla kala* at least include universals. This much is secured just a few lines later, when Socrates says: 'So we have discovered, apparently, that most people's varying standards (*ta polla nomima*) of beauty and things like that are rattling around somewhere in the middle, between what is *not* something and what purely and simply *is* something' (479d2–4). By *nomima*, Socrates must have in mind commonplace views about what *properties* make particular things beautiful, just like the 'sophisticated' causes of the *Phaedo*, and Hippias' claim about gold.³⁸ But this time Socrates is unequivocal: there is not *one* of these many properties which will not at some point turn out to be ugly.³⁹ As Socrates says about the many doubles, 'each of them can always lay claim to both labels' (479b7).





All of this confirms what was implicit in the *Phaedo* and suggested in the *Hippias Major*. In Plato's scheme, there is no parallel to fire when it comes to beauty—no property that brings beauty with it wherever it goes.⁴⁰ If a property appears beautiful in a certain context, that is never due to the *nature* of the property; it becomes beautiful only by sharing in the form of the *kalon* itself. I think we are justified, then, in reading Plato as a holist about aesthetic reasons. The key insight of the *Hippias Major* was that gold can make a statue either beautiful or ugly, depending on how it is used. In the *Phaedo* and *Republic*, the analysis is extended to include *all* aesthetically relevant properties. We may also safely conclude that he would be opposed to aesthetic principles, absolute or contributory. Since the valence of any property is always in flux, no principle could ever be trusted.⁴¹

So far Plato's view would appear to have all the marks of particularism. As I understand him, however, Plato parts ways with the particularist at a critical juncture. Aesthetic particularism, we recall, was the claim that the rationality of aesthetic judgment does not depend on the truth of any principles. In other words, the practice of aesthetic evaluation can get along just fine without being grounded in any invariant norms. But is that not exactly what the dialogues deny? The lovers of sights and sounds are said to be mired in lowly opinion because they have not seen the form of the *kalon*. They are in the same state as the Socrates of the *Hippias Major*, who rashly judged the beauty of speeches before knowing 'what the *kalon* is itself'. The aesthetic particularist, on the other hand, would be not at all troubled by his inability to give an account of beauty. It does not figure into his picture of how aesthetic value works. The particularist stance is perhaps best captured by Hippias' words: 'whatever is appropriate to each thing makes that particular thing beautiful.' There is nothing more to be said about why a particular object is beautiful than that certain of its properties make it beautiful in this particular case.⁴² The particularist does not appeal to something further, beauty, which explains why those properties make the thing beautiful. Thus a definition of beauty would be otiose.

So what is to be gained by insisting that the *real* cause of a thing's aesthetic value is 'beauty itself'? In an eloquent defense of the Platonic



view, David Sedley writes:

*There is an enormous value in knowing that the sunset is beautiful because of the beautiful and not because of, say, its colour. Only when you know what the genuine cause is do you know what it is that you have to investigate. If you want to understand what makes sunsets beautiful, don't be sidetracked into investigating the nature of colours. Investigate what the beautiful is – in other words, seek to establish the essence of the beautiful by means of a definition.*⁴³

I am not sure that I agree. Investigating the nature of colours and seeking to establish the essence of beauty are not the only available options. If I wanted to understand what makes sunsets beautiful, the best thing I could do would be to observe a lot of sunsets. I could then make comparisons based on these experiences, and draw up some tentative generalizations about what the beautiful ones have in common.

