Education comes originally from Apollo and the Muses... So by an uneducated man we shall mean a man who has not been trained to take part in a chorus; and we must say that if a man has been sufficiently trained, he is educated... And this means that the finely-educated man will be able both to sing and dance finely [kalōs]. (Laws 654a–b)¹

Suppose you believe that there are objective truths in matters of value: mind-independent facts about what is worth pursuing, knowledge of which is crucial to living well – to being virtuous and happy. Suppose you also believe that these facts are very difficult to grasp, and, indeed, that most people get them badly, dangerously wrong. Now suppose that you are a vastly ambitious moral reformer: you want to design a system whereby all members of society will be as virtuous and happy as possible. You lay out all kinds of laws to regulate every aspect of life, major and minor, public and private, all with a view to the virtue of the citizens. You hold that the most important part – the foundation of all the rest – is moral education (paideia), a program for instilling virtue in the citizens in the first place. What will you prescribe?

One thing is clear: you will have to start on people when they are young. For you have observed that feelings and habits formed in youth are hard, or even impossible, to alter later on. So you cannot rely on the kind of rational instruction – arguments about what is good and bad, and why – that could only engage adults. In fact, you’ve watched someone devote his whole life to arguing with morally confused adults, and the results were dispiriting indeed. What you want is a method for shaping people’s values when they are still young, and, furthermore, one that can be used to maintain those values when people have grown. What method will succeed?

If you are Plato at the end of your career, writing your never-to-be-finished magnum opus, the Laws, the answer you give is one bound to surprise
modern readers. The foundation of moral excellence – indeed, the whole of moral education – consists in exposing people to the right music.

The aim of this paper is to present a new explanation of why Plato holds this view. I want to show that, according to the *Laws*, musical education is the best means of moral education, because through exposure to the right music one comes to occupy a certain perspective. This perspective is that from which one can correctly view the defining feature of ethically good characters and actions: the beautiful or fine – the *kalon*. Occupying this perspective is a matter of feeling the correct pleasures and pains: being pleased by what is truly *kalon*, and pained by the opposite.

There are other ways to explain the aim of musical education, which are closely related to this one: that musical education channels feelings of pleasure in the correct direction, that it produces love of the *kalon*, that it instils virtue, or that it harmonizes the soul. These are all compatible with my account, and I think them all correct. What I want to show is that understanding the function of musical education as the transformation of ethical perspective, as the *Laws* encourages us to do, helps us in understanding the relation of art and ethics. It sheds some light on Plato’s notion of the *kalon*; it also suggests an answer to a glaring question about moral education as Plato presents it: why it should proceed through art rather than through more direct means.

I  The *Kalon* in art and in ethics

*Kalon* is a notoriously ambiguous term. Most broadly it means ‘admirable’ or ‘praiseworthy’. It can also mean ‘noble’, ‘honourable’ or ‘genteel’ in a social sense. Coming to the uses that interest us here, it is the standard term for ‘beautiful’, used to describe, for example, a good-looking person. But it also has an ethical use: Socrates frequently insists that acts are virtuous only if *kalon*, and his interlocutors agree (see, for example, *Prt.* 349e ff.). Moreover, in some contexts he uses it as interchangeable with – coextensive, and apparently even synonymous with – ‘good’ (*agathon*), where ‘good’ means what benefits the soul, and thus (given Socrates’ ethical views) what we would call ethically good (*Rep.* V.452e, V.457b; *Meno* 77b; *Smp.* 204e).

If you look up ‘*kalon*’ in a lexicon, you will get separate headings for the aesthetic and ethical senses of the word. The assumption that these senses are distinct is natural enough for us moderns; I want to show that it nonetheless seriously hampers the interpretation of Plato’s aesthetics.

As we have already seen, Plato thinks that music (and other art) contributes to moral education. But he does not say merely that it is in virtue of being morally beneficial that art is useful, or appropriate; he seems to say that it is this same quality that renders art *kalon*. In *Laws* II the Athenian