

## *Art: A “Political” Good?*

Jeanne M. Heffernan

Art is said to do many things. Among others, it gives visual expression to religious sentiment; complements the power of prose in telling a story; records the likeness of family members, preserving memories for the benefit of posterity; and generates passionate response to issues of public moment. Hence, churches commission sculptors, publishers hire illustrators, the wealthy retain portraitists, and governments employ propagandists. In each of these instances, the artistic product serves a distinct function designated by the sponsor; the monetary value of the work corresponds to its perceived utility. While some consider patrons of sculpture or oil portraits frivolous, most would grant that if churches or blue-bloods or the *nouveau riche* “get something out of it,” they are free to spend their money as they wish.

It is less clear for most of us to recognize the public, indeed political, value of the fine arts; hence the fierce debate concerning its public funding. I shall argue that Jacques Maritain’s aesthetic and political work sheds light on this difficult problem. It helps us to think analytically and comprehensively about three questions: What is art? What is politics? Is art a political good? Examining these issues serves a twofold purpose, theoretical and practical: to clarify the nature of the creative process and product and the relationship of these to social and political life so as to, in turn, clarify one of the more divisive issues of the day, public funding of the arts. In the course of his aesthetic and political work, I shall argue, Maritain provides the foundation for a contemporary Thomistic defense of publicly funded art far superior to the conventional defense offered by social liberals. Current varieties of liberalism, found on Capitol Hill no less than in the academy, are ill-equipped to answer such questions; their philosophical assumptions and related methods are, as Aristotle would say, inadequate to the object

under study.<sup>1</sup> Liberal theories of politics, like John Rawls's, attempt to bracket comprehensive views of the good from their accounts of justice: justice, so the argument goes, is political not metaphysical. The persistence of value conflicts in the public square reveals the inadequacy of this conception. How does a polity adjudicate claims about the *value* of public art without a conception of the good life and the place of beauty within it? Unlike political liberalism, Maritain's aesthetic and political theory offers an alternative account of the nature of art and politics which yields not only a persuasive theoretical response to the question: Is art a political good? but provides practical guidance as to its concrete resolution.

### WHAT IS ART?

In *Art and Scholasticism*, an early attempt to fashion a Thomistic aesthetics,<sup>2</sup> Maritain admits the difficulty of the task. St. Thomas and the Schoolmen did not articulate a philosophy of art *per se*. Thus, a Thomistic aesthetics must be synthetic, building upon the Scholastics' more general reflections concerning *techne* on the one hand and beauty on the other. Such a difficult synthetic enterprise has its benefits, for it reveals the narrowness of modern aesthetics which considers "under art the Fine Arts only and deal[s] with the beautiful only as it concerns art."<sup>3</sup> Maritain, by contrast, attempts a more holistic analysis by situating the fine arts within the larger category of art and identifying beauty as a transcendental reflected in works of art, but finally independent of them.

In laying out this holistic analysis, Maritain employs the scholastic distinction between the speculative and practical intellect. Art, broadly understood to include "useful" and "fine" art, pertains to the latter; it is a habit of the practical intellect which operates for the good of the work done specifically by sharpening the intellective faculty—hence the resemblance between the virtue of art and the virtues of the speculative intellect.<sup>4</sup> Yet, art sharpens the intellective faculty not for the sake of contemplation, but with a view to *doing*—hence its kinship to prudence. Yet, where prudence concerns the doing of moral actions, art concerns productive action or *making*. Maritain distinguishes the two thus:

<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* I.2, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this essay I shall treat the term aesthetics rather specifically to refer to the beauty associated with the fine arts.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937), p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> For a later statement of this relationship see Maritain's *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (New York: Pantheon, 1953), pp. 44–52.

