

THE ROLE OF THE FINE ARTS IN THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

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Taking many hints from St. Thomas, I hope to show in this very short time that engaging oneself in the fine arts is more than simply sense pleasure and that it needs to be integrated as part of life and not a culture consumer, emotional listener, resentment listener, entertainment seeker, indifferent passive receptor, because the appreciation of the fine arts is a kind of moral virtue.¹ The problem with the contemporary culture may be characterized by bad taste, and by too many consumers enjoying lovely melodies and rhythms, poems, literature, movies and the dance while accepting the anti-gospel way of life concomitantly promoted attractively by the sounds of beauty flowing from the now wealthy high priests of the contemporary musical world, rock stars or the celebrities in culture. The beauty of the fine arts cannot be fixed in a mold for it is not static but changing. That is their nature.² Because all of the fine arts have a recognized ability to get down into the depths of one's consciousness very easily and quickly, it is necessary that theologians take them more seriously, instead of viewing them simply as a means of entertainment.

¹ E.T. Gaston brings out the holistic question involved in the listening of music in his article, "Factors contributing to responses to music" :

To each musical experience is brought the sum of an individual's attitudes, beliefs, prejudices, conditionings in terms of time and place in which he has lived. To each musical response, also, he brings his own physiological needs, unique neurological and endocrinological systems with their distinctive attributes. He brings, in all of this, his total entity as a unique individual...(*Music Therapy*, ed. by E. T. Gaston, The Allen Press, Kansas 1958 p. 25).

Also, A. P. Merriam's ten functions of music help us realize what goes on in the art of appreciating music:

... emotional expression, aesthetic enjoyment, entertainment, communication, symbolic representation, physical response, enforcing conformity to social norms, validation of social institutions and religious rituals, contribution to the continuity and stability of culture and contribution to the integration of society... (*The Anthropology of Music*, Northwestern University Press, Illinois 1964, p. 156).

² "...novelty is fundamentally necessary to art, which, like nature goes in seasons" (J. Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 37).

An author of the late 1920's, Callahan called to mind the why of beauty which of course is involved in all the arts:

It is in the resemblances which exist between the mind and beauty that we find the true cause of feeling of beauty; the apprehension of the beauties of nature and of artistic works brings with it a keen delight, because in their perfections the mind discovers an image of its own perfection, and the complement of its aspirations. There is in the human mind an innate and unquenchable desire for knowledge, of effecting through an ideal assimilation the union of other beings with ourselves. This tendency is naturally directed with greater force towards those objects which are most easily known, in which the object of the intellect stands out in greatest prominence... . (p. 53)³

The life and growth of virtue according to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is a road which requires personal effort in cooperation with family, culture and above all grace (CCC 177). The journey begins, normally, in the home where the offspring learn to live the four cardinal virtues for the natural and supernatural person and together with the three infused virtues (faith, hope and charity). In addition, it is necessary that they cultivate, where possible, according to their talents and vocation, the intellectual virtues: philosophy in its fullest sense, science, speculative and practical wisdom, and *ars* which is the virtue which make things and also creates beautiful objects. These values are necessary so that the child or young teenager by developing a sense of personal of honor and a love for the common good of his many surroundings: family, school, church and society along with the various other associations he will eventually belong to. He or she must eventually learn to surrender their sense of isolated autonomy to a more collaborative lifestyle with their fellows or put theologically, they must live in *communio* with his fellow Christians and solidarity with all others. At the same time from the beginning, the Christian must also develop a personal relationship with the Triune God through Jesus Christ, the angels and saints especially the Virgin Mary.