At the end of the *Hippias Major*, Socrates can only conclude that the *kalon* is difficult. There is little reason to believe that having a definition would make it any easier to say why a thing is beautiful. The value in the Platonic notion of the beautiful is not, as far as I can see, that it inspires us toward abstract reflection. It reminds us, rather, that beauty is elusive, and will always resist being contained in rules and formulae. We can only hope to develop our sensibilities, so that we may recognize beauty when it appears.⁴⁴

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Notes

- 1 For those who accept the work as genuine, that is. The *Hippias Major* is one of a very small number of Platonic dialogues whose authenticity is still debated by scholars. Cf. Woodruff, 1982 and Kahn, 1985. For an exhaustive history of the debate, see Liminta, 1998:3–28. If Plato himself did not write the *Hippias Major*, then the author was deeply familiar with Plato's dialogues and strove to maintain consistency with the rest of the corpus. Thus Charles Kahn, who has led the charge of spuriousness in recent decades, concedes that 'no serious philosophical harm will be done to scholars and students who take the work for Platonic, so cleverly has the author done his job' (269).
- 2 Cf. Woodruff, 1982: 'The *Hippias Major* is [...] not a treatise in aesthetics, and beauty is not its subject' (110). For most of its history, the dialogue appears to have been treated rather differently. For example, we find an original translation and analysis of the work appended to the second edition of Jean-Pierre de Crousaz's *Traité du Beau* (1724; orig. 1714), one of the founding works of modern French aesthetics. Crousaz considered this the best way to educate his readers about 'les idées de Socrate sur le Beau' (Calle and Bonet, 2001:45, n. 26). Likewise, Dorothy Tarrant, the author of the first English commentary on the dialogue, claims that it was written primarily 'from the aesthetic point of view' (1928:xiv). See also Grube, 1927.
- 3 Dodds, 1959:249.
- 4 It is true that 'beautiful' enjoys a similar versatility (see chapter one of Scruton, 2009), but a strict substitution for *kalos* yields some awkward results (e.g., 'the beautiful pot, full of beautiful bean soup' (290d8–9)). In what follows I shall stick with the Greek term for the more general uses of *kalos* (including 'the *kalon* itself'), reserving the word 'beautiful' for when the sense is clearly aesthetic.
- 5 Cf. Moravcsik, 1982:31.
- 6 Consider, for example, the passage at 282a1 ff., where Socrates suggests that the seven sages

- have nothing on the modern man of learning. Hippias heartily agrees, then adds: 'However I usually praise the ancients who came before us before and more highly than I praise people of our own day, for while I take care to avoid the envy of the living, I fear the wrath of the dead'. 'How beautifully, Hippias, you're putting your thoughts into words!' Socrates replies (282b1–2). Hippias' little speech, full of rhyme, repetition, and antithesis, is a model of Gorgianic floridness. But it is also a shameless admission of deceit.
- 7 Translations are taken from Cooper, 1997 (with minor alterations) with the exception of the *Republic* passages, which are from Ferrari, 2000 (trans. Griffith).
 - 8 He is also said to have hurled Hector's son, Astyanax, from the walls of Troy, before abducting his mother, Andromache, as a concubine. It is also significant that the young Neoptolemus is seeking the advice of someone who is not his father (Achilles having been slain in battle); cf. 283e ff.
 - 9 This is very likely the same speech referred to at the start of the *Hippias Minor*.
 - 10 See Sedley, 1998 for the suggestion that a Platonic cause is a 'thing responsible'.
 - 11 Cf. Janaway, 1995:66.
 - 12 Sider, 1977:466.
 - 13 Cf. Grube, 1927:275–77.
 - 14 Sider, 1977: 467–68. Cf. Sider, 1992: 'kalon entails a unity that is foreign to Hippias' method of composition.'
 - 15 Guthrie, 1971:282.
 - 16 Guthrie, 1971:283.
 - 17 Sider, 1977:468.
 - 18 Sider, 1992.
 - 19 Guthrie, 1971:283.
 - 20 Cf. 289e1–2.
 - 21 It should be noted that the word *prepon* is more strongly positive than our 'appropriate', which can mean simply 'not inappropriate'.
 - 22 One could argue that 'deal with each part appropriately' just means 'make each part the colour it is in nature'. But the reason for painting naturalistically, I take it, is to make 'the whole thing beautiful'.
 - 23 I should note here that Plato treats 'making a thing beautiful/ugly' as tantamount to 'being beautiful/ugly'.
 - 24 Note the limiting force of the particle *ge* in Hippias' statement: 'We'll agree to *this* (*ge*): whatever is appropriate to each thing makes that particular thing beautiful.' Hippias is unwilling to draw the second half of the conclusion: '...and whatever is not appropriate to each thing makes that particular thing *worse*.'
 - 25 Dancy, 2004:76.
 - 26 Beardsley (1958) argues for exactly three such features: unity, complexity, and intensity.
 - 27 My account of particularism is largely based on Dancy, 2008. Bender, 1995 adds complications to the story, but I cannot address them in this space.
 - 28 Dancy, 2008.
 - 29 Mothersill, 1961:77.
 - 30 Mothersill, 1961:76.
 - 31 Mothersill, 1961:78. It is interesting to note that Mothersill assumes generalism must be true in the moral domain. The reason seems to be that she thinks moral cases are sufficiently similar to support principles, whereas individual works of art are more unique.
 - 32 In the *Republic* IV passage, Socrates calls purple 'the most beautiful colour'. But that is compatible with holism. I may find that the sound of a clarinet is more beautiful than the sound of a flute, but that does not commit me to the view that a clarinet always makes music beautiful in so far as it is present.