Art, therefore, keeping Making straight and not Action, remains outside the line of human conduct, with an end, rules, and values, which are not those of the man, but of the work to be produced. That work is everything for art,—one law only governs it—the exigencies and the good of the work.<sup>5</sup>

Art *qua habitus* is a "state of possession" or inner strength which perfects man in his making; it is "the proper virtue of working reason."<sup>6</sup>

This orientation of the virtue toward the object made holds for the useful and fine arts. The useful arts pertain to the satisfaction of a particular material need; the art of shipbuilding, for instance, pertains to the need for safe transportation. The fine arts, by contrast, pertain to the satisfaction of a spiritual need, the need for beauty. As Maritain insists, the intellect "strives to engender," to release its spiritual creativity in creating beauty. "The need of the intellect to manifest externally what is grasped within itself, in creative intuition, and to manifest it in beauty, is simply the essential thing in the fine arts,"<sup>7</sup> a category inclusive of poetry, music, and the visual arts. In each of these categories, the object produced is the material expression of the artist's creative intuition, that is to say, of his participation in beauty which yields an utterly singular work made for itself.

Inasmuch as the artist engages in contemplative contact with the transcendental beauty and discovers "a new way in which the brilliance of form can be made to shine upon matter,"<sup>8</sup> artistic activity can be described as "disinterested." It is personal and subjective, as the artist is an individual subject giving expression to his unique creative intuition, but the object of the intuition is transcendent. Maritain helpfully underscores this point, for it challenges the dominant twentieth-century view of art and artist. A culture like ours that has inherited a vulgarized Romantic notion of the artist as expressive individual and has lost an earlier notion of art as window into the transcendent and artist as mediator of the transcendent has special need of this corrective. Art, properly understood and practiced, is not the expression of a grandiose, neurotic ego.<sup>9</sup> On the contrary, Maritain insists, artistic

<sup>5</sup> Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, p. 49. Maritain later distinguishes the roles of "working" and "intuitive" reason in the fine arts. Intuitive reason, "in the obscure and high regions which are near the center of the soul," plays the major role: it yields the creative intuition. Working reason directs the artist in the material realization of the intuition (p. 63).

<sup>7</sup> Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, p. 56.

<sup>8</sup> Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 46.

<sup>9</sup> This fact takes on special significance as it bears on the debate over public funding of the arts. If art is merely self-expressive, designed to gratify the personal preoccupations of the artist, then it would be difficult to see its intersubjective

creation "engages the human self in its deepest recesses—but in no way for the sake of the human Ego."<sup>10</sup> The artist reveals himself in his work, it is true, but he does more than this. As Maritain puts it, "The very engagement of the artist's Self in [artistic or] poetic activity, the very revelation of the artist's Self in his work, together with the revelation of the particular secret he has obscurely grasped in things, are for the sake of the work."<sup>11</sup> In this way, the artist is profoundly other-regarding, indeed open to the divine; he detects the spiritual "in the things of sense."<sup>12</sup> Maritain describes the artistic subject thus: "Poetry's *I* is the substantial depth of the living and loving subjectivity, it is a subject as act, marked with the diaphaneity and expansiveness proper to the operations of the spirit. Poetry's *I* resembles in this regard the *I* of the Saint, and likewise, although in other fashions, it is a subject which gives."<sup>13</sup>

Yet, it must be added, the artistic *I* has a particular way of giving that may pose difficulties for social life. As Maritain emphasizes, art is in a sense an "inhuman virtue," inasmuch as it strains after "a gratuitously creative activity, entirely absorbed in its own mystery and its own laws of operation, refusing to subordinate itself either to the interests of man or to the evocation of what already exists."<sup>14</sup> The temptation of art is to abstraction—to an isolation from everything not peculiar to its own laws and object—leaving the artist and his work "separate and exempt from, and perfectly disinterested in regard to man and things."<sup>15</sup> But art depends upon man and things, for it subsists in man and is nourished by things; the artist *qua* man thinks and acts as well as makes. He must take account of his moral and intellectual life and the state of his environment, lest his art destroy the very conditions of its own existence. If able to claim the whole man as its own, art will devour "the substance of the artist and the passions, the desires, the speculative and moral virtues which make it truly human, it [will also] devour its own subject of inherence."<sup>16</sup> Though in some sense an

---

meaning and, hence, social value. If, on the other hand, art has a transcendent object—that is at least in principle accessible to all men *qua* spiritual—then artistic activity can have an intersubjective value.

