



Jacques Maritain's Ethics of Art

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Abstract

I examine Jacques Maritain's views on the relationship between art and ethics or what is today called the 'ethical criticism of art', and examine what Maritain's thought can contribute to debates in contemporary aesthetics and wider society. In part I of the article, I approach Maritain's attempted reconciliation of artistic freedom and the demands of morality in three steps, first recalling Maritain's definition of art, second looking at Maritain's analysis of the extra-artistic concerns of the artist, and third offering a critique of Maritain's views on why art is valued by the community and what justifiable moral claims of the community upon the artist might be—particularly regarding the method of production of artworks. Comparing Maritain's theories to those of contemporary writers in part II, I argue that Maritain's ethics of art can be used to complement Jacques Rancière's notions of the 'distribution of the sensible' and 'artistic regimes', and that, in the terminology of the ethical criticism of art, Maritain affirms a position which is a composite of 'moderate moralism' and 'ethicism'—a position which is both explanatorily powerful in ascertaining how and why we recognise and value art, and flexible in accommodating changing artistic forms and practices.

Keywords

Jacques Maritain, Ethical Criticism of Art, Jacques Rancière, Moralism, Ethicism

I

Art and Morality

The problem of the relationship between art and ethics is more pressing today than ever, when art, like ethics, is aware of its essence and the purposes of its activities or lack thereof—when art, like ethics, seems to be shapeless, fluid, prizing freedom and freedom of

innovation and novelty sometimes without regard to established societal principles and traditions. Perhaps the greatest transformations in our notion and practices of art are the attack on the notion that beauty is a necessary property of an artwork by artists such as Marcel Duchamp and philosophers and critics such as Arthur Danto,¹ the claim by Duchamp and others after him that any object whatsoever can be a piece of art if the artist merely says it is,² and the rise of 'conceptual art', with artists and critics such as LeWitt claiming that 'Ideas alone can be works of art'.³ As such, the present situation of art today is one in which many things which would not have been considered art in the past—including ugly, shocking, grotesque and sometimes pornographic artefacts and performances which seemingly require no manual skill or craftsmanship—are accepted and promoted as art.⁴

What is the relationship between art and morality? More particularly, are there moral parameters on what an artist can create, or is art amoral in its subject-matter and practices? Does the community in which the artist operates have any moral claims on the artist? And if morality—either in the form of personal obligations or interpersonal claims and obligations in and to the community—bears upon the activity of an artist, isn't the artist's freedom threatened, and isn't art's ability to innovate with new ideas, methods and forms at risk?

Maritain's first book on the philosophy and ethics of art, *Art et scholastique (Art and Scholasticism)* was published in 1920, and his final book on art, *The Responsibility of the Artist*, comprising lectures given at Princeton University in 1951, was published in 1960. We might consider some examples of what writers around that time said about our general problem so as to appreciate the diversity of views.

Flannery O'Connor, who was very much influenced by Maritain's philosophy of art said, when giving a lecture on fiction:

... art is writing something that is valuable in itself and that works in itself. The basis of art is truth, both in matter and in mode. The person

¹ Arthur Danto, *What Art Is* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 28.

² Marcel Duchamp, M. Interview with Martin Friedman, October 1965, via: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VYqDpNmnu8I>.

³ Sol LeWitt, 'Sentences on Conceptual Art', in A. Alberro and B. Stimson eds., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2000), p. 107.

⁴ For a detailed discussion of these issues with regard to the problem of defining art, see my article 'Jacques Maritain's Definition of Art', *New Blackfriars*, vol. 96, no. 1065 (2015), pp. 527–541. Moving from defining art to the ethical criticism of art, this paper, which was originally presented at a conference on Jacques Maritain at Quarr Abbey in September 2015 and subsequently revised for publication in *New Blackfriars*, builds upon conceptual content from the previous article and thus serves as a sequel insofar as the question of what art is has to do with normative or prescriptive principles as much as descriptive principles, which did not previously receive much explicit discussion.