Because of original sin, human nature is deeply wounded making the life of self-fulfillment by self-giving, a difficult life, if not impossible without the grace of God. The human person's mind is somewhat dimmed in terms of applying moral

³ Leonard Callahan, *Theory of Esthetic: According to the Principles of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Catholic University of America Press, Washington D.C. 1947, second printing, p. 114.

principles to concrete situations. One's emotions are not easily under control. The ability to be faithful to one's responsibilities and respect the rights of others with a generous heart is not always operative. The instincts of self-preservation do not easily lend themselves to their proper goals, which if not mastered lead to all kinds of disorder and abuse. Finally, one's overall or overarching motivator, personal meditation and contemplation of truth tends to become difficult because of the difficulty in trying to study and concentrate on "ultimates" or the invisible realities only known by faith and/or great thinking together with a fascination with the flesh. The often bad example of one's culture feeding its opinions and cherished beliefs, makes virtue difficult even if contrary to one's fundamental decency and sense of right and wrong. This is all adequately summarized in the *Catechism*, 400-405.

Here is where the sense of the beautiful can come to the aid of the virtues. Beauty can in its own way but not exclusively allure one to the goals and ends of morality by the way morality is taught or communicated. It needs exemplification by heroes which comes through stories told, or danced to, or seen in drama/movies as can be found in theaters or television. Hence arises the need for authentic myth, story telling both in the poetry, prose, and the drama (plays and the film): modes of expression most suitable for expressing the deep moral values of a culture.⁴ Likewise, some stories embody events in sculpture and the other plastic arts. Finally, some notions pregnant with ideas of the spiritual life can be expressed even in architecture of great cathedrals and the music of Gregorian chant.

Now the fine arts are motivators by which the life of virtue and contemplation can become a reality when consistently chosen as a life force. One of the key concepts that needs revitalizing is the need for contemplation in the life of virtue, as a motivating energy. Virtue without some meditation and contemplation becomes impossible especially because contemplation of divine truth provides a foundational lodestar giving direction to the life of growing in the perfection of the virtues. In his Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in America*,⁵ John Paul II made a similar observation. Furthermore, religious contemplation of the faith and any truth in relationship to faith is itself a manifestation of different virtues and is a necessity for moral

⁴ St. Thomas Aquinas reminds us that all the seeds of virtue are found in the human person (*ST I-II 63, 2 ad 3*). So, therefore, it is part of the delight of great literature that these potential inclinations are delighted when seen imaginatively done in actuality, although in art form.

⁵ See *L'Osservatore Romano, special insert, N. 4 (1576) - 27 January 1999*.

virtues to receive their formation so as to persevere in the task shaping one's personal life and that of community to which one belongs.

It must be kept in mind that contemplation is both a natural activity chosen at will and a supernatural gift flowing from actual grace or in an extraordinary way from the gifts of the Holy Spirit, traditionally called infused contemplation activated by the Holy Spirit from either wisdom, knowledge or understanding. This extraordinary manner does not mean that it is reserved for a choice few but is meant to be operative as the normal complement to one's advancement in the spiritual life of virtue.

If natural and ordinary contemplation means enjoying and gazing at the conclusions of a mathematical theory, seeing a sunset, enjoying a film, then gazing and enjoying the truths of faith or religious contemplation is also part of the life of virtue employing faith, hope and charity together with ordinary vocal prayer. One can even speak of "contemplative prayer" as does the *Catechism* (cf. 2710-19). St. Thomas explains that religious contemplation is an action which, with the help of grace, we can merit and grow in devotion (S.T. II-II 82, 3). It is not the main virtue of the Christian life but it works with divine love or charity, the form of all the virtues. It does not replace the moral virtues which redounds upon a person for contemplative acts.

From the contemplation of divine truth, one can live the moral virtues as an act of effective love, or doing God's will. To do the more difficult deeds that sometimes demands heroic acts, one must have the grace of God to do them. In concrete terms, that means one must believe very passionately that he or she is loved by God very profoundly or the psychological motivation to continue doing heroic acts will die thereby discontinuing many lesser moral virtues in its wake.

