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Ethics and Art: An Essay on a Gilsonian Theme

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The relationship between ethics and art can be seen on various levels. On the one hand, there is the difference between the artistic and ethical orders on the part of the artist. Then there is the difference between ethical judgments and artistic judgments on the part of a spectator. What is of further interest is what the relationship between these two aspects of the human spirit reveals about human flourishing.

Using principles from the philosophy of art of French Catholic philosopher Étienne Gilson, this summary article will first distinguish the orders of ethics and art on the part of the artist, showing that they have different and heterogeneous first principles. This will be followed by Gilson's presentation of artistic judgments, and how they are different from moral judgments. Finally an integral consideration of both the artistic and moral impulses from the point of view of the human person will reveal a dynamic tendency towards organic harmony and spiritual beauty.

Distinguishing the Artistic and Ethical Orders

According to Étienne Gilson, following Aristotle and St Thomas, human beings have three main life activities: knowing, doing and making. These are three heterogeneous operations, each with its own first principles of knowledge. They are autonomous in that each activity seeks a different finality. In particular, art falls in the order of factivity, of making, and its measure is not primarily the ethical, but what must be done in order to produce – and produce well – an artifact: «The only good that art as such has to pursue is the perfection of the work. Its responsibility is no more to promote moral perfection, which is the good of the will, than to say the truth, which is the good of knowledge»[1].

Within the field of factivity, we can distinguish between the making of something useful or for an instrumental purpose – the technical arts – and the making of something beautiful or for no other purpose than to be appreciated as it is, to be contemplated – the fine arts, or what we commonly call "art"[2]. Applying what we have said above, the measure of art will thus not be primarily the ethical (and within the ethical, the religious) or the true, but what must be done in order to produce a beautiful work.

As such, the artist is at the service of the beautiful, which in the mind of Gilson is not identical with the good, understood in the strict sense as the object of an appetitive faculty. Only if "good" is taken in a broad sense, as that object towards which a faculty properly tends, can we then say that the beautiful is a "good", specifically the good of sense knowledge of an intelligent being: «Using the classical language of the schools, let us say that just as good is the perfection of the will, and just as the true is "the good of the intellect", so also, because it is that of which the very sight gives pleasure, the beautiful is the good of sense knowledge for the sensibility of an intelligent being»[3]. Armand Maurer, a student and close collaborator of Gilson, puts it this way:

«The call of the beautiful is different. In this case what delights us is not precisely the

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thing itself but the sight of the thing. The beautiful attracts us to look at it, but not to possess it, except in order that we might look at it more often and more attentively. In contrast to the desire of the good, the experience of the beautiful is disinterested»[4].

Thus art and ethics form heterogeneous spheres of human knowledge, where the principles of the one are not directly subordinated to the principles of the other. Nevertheless, it is important to affirm, as Gilson does, a deeper unity of these spheres of human activity based on the unity of the person in whom they exist. The artist, *qua* artist, is only concerned with the beautiful; but as a human being, he or she is also concerned with the moral[5].

Because of the unity of the human person, an artist, who seeks perfection in the beauty of the artwork, may certainly desire to integrate the true and the moral in the artwork, and the fact is that this is often done, for example, in religious art. Still, the distinct orders should not be confused. «Nothing prevents the artist from putting his art at the service of a moral or religious cause, far from it, but good causes may be promoted by poor art, and the artistic quality of the works which serve such causes owes nothing to their dignity»[6].

French philosopher Étienne Gilson has stressed the close connection between ethics and art

Artistic Judgments vs. Moral Judgments

In an early work, "On the Foundations of Aesthetic Judgments", Gilson already expresses the idea that aesthetic judgments are basically subjective. Like opinion in the intellectual domain, aesthetic judgments only express the agreeable or disagreeable character of an aesthetic object with respect to our sensibility[7]. Since the sensibility to certain aesthetic qualities or forms varies from person to person, taste is radically subjective. The more solidly one's affective personality is formed, the more intense one can expect its positive and negative judgments to be. A sign of this subjective character of aesthetic judgments is their dogmatic and unjustifiable character. Our personal experience confirms that it is impossible to explain why we like or dislike such or such an artwork with any sort of «convincing objective justification»[8]. Another sign of the subjective character of aesthetic judgments is their vulnerability: «A word said at the right moment may suffice to reveal to us a beauty we had overlooked, just as another word may sometimes spoil for us forever certain pleasures by poisoning their source»[9].