who aims after art in his work aims after truth, in an imaginative sense, no more and no less.⁵

Albert Camus, in his Nobel Prize Banquet Speech, stated:

Whatever our personal weaknesses may be, the nobility of our craft will always be rooted in two commitments, difficult to maintain: the refusal to lie about what one knows and the resistance to oppression.⁶

Contrary to these views is that of André Gide, who, writing some years before *Art and Scholasticism*, implies in the preface to his novel *The Immoralist* that while a piece of art may consider a general or universal problem, the particularisation of the problem in an artwork—for example, a moral problem for a character in a novel—literally confines the problem in all respects to the artwork in which it is presented. Gide says: ‘To tell the truth, in art there are no problems—that are not sufficiently solved by the work of art itself.’⁷

D. H. Lawrence gives a rather different view in his essay ‘Why the Novel Matters’—claiming neither that the writer has moral obligations imposed upon him from without nor that he does not, that ethics is a branch of enquiry within and for the aesthetics of an artwork. Rather, Lawrence argues that only the writer has the most complete view of human life and morality, and that the novel is therefore the most apt way to learn how to appreciate all modes of life and be able to live wisely. Lawrence writes of his craft:

I am a man, and alive . . . for this reason I am a novelist. And being a novelist, I consider myself superior to the saint, the scientist, the philosopher, and the poet, who are all great masters of different bits of man alive, but never get the whole hog . . .

And concerning morality:

There is no absolute good, there is nothing absolutely right. All things flow and change, and even change is not absolute. The whole is a strange assembly of apparently incongruous parts, slipping past one another . . . In life, there is right and wrong, good and bad, all the time. But what is right in one case is wrong in another . . . And only in the novel are all things given full play, or at least, they may be given full play, when we realise that life itself, and not inert safety, is the reason for living.⁸

⁵ Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), p. 65.

⁶ Albert Camus, Banquet Speech, available via: http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1957/camus-speech.html.

⁷ André Gide, *The Immoralist*, trans. D. Bussy (1930 reprint), (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1966), p. 8.

⁸ David H. Lawrence, ‘Why the Novel Matters’ available via: http://individual.utoronto.ca/amlit/why_the_novel_matters.htm.

Given the situation of modern art and the variety of views on the relationship between art and morality, perhaps there is no surprise why Jean Cocteau—master of many arts and of a view contrary to D. H. Lawrence—sought Maritain's counsel concerning artists and the arts, writing to him that 'To sustain them is your role, my dear Jacques.'⁹

Art and Prudence

What does Maritain have to say about our problem, a problem which, as we have seen, was perhaps almost just as pressing in his day as it is for us today? We begin by noting that Maritain conceives 'poetry' not just as the art of writing verses, but classically and like Cocteau, as the 'intercommunication between the inner being of things and the inner being the human Self which is a kind of divination.'¹⁰ Poetry is therefore 'the secret life of each and all the arts'¹¹ and any artist is a poet in this general sense. Now, Maritain states our general problem in *The Responsibility of the Artist* thus:

What are, in the poet, the novelist, the man dedicated to any kind of creative art, the relations between the exigencies of poetry and intellectual creativity and those of moral standards, which have to do with the right use of human free will?¹²

Maritain provides an attempt at a general philosophical, conceptual reconciliation between art and morality. He first asserts in all relevant works that art and morality are two autonomous spheres, with no 'intrinsic' subordination between them: that is, that art itself is neither fundamentally moral nor immoral, and morality does not in itself consist of artistic or aesthetic qualities or aims.¹³ Maritain suggests his overall answer to the problem, that while neither is intrinsically subordinate to the other, there is extrinsic or indirect subordination, and this is intelligible only when we take the whole human subject and its unity into account.¹⁴

Allow us here to briefly recall the general philosophical framework of Maritain's thought on art. Rather than focusing on the ontology of the artwork (the properties of the artefact or performance itself) as

⁹ Jean Cocteau and Jacques Maritain, *Art and Faith: Letters Between Jacques Maritain and Jean Cocteau*, trans. J. Coleman (New York, N. Y.: The Philosophical Library, 1948), p. 61.