Thomas and ars

Looking at *ars* in a general way, we can begin to discover some meaning of the fine arts in relationship with virtue.⁶ Using the English word *art* tends to confuse the discussion because his virtue of *ars* includes painting but is a much richer notion, encompassing any kind of making or producing. In our romantic era where feeling trumps reason in so many ethical problems of our day, the artist, poet or musician is assumed to live in a world above the ordinary created world, going from one

⁶ All translations from the *Summa Theologiae* are taken from vols. 1-60, Blackfriars, Cambridge, Great Britain 1960-1973 which were edited by Thomas Gilby, O.P.

ecstasy of inspiration to another. There is a certain sense that the fine arts are a special and delightful world and have a relative autonomy all their own. Still, being products of man, they can be submitted to the judgments of the prudent person as well because he is interested in the consequences of the art-work on virtue.⁷

To the extent that the craftsman (*artifex*) makes himself or herself morally good by way of other virtues inclining him or her to service, fidelity and the like, the more he will do the work faithfully. Cardinal Mercier explained it in the following manner:

...The beautiful appeals to mind and will and emotions. Some emotions can be bad. Also art can lead to what is honest, elevated, forgetfulness of self, disinterestedness, a sacrifice. Then it is good and ennobling. But it can also incite to egoism, self-worship, flatter voluptuousness which has repercussions upon the person and society.⁸

Since the craftsman is meant to be of service to humankind, then what he or she does may have a beneficent or deleterious effect morally speaking. There are two kinds of arts for St. Thomas: art for utility and art for beauty (*In Div. Nom.*, 4, lect. 5, n. 354). Our next task is to examine what Aquinas means by beauty

⁷ J. Maritain in his work, *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 202, has something relevant to say on this question:

When he reprovcs a work of art, the Prudent Man, standing squarely upon his moral virtue, has the certitude that he is defending against the Artist a sacred good, the good of man, and he looks upon the Artist as a child or a madman. Perched on his intellectual virtue, the Artist has the certitude that he is defending a no less sacred good, the good of Beauty, and he looks as though he were bearing down on the Prudent Man with the weight of Aristotle's maxim: "Life proportioned to the intellect is better than the life proportioned to man" (S.T., II-II, 47, 15).

⁸ ("Le genie poetique de Dante," a paper read at the 7th centenary of Dante, Royal Academy, Belgium, 1921. as cited by Leonard Callahan, *Theory of Esthetic: According to the Principles of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Catholic University of America Press, Washington D.C. 1947, second printing, p. 114.q)

and what are its effects on the human person.⁹

The notion of beauty

To see the relationship of the virtue of appreciating the fine arts and the other virtues, it is first necessary to explain something of St. Thomas's notions of the beautiful.

Aquinas uses the notion of beauty to help understand that the creation of the world is shot through with beauty (*De Potentia*, IV, 2c; S.T., I, 65, 4; 66, 4, ad 2; 70, 1; 73, 1; 93, 1). Looking at his commentary on Pseudo-Dionysius (*In Div. Nom.*, c. 4, lect. 5, nn. 352 & 353), we discover that the reason for God's creative act is reduced to his beauty. He wanted to make things like to himself who is Beauty per se. (*In Div. Nom.*, c. 4, lect. 5, n. 337 & 349). So, it follows that each thing is beautiful in its own way (*In Ps.*, 44, 2; *In Div. Nom.* IV, 5). Aquinas also says that this divine beauty gives unity, mutual adaptations, agreements in ideas and friendship (*In Div. Nom.*, c. 4, lect. 5, n. 337.).

While there is nothing to prevent the same object from being beautiful in both sensible and intelligible ways at the same time, (see *In Ps.*, 25e; S.T., II-II, 145, 2), Aquinas's nominal definition of beauty encapsulates much. From the perspective of one's own experience, he says the beautiful is that which when seen gives pleasure (S.T., I, 5, 4, ad 1). It adds to goodness a

⁹ It is interesting to note that a modern composer of great fame possessed a very craftsman-like idea of his art:

I shall not forget that I occupy a chair of *poetics*. And it is no secret to any of you that the exact meaning of poetics is the study of work to be done. The verb *poiein* from which the word is derived means nothing else but to *do* or *make*. The poetics of the classical philosophers did not consist of lyrical dissertations about natural talent and about the essence of beauty. For them the single word *techné* embraced both the fine arts and the useful arts and was applied to the knowledge and study of the certain and inevitable rules of the craft. That is why Aristotle's *Poetics* constantly suggest ideas regarding personal work, arrangement of materials, and structure. The poetics of music is exactly what I am going to talk to you about; that is to say, I shall talk about *making* in the field of music. Suffice to say that we shall not use music as a pretext for pleasant fancies (Igor Stravinsky, *Poetics of Music*, trans. by Arthur Knodel and Ingolf Dahl, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1947, p. 4).

pleasure in apprehension (I-II, 27 1 ad 3). His definition by derivation includes that which is heard as well, and the pleasure encompasses both sensual and spiritual delight.

Scattered throughout his works, we discover what he further means by beauty. It is a disposition of the singular substance which is so proportioned in itself that it is suitable to human cognition (S.T., I-II, 55, 2, ad 1; *In Th. Jer.*, cap. 4, g-h; *In Div. Nom.*, cap. 4, lect. 5; S.T., I-II, 49, 2, ad 1). This proportion is called a kind of harmony (S.T., I, 4, 4, ad 1; I, 39, 8; II-II 145, 2; *In I Sent.*, d. 31, 2, 1). This comes from the ordering of a thing to an end (*In Div. Nom.*, c. 4, lect. 5, n. 339). Likewise it will differ in each case; that is, it will never simply be of one kind. Or, put another way: the beauty of one thing is not the beauty of another (*In Ps*, 44, 2). All of this different beauty comes from the form of the beautiful persons or things (S.T., I, 5, 4, ad 1). So the second property of beauty is splendor of form or brilliance (S.T., I, 39, 8c). Taking his cue from the visual arts, he says in the same place that "things which have a bright color are said to be beautiful."

Finally, beauty needs wholeness or integrity (S.T., I, 39, 8). It is perfect when it has its first perfection in being what it should be; and secondly, when it has its proper operation in act (*IV Sent.*, 26, 2, 4). That which is ugly, then, is less than it should be on any level (*In Div. Nom.*, c. 4, lect. 21, n. 554; S.T., I, 39, 8c; II-II, 145, 4c).

When it comes to man-made works that are called beautiful, "art imitating nature" should mean that it possesses something of proportion, clarity and wholeness.¹⁰ But he never develops this aspect for the fine arts. He perhaps saw that practical laws that

¹⁰ Callahan, *Theory of Aesthetics*, pp. 61-62, makes the following application of Aquinas's notions on beauty for the arts:

Variety denotes nothing more than a multiplicity of diverse things or actions, or successive changes through the work of arrangement or proportion. These various unities are set in harmonious relations, thus effecting the unity of the object or work. From this it will be evident that there is ample justification of stressing the importance of the role of proportion above the other factors involved in the process. To speak scholastically, variety or the multiplicity of diverse things and actions represents the material cause of order; unity the formal cause; and proportion, arrangement or harmony the efficient cause which accomplishes the coordination and unification of these elements in a manner best calculated to manifest the perfection of the whole.

govern the creating of beautiful paintings or music are not evident or even absolute but conditional.¹¹

So also the virtue of "beauty of spirit" consists in conversations and actions which are well formed and suffused with intelligence (S.T., II-II, 145, 2c). Therefore, from the point of view of morals, the beauty of an entire life is founded upon the virtuous life which consists in the co-ordination of many human acts according to reason (II-II, 145, 2 & 4). Because the instincts and emotions are brought under the order of reason, this in turn harmonizes, and sets in proportion the human life of the person (S. T., II-II, 180, esp. 2, ad 3 where Thomas says that the moral life is beautiful in so far as it participates in reason; see also *Contra Gentes*, III, 37).