This is not to say that aesthetic judgments are irrational. The fact that appreciation of certain artistic styles is capable of being learned is a sign that understanding the "language" and cultural referents of a work of art, and the general taste or tastes of the society in which one is raised, along with one's personal history of exposure to artworks, are important in forming one's aesthetic taste. Perhaps one can judge an artwork to be more intellectual or less so, requiring more or less understanding of techniques, symbols, and art history. Perhaps too one can make a judgment about whether a work of art better represents something in nature or not. But these are not judgments about better or worse in the subject's perception of beauty; the fact remains that whether one considers an artwork simply as more or less pleasing is at the end of the day altogether subjective.

If this leaves us perplexed about whether we can make any objective judgments about the artwork *qua* art, Gilson says that besides aesthetic judgments, there is also the field of what we could call «artistic judgments». For Gilson the philosopher, it is here that evaluations of an artwork's objective beauty can indeed be made, and they are based on ontological aspects of the work: wholeness or unity, harmony and radiance[10]. A unique form presides over, as it were, the production

of the artwork and is readily perceived in every one of the parts of the work; what is beautiful in a work of fine art is ultimately this form.

One artistic judgment which Gilson is fond of describing is that between «a work of genius» and «a work of talent». Whereas most people would apply the terms «genius» and «talent» to the artist himself, Gilson seeks the criteria of «genius» and «talent» in the work itself, and precisely in the unity of the work. A work of genius, from an insight of the composer Robert Schumann[11], has a «golden thread» that binds together the different elements of the artwork. The work is «of one piece»; it is perceived as one, and its parts are organically derived from this unity. A work of talent, on the other hand, displays an «external unity» derived more from the work of organizing, adjusting and composing elements together than from «birthing» them. Thus if the artistic form is unified and its parts are organically related to that unity as in a living being, we have a higher beauty than that of a form that resembles an artificial thing, where elements have simply been brought together for a common purpose. «Talent achieves … unity from outside and obtains it from an artificial form; genius generates it from within while conceiving the form which will become that of the work. With art as with nature, the degrees of being follow those of unity»[12].

Higher degrees of unity and thus of organicity are present in architectonically proportioned artworks. The architectonic character of an artwork can perhaps be best exemplified in a classical musical symphony. Sound and silence are informed by a melody. Melody in turn is informed by a harmonic structure. These in turn are informed by a «musical form» such as sonata-allegro or rondo, and these are further informed ultimately by the «symphonic form» in 3 or 4 movements. This ultimate, architectonic form in an artwork is the «artistic form», which gives meaning and unity to all the lesser subordinated forms, and that by which the work should be objectively judged as beautiful or not[13].

We note here that Gilson firmly rejects the idea that objective evaluation of art should be based solely upon how well it imitates or represents nature[14]. It is common that an artist will use elements and figures from nature in an artwork, and that this in itself may give pleasure; yet the beauty of an artwork is not identical to the beauty of the natural forms it may represent. If it were, it would have to be said that photography would be the most perfect form of painting, and cloning the most perfect form of statuary. It's not that the words or representations are indifferent to the artwork, but due to the architectonic nature of art, they are simply as matter in relation to form. Thus the objective evaluation of the beauty of an artwork requires a consideration of how the natural forms are woven into the overarching artistic form.

Artistic judgments of an artwork correspond to the artist's production of the work, and therefore evaluate not only the work as having an artistic unity, but also the artist's skill in bringing this unity about in the material he or she has used. As such, other sorts of objective judgments about the beauty of an artwork could be made: for example, about the originality of the artwork or about the degree of skillful elaboration employed by the artist according to the canons of a certain artistic style.

Passing on to moral judgments of artworks, we point out first that they do not necessarily always occur, except perhaps the very general judgment that persons desire beautiful things. It is especially in the case where an artwork contains "narrative" content that moral judgments may arise. Gilson asserts that this moral judgment is precisely not an aesthetic or artistic one – which focus on the *beauty* of the work. Rather the approval or disapproval of an artwork insofar as morality goes is a distinct point of view; what is artistically good can be morally wrong and vice versa.