¹⁰ Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (New York, NY: New American Library, 1953), p. 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Jacques Maritain, *The Responsibility of the Artist* (1960 reprint), (New York, NY: Gordian Press, 1972), p. 15.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 23–29.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 33–41.

many twentieth century and contemporary philosophers do, Maritain aims to account for the capacity to be an artist. He defines 'art' in medieval and Thomistic terms, generally as a virtue of the practical intellect, a habit of the mind which deals with 'making' objects. Now, the particular art we are concerned with—the so-called 'fine arts'—Maritain calls 'free' art: art that is not made for any purpose other than itself.¹⁵ In this sense, art is concerned not with the person, but solely with the good of the work.

Maritain contrasts art with the other practical virtue of prudence—the principle of judgement which enables us to intuitively ascertain the good for oneself in a given situation in accordance with the prior ordering of our appetite and will. This good, however, is amoral. Prudence infallibly chooses the 'good' that the situation demands for us, but only within the parameters of goodness that we have already decided beforehand. The question then is, what is the moral good which is a prerequisite for prudence?

Moral good for Maritain is that which is in harmony with reason, because humans are classically defined as rational animals. Maritain claims that 'goodness' is a 'transcendental' (a property of being as being), and thus that the ultimate Good is God. When we act according to the good, we participate in and do God's will. Maritain insists that the only *telos* that offers human beings ultimate happiness is God, implying that God should therefore be consciously chosen as one's own ultimate end. Acting according to reason, for Maritain, is acting according to intuitively-known moral rules as to how humans should behave. These are the precepts of 'natural law', which have been bestowed upon us by God. Moral obligation arises when our reason constrains our appetites (or desires) and will and orders them to the precepts of natural law.¹⁶

Now, analogous to prudence, the virtue of art demands that we never act against our art and do what would make us bad artists. So how does Maritain aim to answer our original dilemma? Maritain observes that 'the artist is a man using Art',¹⁷ and as such, 'he is a man before being [for example] a painter'.¹⁸ Moreover, it is clear that while art (the activity of *making*; *factible*) does not encompass 'morality' (which is the realm of 'doing' or action; *agibile*),¹⁹ it is clear that the latter encompasses the former: the creation of anything is an action of human intelligence and will. As such, as the use of free will, art is subordinated to morality, not in its object internally but extrinsically. With Cocteau, Maritain aims to give art autonomy of

¹⁵ Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, p. 40.

¹⁶ Maritain, *The Responsibility of the Artist*, pp. 26–36.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁹ Cocteau and Maritain, *Art and Faith*, pp. 123–124.

subject matter, ends and procedures, but ultimately, as he says, 'There is no law against the law of which the destiny of man demands'.²⁰

Acknowledging that Maritain's ethics of art clearly rests upon a traditional Catholic Christian and Thomist understanding of human nature, life and ethics generally, let us consider Maritain's solution in more detail, first as it pertains to the individual artist himself and second, how it pertains to the relationship between the artist and the community in which he produces his art.

The Artist

One of the most interesting elements of Maritain's books *Art and Faith* and *The Responsibility of the Artist* is his concern with what the extra-artistic concerns of the artist should be, with Maritain having established that the artist is not exempt from moral considerations in producing his work, given art's material conditions.

Maritain insists that the artist, in being inspired by and wishing to pass on the messages of his beliefs and loves, cannot have in mind particular purposes such as payment or the political efficacy of his or her work but rather what we may say are internalised or subconscious modes of existing, such as religious faith, because the former will interfere with the object of art, which is the good of the work alone. Internalised modes of existing will provide one with ready objects and their associated emotions from which to draw and signify in the creation of an artwork, the virtue of art then operating *freely*—which in Maritain's philosophy of art is known as the artist's 'poetic knowledge'.²¹ Given that practical and particular purposes derive from one's material individuality, they risk the invasion of the ego with its hangups and ambition into the creative process.²²

It is precisely to the extent to which poetry is useless and *disengaged* that poetry is necessary, because it brings to men a vision of reality-beyond-reality, an experience of the secret meaning of things, an obscure insight into the universe of beauty...²³

²⁰ Maritain, *The Responsibility of the Artist*, p. 41.