<sup>10</sup> Jacques Maritain, *The Responsibility of the Artist* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960), p. 51.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Maritain, "The Frontiers of Poetry," in *Art and Scholasticism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937), p. 96.

<sup>13</sup> Maritain, *The Responsibility of the Artist*, p. 51.

<sup>14</sup> Maritain, "The Frontiers of Poetry," p. 92.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

"inhuman virtue," art is also *for* man, if not like prudence, then at least with respect to the way in which it is used. Art will decay if it rejects the constraints of prudence or the "service of our common culture, which requires it to make itself intelligible, accessible, open, to shoulder the burden of the inheritance of reason and wisdom by which we live."<sup>17</sup> The tension between art and prudence and the requirements of cultural longevity is perennial and comes to the fore when the topics of art and politics are brought into connection.

### WHAT IS POLITICS?

Like his account of art, Maritain offers a comprehensive account of politics. Though Maritain freely uses the language of rights, his conception of politics owes more to the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition than it does to classical liberalism. This becomes evident in Maritain's robust conception of the common good and the body politic.

In *Man and the State*, Maritain challenges narrow conceptions of politics that view the political task as essentially negative, that is, as the protection of individuals against the encroachment of others, reduce politics to interest group competition, and deny the existence of a common good. While acknowledging the importance of the negative function of political order, Maritain assigns politics a range of positive responsibilities, which suggests an understanding of politics as broadly conceived.

For Maritain, the body politic or political society exists not merely for the satisfaction of individual material needs, nor for the technical mastery of nature, nor yet for the domination of some over others. Rather, the *telos* of political society is:

to procure the common good of the multitude, in such a manner that each concrete person, not only in a privileged class but throughout the whole mass, may truly reach that measure of independence which is proper to civilized life and which is ensured alike by the economic guarantees of work and property, political rights, civil virtues, and the cultivation of the mind.<sup>18</sup>

This rich conception of political society harkens to Aristotle and Aquinas for whom the moral and intellectual development of man is the end of politics. As Aristotle argues and Aquinas affirms, the city exists not for the sake of mere subsistence, but for the sake of the *good* life. The relationship

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 54.

among citizens, therefore, differs from that of simple allies. Whereas in an alliance the parties concern themselves with mutual protection or economic benefit, in a city, the citizens concern themselves with the character of their fellows: indeed, the first task of legislation is the cultivation of virtue.<sup>19</sup> Maritain, working within a Thomistic framework of natural and supernatural ends, glosses Aristotle in this way: human life, he maintains, has an absolute ultimate end, namely, the “transcendent, eternal common good,” which is the object of individual ethics, but it also has a “subordinate ultimate end,” namely, the “terrestrial common good.”<sup>20</sup> This is the direct object of political ethics. Politics considers (but does not have principal responsibility for) the absolute ultimate end as it carries out its own specific charge: “the good of the rational nature in its temporal achievement.”<sup>21</sup> But insofar as man is a unity of body, mind, and spirit, the good of his rational nature temporally considered includes not only basic material goods, but also the cultivation of moral and intellectual virtues. Considered in this light, the political task may be viewed as essentially a task of “civilization and culture,” of “making faith, righteousness, wisdom and beauty ends of civilization.”<sup>22</sup>

### IS ART A POLITICAL GOOD?

Maritain’s rich understanding of art and politics holds promise for bringing the two into contact. They need not be alien, one from the other. Rather, if one regards art as a virtue of the practical intellect and politics as the ordering of communal life with a view to moral and intellectual excellence, then it seems reasonable to speak of art as a political good, that is, a good to be achieved in political association. Indeed, Maritain affirms, “Art is a fundamental necessity in the human state,”<sup>23</sup> for it plays a critical role in the life of virtue: art teaches man the pleasures of the spirit and frees him from a preoccupation with the pleasures of the flesh. Art points beyond itself to what is nobler than itself, and insofar as it does this, “it prepares the human race for contemplation.”<sup>24</sup> Art thus bears on our temporal and eter-

<sup>19</sup> Aristotle, *The Politics* I.2.1094b8, III.9.1117b5–8, ed. Ernest Barker (London: Oxford University Press, 1958); *Nicomachean Ethics* II.2.1103b, X.9.1180a10.