«[W]orks of a kind which corrupt morality do not rise in artistic value for doing so, but the disapproval they deserve should be taken from the point of view of ethics, not of art.

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In itself, since art consists in incorporating a form in a matter for the purpose of producing beauty, a work which achieves that end is good. But its goodness is an artistic, not a moral one, and what is artistically good can be morally wrong»[15].

Gilson will go even further, to be wary of extending moral judgments on the "narrative" element of an artwork to the artist him or herself. Because art is factivity, artistic production doesn't necessarily mean that the artist condones the narrative actions depicted, or that the artist's work is a means to stimulate his own or others' immoral passions: «A poem may inspire the reader with sensuous images, but there is nothing sensuous in writing it; on the contrary, because it is work, artistic creation can be prescribed as effective "cure" for passion»[16].

While virtually anything may cause an immoral stimulus in a particular individual according to his or her moral or religious sensibility, judgments about the proclivity of an artwork to stir immorality in a given audience depends on the moral and religious customs of a given society.

Now the fact that the two sorts of judgments – aesthetic and moral – may occur at the same time again points to the fact that the spectator too is one human person. A connoisseur of art may be able to suspend ethical judgments, being caught up only in the aesthetic experience, or may be so engaged in the moral dimension that the artistic dimension simply is not considered. What is important in this discussion is that since an artwork contains a formal dimension beyond the merely natural forms and narrative elements, appreciation of art can allow a certain contemplation of the world not possible to a spectator accustomed only to sensing "sensually" and not artistically. Aesthetic contemplation, requiring as it does the presence of the sensibility impregnated with intelligence, creates a perceptual space whereby naturally sensible forms and events can signify or be a part of something beyond their purely sensual nature. Thus, while it would be sadistic to entertain oneself by watching live Roman gladiatorial contests, a drama or painting that depicted such a gladiatorial contest might be not only be beautiful, but also allow one to develop emotions other to bloodthirsty passion, such as compassion, hatred for evil, love for martyrdom, and so on. On the other hand, it may also be the case that if the purely base sensual or vivid narrative elements are too glaring, such an aesthetic sublimation may not be possible – except for a person in full mastery of their sensible appetites.

The Beautiful and the Moral

The distinction between the fields of ethics and art points to a certain "composition" in the human person, which is itself a "call" to harmony and integration. As hitherto explained, the meaning of art is not primarily found in the meaning of whatever words or representations are used as parts of a work. Yet, if speculative elements can be woven into the architectonic nature of sculpture, poetry, painting and theatre, and even to some extent in music, could it not be also said that the moral is also thus included?

Certainly the artist is aware of the moral impact of the elements or composition, and thus uses this moral meaning as part of the matter of the artwork. Insofar as it is an artwork, the moral meanings are not formally what is beautiful, but the beautiful form includes the moral meaning as a subordinated part, elevated to the artistic level by the skill of the artist.

This is in fact, according to Gilson the true vocation of an artist: to responsibly, using all the resources of his creative freedom and skill to serve the production of artistic beauty. In a pragmatic world, where things and persons are often perceived only in terms of utility, the artist sees his surroundings as «the sign of something else, which it already in some measure is, which it is art's function to bring wholly to be»[17]. An artist should be aware that in creating beautiful objects, sensual and narrative elements can be elevated, precisely as becoming an integral part of a beautiful whole. For example,

the stark, sensual sound of an oboe can be elevated when it becomes a part of a melody, and furthermore when harmonized with other instruments. A nude figure can be elevated artistically when it becomes part of anecdotal composition, which itself is elevated in a unified production of a noble beauty. Such elaboration requires skill on the part of the artist and a certain desire to invoke the sympathy of the intellectual perception of beauty rather than a mere concupiscible reaction.

The creative impulse in the artist in producing his work arises from a real participation in the creative power of the Creator. Gilson speaks to the creativity of man as a certain analogue of Henri Bergson's *élan vital*. The world in which we live has a certain upwards evolution, especially in the world of living things, which brings forth new natural forms. Though not creation *ex nihilo* – since pre-existing matter is always implied – even on the natural level there is the production of novelty. The universe's production of novelty is enhanced radically in the case of human beings, and especially in the area of art, with the possibility of creating wholly new beautiful forms. In fact, Gilson asserts that if art is understood properly as factivity, and not primarily as imitation or representation, it can be seen that through art, humankind contributes to the evolutive progress of the universe[18].