²¹ Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, p. 534.

²² Maritain, *The Responsibility of the Artist*, pp. 51–55. See also: Cocteau and Maritain, *Art and Faith*, p. 86. It is also interesting to note Flannery O'Connor's fundamental agreement with Maritain's view. O'Connor writes: 'It eliminates any concern with the motivation of the writer except as this finds its place inside the work. It also eliminates any concern with the reader in his market sense. It also eliminates that tedious controversy that always rages between people who declare that they write to express themselves and those who declare that they write to fill their pocketbooks...' O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, p. 65.

²³ Maritain, *The Responsibility of the Artist*, p. 85.

However, the view that *all* particular purposes obstruct the virtue of art in creative intuition and the good of the work seems false. It seems that for some artists the artistic and the moral or political are two sides of the same coin. For example, the public and political mural art of Banksy—a ‘street artist’—is no less art and Banksy is no less an artist for the particular purposes and messages that his artworks aim to convey; the same goes for Naomi Shihab Nye, a world-renowned poet, whose poems are sometimes uncompromisingly political. And again, it seems that art movements predicated on political or philosophical beliefs and manifestos such as dada or futurism are no less genuinely artistic movements. Maritain is quite right, however, to draw attention to the dangers of the allure of prestige and a preoccupation with payment in creating an artwork; Cocteau, as with many writers, talks about the need for the artist to think of himself as a perpetual amateur so as to not get caught up in convention, careerism and mere crowd-pleasing.²⁴ I was also once told by a homeless artist in Paris that he did not consider his twenty-minute caricatures as art, and his talent and the potential of many great pieces were undeniably being wasted in the exigency of payment in the struggle to survive.

Maritain observes that an artwork is ‘always nourished by the experience of the man’.²⁵ Here Maritain makes the issue practically significant for artists themselves in arguing that the artist’s moral character influences his work for better or worse. This we can certainly see for example with Sartre, whose early work Murdoch labelled a ‘psychology of the lonely individual’.²⁶ In *The Responsibility of the Artist*, Maritain claims that artists’ awareness of the influence or indirect reflection of morality on art has led to the formation of a ‘merely artistic morality’, that being a pseudo-system in which the good of the work is made the artist’s ultimate moral good and in which normally good qualities such as sincerity, moral purity, and curiosity are perverted to a mere sincere acceptance of oneself as one is, without acknowledging the need for moral compromises or changes, a state in which the person is placed above good and evil, and a state of mind which presses the artist to risk experience of disaster or evil, if it might be a means of artistic inspiration.²⁷

In outlining such a pseudo-system, Maritain perhaps identifies the qualities of many of the avant-garde movements of the twentieth century—even if he does have Oscar Wilde and probably also André Gide in mind. He perhaps makes a key concession, however, in his

²⁴ Cocteau and Maritain, *Art and Faith*, pp. 23–24.

²⁵ Maritain, *The Responsibility of the Artist*, p. 93.

²⁶ Iris Murdoch, *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959), p. 71.

²⁷ Maritain, *The Responsibility of the Artist*, pp. 93–96.

later remark that it is impossible to know whether artworks would be artistically better if their creator had followed the 'moral law' rather than merely artistic morality;²⁸ but then again, it would not have been possible for much avant-garde art to have been conceived or produced if the artists had been strict Catholics or 'Maritainians', and much good and beautiful art would never be created if artists were *not* accepting of themselves.