We return the question: what is contemplation? For Aquinas, it means many things from the point of view of thinking about and loving God. But looked at entirely from a natural perspective, it is ... "a simple gaze upon a truth" (S.T., II-II, 180, 3 ad 1). In the same citation, he relies on Richard of St. Victor's notion that "contemplation is the soul's penetrating and easy gaze on things perceived." This definition is easily transferable to all the arts of the beautiful. To engage oneself in any art is to contemplate something beautiful which is a structured truth of a made thing itself and may also (if allied with poetry) contain extra-musical truth either from faith or philosophy.

¹¹ Similarly, a German philosopher of music analyzes the similar perplexity:

There is no art which, like music, uses up so quickly such a variety of forms. Modulations, cadences, intervals, and harmonious progressions become so hackneyed within fifty, nay, thirty years, that a truly original composer cannot well employ them any longer, and is thus compelled to think of new musical phraseology. Of a great number of compositions which rose far above the trivialities of their day, it would be quite correct to say that there *was* a time when they were beautiful. Among the occult and primitive affinities of the musical elements and the myriads of possible affinities and combinations, a great composer will discover the most subtle and unapparent ones. He will call into being forms of music which seemingly are conceived at the composer's pure caprice and yet, for some mysterious and unaccountable reason, stand to each other in the relation of cause and effect. Such compositions in their entirety, or fragments of them, may without hesitation be said to contain the "spark of genius..." (Eduard Hanslick, *The Beautiful in Music*, Tr. Gustav Cohen, New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1957, p. 58).

The deepest happiness in this life consists in infused contemplation instigated by the Holy Spirit (S.T., I-II, 147, 3 & 4) and, secondarily, acquired virtue when it is achieved by one's own efforts with grace (*Com. in Eth.* X, Lect. XI, n. 2110). To the extent that the fine arts bring someone to the taste and joys of contemplative activity it leads to the purpose of the virtuous life. For moral virtue anticipates and disposes one and looks toward the contemplative life, naturally and supernaturally.

Acquiring a taste for the fine arts thus disposes one to this religious contemplation of divine truth of faith, since it mirrors the infinite beauty of God himself. Could it not be the case that the strife and struggle to fasten onto ideas "by reason of the weakness of the intellect" (S.T., II-II 180, 7) is eased somewhat by a love and appreciation of all the fine arts, which in turn strengthens the natural power of concentration on spiritual things? Might listening to the inner relationships of a work by a Bach or Vivaldi exercise and strengthen the intellect to more easily contemplate the truths of divine faith? Likewise, might not the beautiful as contemplated dispose one to realize that there is more to life than simply or exclusively the goods of the senses? Could not a sonata or concerto suggest through the intricacies of a well skilled melody joined in a deep relationship to harmony and rhythm dispose one to desire a life of virtue? As Kevin Wall, O.P. articulated so well:

Thus morality, thought and art all converge upon the same terminal goal which must thus be the good, the true and the beautiful at once. Virtue, it (traditional Thomism) held, makes contemplation possible and vice makes it impossible in the full sense. Moreover, both virtue and contemplation are furthered and fostered by properly understood aesthetic activity.

What contemplation on the way to self-possession shares of its quality is insight but that insight contains the knowledge that the distance yet to be covered is infinite. This leaves it restless. Morality is similarly restless since it is not brought to rest in the possession of the ultimate good. Aesthetic experience alone has the sense of rest of that possession, the sense of satisfaction and being at an end.¹²

Moreover, Jacques Maritain has written about this from another

¹² *A Classical Philosophy of Art: The Nature of Art in the Light of Classical Principles*, Washington D.C.: University Press of America, 1982, pp. 4-5.

perspective when he asserts:

Art teaches men the pleasures of the spirit, and because it is itself sensitive and adapted to their nature, it is the better able to lead them to what is nobler than itself. So in natural life it plays the same part, so to speak, as the "sensible graces" in the spiritual life: and from afar off, without thinking, it prepares the human race for contemplation (the contemplation of the saints) the spiritual joy of which surpasses very other joy (S.T., I-II, 147, 3, 4)... .¹³