Yet artistic creativity is not the only human creativity. Gilson also speaks of ongoing self-creation, and this arises precisely through moral actions, in the molding of one's spiritual personality. Gilson, in his "Essay on the Interior Life" affirms that «the person decides to "contribute to carrying forward the present point of perfection of the universe" precisely through building and developing himself, his interior organism»[19]. If the artist *qua* man, understands his own creative power as primarily ongoing self-creation through morality, «moral concern» becomes a necessary element in artistic creation, if not *qua* artist, at least *qua* man. The artist must calculate the effect of the elements of the artwork on the audience, so as not to "repulse" the spectator on the moral level, even while seeking to elevate him on the artistic level[20]. "Moral concern" becomes "religious concern" when morality is seen within a vision of religious faith. Thus specifically religious art has as its fundamental goal, not to be beautiful, but to educate; art comes to the service of religion.

We thus intuit that depending on the overarching finality of the work, morality can be at the service of art or art at the service of morality. Is it possible to say *a priori* which is the overarching finality – the moral or the artistic? A reader of the Book of Job may discover the moral conundrums as part of the literary beauty of the book, while another may find the literary forms as somewhat of a delightful enhancement to the fundamental moral and religious meaning of the book. Certainly one can ask the author of the artwork, but perhaps they themselves may not be totally aware of their intent with respect to any particular work. Perhaps what needs to be done is to see an artwork within the totality of the personality of the artist; it is there that we can seek to discern its fundamental spirit.

Whereas the artist seeks perfection of his works, the saint seeks perfection of himself. Gilson has written about the dialectical play between the exigency towards creation of beautiful things, which is the artistic impulse, and the exigency towards the creation of one's moral goodness – or spiritual beauty – which is the overall human impulse. That few great artists have also been considered saints perhaps points to the fact that even the creative impulse in man suffers a certain primordial disorder. Nevertheless, Gilson will have us believe that «the desire for artistic greatness and sanctity – as well as for any other kind of maturity in personality – arises from the same source. It is the desire for God»[21].

In the end, we can be thankful to the artists for bequeathing objects of art to us. They are a means for the elevation of our senses and perception of the world around us. They can also be a means for moral improvement or moral degradation. It is when we see the

two areas integrated together that an artwork becomes truly great: great not only as an artistic beauty, but also as moral encouragement. Artists of this kind thus achieve a certain personal unity and harmony, which itself is radiant in its own right, and constitutes a veritable beauty. The artist-person becomes an exemplar of harmonious humanism, and he or she elicits wonder and a desire for emulation in those around them. *In fine*, "seeing" such persons, our spirit is elevated to the ultimate Source of this integral wholeness.

NOTE

[1] É. GILSON, *The Arts of the Beautiful*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York 1965, 43-44.

[2] From here on, we will use the term "art" to refer to the production or product of the fine arts or what Gilson calls the «arts of the beautiful».

[3] É. GILSON, *Arts of the Beautiful*, op. cit., 28.

[4] A. MAURER, *About Beauty*, Center for Thomistic Studies, Houston 1983, 18.

[5] Here it is instructive to quote J. MARITAIN, *The Responsibility of the Artist*, Gordian Press, New York 1972, 22, on this same point: «The fact is that by nature Art and Morality are two autonomous worlds, with no direct and intrinsic subordination between them. There is a subordination, but extrinsic and indirect. It is this extrinsic and indirect subordination which is disregarded both by the anarchistic claim that the artist must be completely irresponsible: *it does not matter what one writes* — then any subordination whatever of art to morality is simply denied — and, at the opposite extreme, by the totalitarian claim that the artist must be completely subservient: *what one writes must be controlled by the state*. Then the fact of the subordination being only extrinsic and indirect is simply denied. In both cases what is disregarded is the fact that the realm of Art and the realm of Morality are two autonomous worlds, but within the unity of the human subject».

[6] É. GILSON, *Arts of the Beautiful*, op. cit., 44.

[7] Cf. É. GILSON, «Du fondement des jugements esthétiques», *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger,* 83 (1917), 535.

[8] É. GILSON, *Arts of the Beautiful*, op. cit., 40.