So is there an answer to the conflict between (morally good) prudence and art on the practical level, as per circumstance? It seems to follow from Maritain's position that artistic creativity and innovation are at risk of being smothered by a rather all-absorbing morality. Here I believe Maritain can only offer what is natural to him: a positive notion of freedom through the theological virtue of Charity that allegedly makes us 'intrinsically' good and makes the 'moral law' our friend and emancipator.²⁹ In *The Responsibility of the Artist*, Maritain offers a theological solution to the dilemma between art and (morally correct) prudential judgement, quoting François Mauriac in the need to 'purify the source'—not the work, but oneself.³⁰ He offers the Christian spiritual gift of Wisdom as the means to a positive freedom for the artist in his artistic and ethical life, precisely because wisdom and art are two independent absolutes, and art, while imitating the moral and spiritual virtues and the discipline required to attain them, is of a different order altogether insofar as its activities and ends are concerned.³¹ After exploring the position of the novelist with respect to his or her moral and spiritual perfection, Maritain ends *The Responsibility of the Artist* with a reiteration of the notion of the positive freedom of the Christian faith internalised—shaping one's creative intuition and 'occupational stream' or vocation with regard to the 'perfection of human life' or the path to sainthood. Working through Charity directed to transcendent beauty, the artist can, as Maritain says, 'give himself totally twice at the same time, first to his God and second to something that is a reflection of his God'.³²

Now, we should not find it surprising that Maritain's theological solution is neither formulaic nor completely satisfying, particularly for the non-believer for, as Maritain says to Cocteau, as poetry cannot systematise itself to fulfil the purposes of philosophy, philosophy cannot absorb art—it cannot descend from its heaven of abstractions to the concrete situations and practical exigencies of art in its ever-changing forms and mediums.³³

²⁸ Ibid., p. 96.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 41–45.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 61, 67.

³¹ Ibid., pp. 62–64; Cocteau and Maritain, *Art and Faith*, pp. 116–118.

³² Maritain, *The Responsibility of the Artist*, pp. 108–114.

³³ Cocteau and Maritain, *Art and Faith*, pp. 116–118.

As Maritain says, for the Christian artist, to be both a Christian and a poet is a doubly hard task, for he or she is committed to the hardest of disciplines and poverty of spirit.³⁴ It seems to me that we should consider the relationship between Christian morality and the art of the Christian in terms analogous to one's dynamic relationship with God, with all its fluctuations in belief, commitment, and compromises. For Cocteau, a 'poet is nothing more than the labourer of the schizophrenic . . . we all have within us and of whom he alone is not ashamed.'³⁵ And Maritain puts it best when he says:

The poet is both a madman carried along by irrational inspiration and a craftsman exercising for his work the shrewdest operative reason. How could you expect from him that stable balance and constant attention to the rule of reason which perfection in moral life seems to require?³⁶

The Artist and the Community

Maritain's theological solution to the problem carries over into the relationship between the artist and the community from whom he acquires his intellectual material and to whom he addresses or presents his work. Maritain operates with the view that art aims at beauty, by definition. Beauty, like goodness, is a transcendental, and is omnipresent but also subject to 'proper proportionality';³⁷ while there are intuitively-known properties that an art work possesses if it is beautiful—such as 'integrity', 'proportion' or 'harmony' and 'clarity'³⁸ there are no fixed meanings of beauty with regard to artworks. For both Aquinas and Maritain, 'Each artwork is beautiful on its own terms, subject to varying tastes, education and [. . .] aesthetic appreciation of its audience. As an inexhaustible transcendental, beauty can be expressed in an infinite number of ways by artists.'³⁹

Now, Maritain makes the claim that whatever is beautiful is loved, and if an artwork cannot be loved, it cannot be seen as beautiful.⁴⁰ Maritain seems to be correct here. Art that is ugly or that is made to morally insult, shock or disgust cannot be loved in the same way as a traditional portrait, landscape, sculpture or even an abstract work which aims at imitation, representation, conceptual clarification, and

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 104–105.

³⁵ Jean Cocteau, quoted in Noël Simolo, *Jean Cocteau: Lies and Truth*, via: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KIZRT4Eud4I>.

³⁶ Maritain, *The Responsibility of the Artist*, p. 105.

³⁷ Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, p. 173.