The appreciation of fine arts as a moral virtue

It is well known that some people are in fact more sensitive to the beauty of sight and others to hearing. But given this sensitivity and openness to the delight of the fine arts, how can we speak of a virtue here? Earlier in his *Commentary* on the ethics of Aristotle, he hinted at the idea of a virtue in this area and never developed it. In the *Summa*, he explains what a potential part of a virtue is, namely, a kind of imitation of a cardinal virtue. In effect, he will list a large number of potential parts of temperance, two of them being very close to what I will call, for want of an agreed Thomistic terminology, the virtue of fine art appreciation, namely: play and studiousness. Each of these virtues regulates a special and necessary pleasure.

How then does Thomas apply the potential part of temperance to knowledge or the speculative intellectual virtues?

In the *Summa*, II-II, 166, 1-2 and 167, 1-2, he analyzes the virtue of "studiositas" or devotion to learning, and its counterpart "curiositas" or the vice of excessive inquisitiveness (sometimes translated "curiosity"). In the case of the virtue, the love of learning and study is that by which the speculative intellectual virtues are acquired. This love of wanting to know, which is natural to all human persons, needs to be moderated between being lazy about knowledge or too eager to learn about things beyond due measure. Primarily it restrains immoderate desires for learning and secondarily, it eagerly strains after the conclusions of truth when the body wants to relax and not make the effort.

The vice of curiosity (S.T. II-II, 167, 1 & 2) comes about when persons desire knowledge for the sake of their egos

¹³ *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 62-63

(superbiant) or want to learn how to sin. Further, some may want to know things that have nothing to do with their vocation in life, or wish to learn from illicit sources (demons), or want to know for the sake of knowing without any reference to knowledge of God. Finally, there are people who simply desire to know things beyond their capacity.

In another are requiring tempering of a desire (S.T. II-II, 168, 2-4), Thomas poses other questions concerning whether there is a virtue in play, both in words and in deeds. Fatigue is part of life, and so the body needs rest, even if engaged in the direct contemplation of divine things. So, just as the body needs physical rest, the soul also needs rest, which comes from pleasure or "*delectatio*." This can be done through humorous conversation suitable to persons, places and times which gives good cheer to others. Nevertheless it can become addictive (*vehementiam affectus*). On the other hand, there are people who never say anything "ridiculous" to make one smile. As a result they then become hard and boorish (*duri et agrestes*). Yet, playfulness needs control and direction, which comes from this potential part of the virtue of temperance. These are important aspects of life, not the whole of life, yet necessary for fulfilling one's destiny.

Therefore, art appreciation would seem to fit somewhere here between these virtues because the arts of the beautiful both involve sensible pleasure and intellectual pleasure, thus needing some mode of control and regulation. Sometimes, one enjoys them too much and simply from the curiosity of the senses or the intellect, or simply to avoid responsibility. On the other hand, a genuine aesthetic experience can bring one to the threshold of meditation and contemplation of the truth of divine things (natural and supernatural) which is the prime goal and summit of this life.

One final and very important insight that relates to our inquiry concerning the fine arts is this: "...no man can exist without delight and when he cannot enjoy the delights of the spirit, he seeks those of the flesh" (S.T., I-II 35, 2 ad 2). This remarkable sentence contains the beginning kernel for seeing how art appreciation is exceedingly helpful for the virtue of chastity as well as being an assistant virtue to the mainline virtues associated with prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance.

Conclusion

Delighting in art works can do many wondrous things for the soul and body. It brings delight to both because of either the melody, harmony, rhythm, or symmetry, or humor, and images and

thoughts or even sentiments of having done good things. Even aspiring to certain goals come to mind. The contemplation associated with the fine arts can be supremely delightful, given a way of life that may make heavy demands by reason of work and profession. But above all, fine art appreciation acts as an icon for virtue itself, which implies a "doing" or "action" flooded with reason, faith and even an openness to the instigations of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. This is definitely not the intellectual virtue of *ars* but a virtue of the will conducive to a life of the virtues.