<sup>20</sup> See also *Integral Humanism in Integral Humanism, Freedom in the Modern World, and A Letter on Independence*, ed. Otto Bird (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), pp. 286–89.

<sup>21</sup> Maritain, *Man and the State*, p. 62.

<sup>22</sup> John U. Nef, *The United States and Civilization* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1942), p. 252 quoted in Maritain, *Man and the State*, p. 55.

<sup>23</sup> Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 80.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

nal good. With respect to the former, the cultivation of art is, at least in principle, a proper concern of public life—even of the legislator.<sup>25</sup>

As Maritain anticipated, the achievement of this good in political society is difficult. Art and prudence reign in their own spheres, and the claims of each may conflict, or appear to conflict; the artist and the prudent man may be at odds, each with a tenable position. Maritain's description of such tension is apropos of our cultural situation in which the battle lines are often simplistically drawn between self-described "independent artists" and "concerned citizens." The difficulty of this problem, Maritain reminds us, stems from the fact that "by nature Art and Morality are two autonomous worlds, with no direct and intrinsic subordination between them."<sup>26</sup> There is an indirect and extrinsic subordination, however. Each party to the debate forgets one side or the other of this proposition. At the one extreme is the artist who claims complete autonomy for his art, denies any subordination of art to morality, and disregards the extrinsic and indirect subordination that does exist. At the other, is the totalitarian who views artistic activity as wholly subservient to morality (state defined) and under its direct control, thus neglecting the limiting fact that the subordination is only extrinsic and indirect. In short, the two poles disregard the fact that "the realm of Art and the realm of Morality are two autonomous worlds, but within the unity of the human subject."<sup>27</sup>

Several implications concerning the artist and political community follow from this profound observation. An artist is a man before he is an artist. As such, he ought to be disposed toward his comprehensive good, that is, charity, which "when it takes hold of [him], makes the entire subjectivity purer, and, consequently, the creative source purer."<sup>28</sup> If effective, this disposition gives rise to a sense of social responsibility. "If the artist loves truth and loves his fellowmen," Maritain affirms, "anything in the work which might distort the truth or deteriorate the human soul will displease him, and lose for him that delight which beauty affords. Respect for truth

<sup>25</sup> Certainly for Plato and Aristotle, who took the arts very seriously, this implication followed. Recall Plato's discussion of music and poetry in Books II and III of the *Republic* and the broad mandate Aristotle ascribes to the legislator in the moral and intellectual development of his citizens (*Nicomachean Ethics* X.9). It is important to note here, though, that Maritain does not reduce political society to the state and its actors; he has a broader conception, including mediating institutions. Thus, to say that art is a political good is to affirm that it is "of the polis," which includes but is not coextensive with government.

<sup>26</sup> Maritain, *The Responsibility of the Artist*, p. 22.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 60–61.

and for the human soul will become an objective condition or requirement affecting his virtue of art itself. . . ."<sup>29</sup>

The political community, including civil associations and the state, ought in its turn be guided by a true conception of the common good. This requires respect for intelligence and conscience, including artistic conscience. Society may, under certain circumstances, and the state, under rarer circumstances still, legitimately interfere with the free expression of artistic activity. (Such circumstances, like inciting vicious acts, are very limited for Maritain.) But art must not be pressed into the service of the people or regime. It cannot become an instrument of the state without being destroyed; socialist realist art comes to mind. Nor can it serve the public directly without losing its intrinsic focus (namely, the good of the work); various species of "uplifting" art come to mind, from public ad campaigns to religious kitsch. Political society owes to the fine arts respect, interest, attention, and engagement.<sup>30</sup>

### RESPECTING THE ARTS

To recognize art as a political good, we ought to practice the duties to the artist Maritain outlines above. This requires difficult prudential judgments. Nowhere is the difficulty of these judgments more apparent than in the case of public funding of the arts. Nevertheless, Maritain's observations on art and the *polis* provide a framework for outlining a contemporary Thomistic defense of public funding for the arts.