³⁸ Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism* (trans. J. F. Scanlan), 4th impression (London: Sheed & Ward, 1934), pp. 24–25.

³⁹ Anthony Haynes, 'Jacques Maritain's Definition of Art', *New Blackfriars*, vol. 96, no. 1065 (2015), pp. 535–536.

⁴⁰ Maritain, *The Responsibility of the Artist*, pp. 59–60.

most importantly, enjoyment in and for itself, precisely because its intention is to shock or humiliate or disgust. Such art is neither created for the sake of the work itself nor enjoyed for its own sake by its audience, but made and consumed for practical, sometimes visceral purposes.⁴¹ Something is recognisable as an art work when it is created such that it is intelligible *as such*, that is, when it possesses aesthetic properties, recognisable emotional content—what Maritain calls ‘intentional emotion’—made freely for its own enjoyment and is thus ‘cleared of all adventitious elements’.⁴²

The context or method of production also seems to bespeak the truth of Maritain’s claim here: Joseph Beuy’s sculptures made out of fat or Stelarc’s *Ear on Arm* are difficult to love or find beautiful. Martin Creed’s conceptual work *blu tack* is hard to love because of its apparent effortless production, even if we can interpret the work and find it conceptually interesting. The clearest example concerning context and method in support of Maritain’s view concerning love and beauty (and supporting his overall theory concerning art and morality), however, is the Tate Gallery’s withdrawal of Graham Ovenden’s illustrations of unclothed young girls in 2013 when it was discovered Ovenden had sexually molested some of them.⁴³ With a spokesperson saying the criminal charges ‘shone a new light’ on the artworks, it was felt that the crimes undermined their aesthetic merits. In 2015, a court in England ordered the destruction of much of Ovenden’s work that featured young girls.⁴⁴ Here we glimpse Maritain’s sophisticated theory of both what art is and what it should or should not be.

Pertinent to such considerations today, Maritain considers the possible regulation of art both by the Church and by the state. Maritain asserts that state regulation and manipulation of art was the inevitable result of the excesses of an artistic culture and practice ignoring moral considerations and undermining cultural and political beliefs, likening the effect to a poison. Maritain takes the view that artworks that require their maker to commit sin in their production or that are of a libellous or obscene nature should at least be regulated intellectually through art criticism and curators’ choices.⁴⁵

At first, Maritain’s views here may strike one as absurd today, but if we interpret the word ‘sin’ in an atheological fashion, there is

⁴¹ Haynes, ‘Jacques Maritain’s Definition of Art’, pp. 536–538.

⁴² Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, p. 40.

⁴³ Charlotte Higgins, ‘Tate removes Graham Ovenden prints after indecency conviction’, *The Guardian* (3/4/13), available via: <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/apr/03/tate-removes-graham-ovenden-prints>.

⁴⁴ Emine Saner, ‘From Caravaggio to Graham Ovenden: do artists’ crimes taint their art?’, *The Guardian* (17/10/15), available via: <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/oct/17/from-caravaggio-to-graham-ovenden-do-artists-crimes-taint-their-art>.

⁴⁵ Maritain, *The Responsibility of the Artist*, pp. 72–84.

something to be said for them: is it not the case, to take Paul Virilio's general line of argument, that modern artistic practices, in breaking down all methodological, cultural and moral barriers, risk the moral and psychological integrity of society? With art's search for the novel, the lewd, the shocking and the disgusting, questions of the definition of art and the possibility of regulation of the 'art world' internally and are always being raised. Certainly art work such as Gunther von Hagens' exhibitions of preserved human corpses and Creed's Work No. 730, a close-up film of vaginal penetration, precisely at a time when the questions of what the limits of art with respect to the body in terms of transformation and mutilation are and whether pornography is art are being asked makes us consider Maritain's words with a new appreciation. Maritain's claim that artistic criticism serves the double function of judgement of the aesthetic values and the moral implications of an art work seems correct if we consider again the Tate Gallery's withdrawal or Ovenden's drawings and also the fact that some 'work' is indeed rejected as art, precisely because of a lack of artistic intention and an offensive mode of production, such as that of 'Cynthia Plaster Caster'.