[9] *Ibid.*, 41.

[10] Philosophically speaking, these objective marks of what is beautiful are based on "form". Cf. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Super De Divinis Nominibus,* 4.5: «individuals are beautiful according to their idea, that is, according to their form» («singula *sunt* pulchra secundum propriam rationem*, idest secundum propriam formam*»).

[11] Cf. R. SCHUMANN, «Musik und Musiker», vol. 1, 69, in *Du fondement des jugements esthétiques*, Note 1, 532: «Here, invention is the discovery of a creation that does not yet exist; there, a meeting up with an already realized creation. Here is the field of genius which, like nature, sows seeds of a thousand kinds; there is the characteristic of talent which, like each of the clods of earth, receives the seed and makes it sprout into only one stalk». («Ceci, l'invention est la découverte d'une création qui n'existe pas encore; cela la rencontre d'une création déjà réalisée: ceci est l'affaire du génie qui, comme la nature, disperse des semences de mille sortes; cela est la caractéristique du talent qui, semblable à chacune des mottes de la terre, reçoit la semence et n'en fait sortir qu'une tige»).

[12] É. GILSON, *Arts of the Beautiful*, op. cit., 50.

[13] The architectonic character of art is also found in a pre-eminent way in theatre which uses other art forms, such as music itself, along with painting, drama, dance, etc., as subordinated forms to its overarching theatrical artform. See É. GILSON, *Arts of the Beautiful*, op. cit., 96-97 and É. GILSON, *Forms and Substances in the Arts*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York 1966, 277-278.

[14] This is in direct contrast with the theories of Plato in his *Republic*, or that of Aristotle in his *Poetics*.

[15] É. GILSON, *Arts of the Beautiful*, op. cit., 44.

[16] *Ibid.*, 45.

[17] É. GILSON, *Choir of Muses*, Sheed & Ward, New York 1953, 189.

[18] From this point of view, Gilson has positive regard for abstract art: «During the long episode that lasted from the end of the fifteenth century to the beginning of nonrepresentational art, painters, instead of remaining firmly established on the ground of nature, progressively or regressively shifted over to the ground of imitation, representation, and, in short, exchanged making for knowing. Imitation – that is, representation of reality as it appears to be – stands on the side of science or, to use a more modest word, knowledge. Reduced to its simplest expression, the function of modern art has been to restore painting to its primitive and true function, which is to continue through man the creative activity of nature. In so doing, modern painting has destroyed nothing and condemned nothing that belongs in any one of the legitimate activities of man; it has simply regained the clear awareness of its own nature and recovered its own place among the creative activities of man» (É. GILSON, *Painting and Reality*, Pantheon, New York 1957, 263-264).

[19] A. YEUNG, *Imago Dei Creatoris: Étienne Gilson's "Essay on the Interior Life" and Its Seminal Influence*, Regina Apostolorum Pontifical Athenaeum, Rome 2012, 272, 198-199.

[20] N. CARROLL, «Art and Ethical Criticism: An Overview of Recent Directions of Research», *Ethics*, 110 (2000), 350-387. Carroll argues that in some cases a moral defect in a work prevents it from «se-

curing emotional uptake», which is therefore *ipso facto* an aesthetic defect of the work: «Yet the reluctance that the moderate moralist has in mind is not that the ideally sensitive audience member voluntarily puts on the brakes; rather, it is that he can't depress the accelerator because it is jammed. He tries, but fails. And he fails because there is something wrong with the structure of the artwork. It has not been designed properly on its own terms» (Page 379). Without saying that this is an *intrinsic* aesthetic or artistic defect, we could say that it is an *indirectly* artistic defect since the artist – in the best of cases – was not able to calculate properly the sensual power of the artistic elements used on his audience.

[21] A. YEUNG, *Imago Dei Creatoris: Étienne Gilson's "Essay on the Interior Life" and Its Seminal Influence*, op. cit., 454. Cf. É. GILSON, *Choir of Muses*, op. cit., 196: «Poetry even at its purest is not prayer; but it rises from the same depths as the need to pray… [The poet's] most perfect art does not wholly fulfil a promise which can be fulfilled by nothing material, be it the woman or the work. It is then that he sees clearly the real object of his quest: art sought through his Muse, and God through his art».