Recall that for Maritain the common good entails the fulfillment of positive duties to the artist, as indeed to laborers, teachers, workers of all kinds. Now the essence of political authority is to will the common good formally *and* materially.<sup>31</sup> Enter the role of government in the arts. I would argue that insofar as government has responsibility for the common good materially considered, it ensures at least a tolerable justice in the way of compensation for work. Political authority, in my view, should guarantee that "respect for the arts" has practical meaning, and what we value, we pay for.

The fate of the artist, poet, and composer ought not be left to the vagaries of the market or the beneficence of private philanthropy. Other vital aspects of the common good, such as the technical arts of civil engineering

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 85–88.

<sup>31</sup> See Yves R. Simon's *Philosophy of Democratic Government* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951) for a penetrating Thomistic analysis of political authority.



receive public compensation—we not only “respect” them, we fund them. Why should not the fine arts, which represent a related excellence of the practical intellect, receive similar recompense? One might object that the fine arts do, in fact, get funded both by government and private contributors. This is true, but the comparatively small sums of public support the arts currently receive are ever endangered by political squabbles and the technocratic designs of educational bureaucrats.<sup>32</sup> What is being established here is the principled case for public funding of the arts which, if compelling, would put the question of the amount and distribution of funding on the table as a serious question of equity.

The distinctly public nature of such funding, as distinguished from private donations, is central, for it attests to the proper end of politics: the cultivation of virtue. It is important that funding of the arts be done in the name of the whole. The arts are “ours.” *Our* city has a community band, a symphony orchestra, a museum of fine arts. In an important sense, insofar as these are supported by public funds, we own them, in much the same way that public parks (as opposed to private gardens) signal our communal life and the importance of natural beauty. While public money is typically not the only financial support for these, it is crucial. It protects against the corporate cannibalism of the civic sphere which has degraded public life in our cities. (Imagine if the Cleveland Symphony were owned by Art Modell—it might join the Browns in Baltimore!) Public sponsorship of the arts has another important advantage: it can indirectly limit state power. The arts, as Maritain tells us, reveal to us something of the transcendent: they remind us that we are spiritual, as well as material, beings. They remind us that there is more than the state, that the material realm of taxes and tariffs does not comprehend our existence. The arts, as dissident poets and composers in totalitarian states teach us, speak of the indomitable spirit that will forever resist imperial power. In less dramatic fashion, in a technocratic democracy the arts remind the powers that be that meaning cannot be reduced to utility, that value cannot always be quantified. Art can, in other words, reinforce the distinction between the good of civil life and the absolute human good—a fundamental distinction, as Maritain reminds us:

The common good of civil life is an ultimate end, but an ultimate end in a relative sense and in a certain order, not the absolute ultimate end.

<sup>32</sup> For a sobering account of the trend to privilege “computer education” over the fine arts—in some cases phasing out art and music requirements altogether—see “The Computer Delusion” by Todd Oppenheimer in the *Atlantic Monthly* (July 1997).

This common good is lost if it is closed within itself, for, of its very nature, it is intended to foster the higher ends of the human person. The human person's vocation to goods which transcend the political common good is embodied in the essence of the political common good. To ignore these truths is to sin simultaneously against both the human person and the political common good. Thus, even in the natural order, the common good of the body politic implies an intrinsic though indirect ordination to something which transcends it.<sup>33</sup>

For these reasons, there should be public support of the fine arts, from the national to the local level, whether through block grants, the NEA, or fine arts curricula in the public schools. Not only is this within the proper scope of political action, it is a positive duty entailed by the common good.

<sup>33</sup> Maritain, *Man and the State*, p. 149.