- 33 It has been suggested that both passages I shall draw on for my argument assume familiarity with the *Hippias Major* (cf. Woodruff, 1982:54–55). Nothing I have to say exploits that possibility.
- 34 Cf. *HiMa*. 287c8–d2, where Socrates again ‘assumes the existence’ of the fine itself. The dative construction also appears in the *Phaedo* passage. Cf. *Symp.* 211b1–3.
- 35 The presence of this property would not guarantee that an object *is* fine. Similarly, a pot of boiling water poured into the ocean does not make the ocean hot.
- 36 Cf. Janaway, 1995:109.
- 37 The classic defense of the ‘universals’ reading is Gosling, 1960. Sedley, 2007 appears to treat them as particulars.
- 38 Cf. Gosling, 1960:120. For other uses of *nomima* in the *Republic*, cf. 425a8; 479d4; 484d2; 589c7. A *nomimon* attributed to Simonides is the centerpiece of *Republic* I: ‘it is just to pay everyone what is owed to him’ (331e3–4).
- 39 Janaway, 1995 has a different take on why the many fine properties always turn out to be foul: ‘The things which have one of these properties are and are not beautiful—meaning that some gold things are beautiful, some are not, some brightly coloured things are beautiful, some are not’ (109). On my interpretation, however, it is gold and bright colours *themselves* which make things beautiful and not beautiful.
- 40 This might be true for Plato’s scheme only through the *Republic*. *Phil.* 51b seems to tell a different story, though I am not sure.
- 41 At this point it might be said that I have passed over a serious objection to my argument. The Pheidias passage suggests that there *is* a property that always makes things fine, namely ‘the appropriate’ (*to prepon*). The appropriate explains why gold, ivory, and stone created a beautiful Athena. It would seem, then, that the appropriate does for the fine what fire does for the hot. And wouldn’t that make Plato an atomist about aesthetic reasons? No. Consider what it means to say that the use of a particular colour on a statue is ‘appropriate’. The only good answer, it seems to me, is that it makes the statue more beautiful. But if that is correct, then ‘the appropriate’ no more explains why Pheidias’ statue is beautiful than does ‘beauty itself’.
- 42 That is not quite *all* that the particularist can say. He can explain why the same property is fine-making here and foul-making there by pointing to other properties which make the two cases different. But he still makes no appeal to fineness itself.
- 43 Sedley, 1998:127.
- 44 I wish to thank the Graduate Studies Executive Committee of the Department of Philosophy at UT-Austin for a summer scholarship which supported the writing of this article. The line of thought in this paper owes much to Paul Woodruff, whose Spring 2007 seminar on the Forms sparked my interest in the theme of holism / particularism in Plato. I also would like to thank Rick Benitez for inviting me to contribute to the present volume, and for his comments on the original draft.