Perhaps Maritain also provides some balance in his discussion of 'art for the community,' which is the notion that the demands of the community determine the rules and purposes of art, making social value the supreme aesthetic value, ignoring the autonomy of art intellectually and creatively. Maritain reiterates that unless beliefs are internalized as subconscious sources of creative intuition, they will determine the virtue of art against its nature as directed solely toward the good of the work. Work created under such conditions Maritain aptly calls 'propaganda art', and much Soviet 'art' is regarded as such.⁴⁶ Given utilitarian reasons for creation, in this manner we may indeed draw an analogy between particular political purposes and payment for an artwork. That said, Maritain considers existentialist art in the same way,⁴⁷ and here his thoughts seem uncharitable or at least lacking subtlety and development. Were not the existentialist beliefs (in all their dimensions) internalised by Sartre, de Beauvoir and Camus, as indicated by the range of their work in its content and media? But even if we deny this, Sartre's novel *Nausea*, for example, a book which, as Murdoch remarks, 'lives on many levels' and which serves as the 'master-image of Sartre's thinking',⁴⁸ seems to be as much a literary masterpiece as a philosophical masterpiece.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 73.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Murdoch, *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*, p. 4.

II

Purifying the Source: Art, Politics and Religion

We may identify two central themes of Maritain's ethics of art. The first is the Christian theme of the dependence of art on the artist's moral character and the need to align oneself with God to overcome what is otherwise an insoluble dilemma between the exigencies of art and morality for artists who are concerned about such, and the second theme is the interpersonal nature of art, with regard to the artist and God, between artists themselves, and between the artist and the community. I would like to bring out Maritain's Thomistic pre-occupations and bring the two themes together.

In Maritain's thought, derived from that of Aquinas and replicated more or less exactly in the modern Catholic Church's papal encyclicals and teaching, a clear hierarchy of God as 'ultimate absolute end' and the community's 'common good' exists (where the former stands higher than the latter). Figuratively speaking, the 'horizontal' line of societal progress must be informed by the 'vertical' line of moral and spiritual progress in each person's life with respect to his or her transcendent relationship with God.⁴⁹ Acknowledgement of both axes and lines of human development Maritain elsewhere calls 'integral humanism'.⁵⁰ Human society has to not only accommodate spiritual values, but to be guided by them, and what we see in Maritain's ethics of art is a cumulative case being made by Maritain that being an artist is a vocation, and that the thoughts expressed and methods used by the artist must have recourse to Christian morality for the moral and spiritual well-being of society. Thus both the artist and the community must 'purify the source', the latter being fully entitled to regulate art that opposes the 'perfection of human life', given, as Aristotle and Aquinas say, the common good is superior to the individual good and serves the individual good. I believe that in Maritain's thought it is evident that art is fundamentally political in the sense that there is what we may call a 'politics of ideas' operative in artistic creation and the presentation of artworks, and this brings us to how Maritain's views stand in relation to the ethical criticism of art today.

With respect to the religious and political themes that we find in Maritain's ethics of art—in particular the 'politics of ideas'

⁴⁹ Jacques Maritain, *Scholasticism and Politics*, trans. M. J. Adler (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1940), p. 10; Jacques Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, trans. J. J. Fitzgerald (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), p. 16, 21, 80, 85.

⁵⁰ Cf. Maritain's famous book by the same name and the essays 'Integral Humanism and the Crisis of Modern Times' and 'The Human Person and Society' in his other work, *Scholasticism and Politics*.

posited—certain parallels to the contemporary philosopher Jacques Rancière's notion of the 'distribution of the sensible' can be made. The distribution of the sensible refers to the systems of power which determine what is sayable, audible, visible and therefore also which artistic practices are permitted in a society.⁵¹ For Rancière, aesthetics and politics are necessarily interlinked, and he gives a historical analysis of this relationship, detailing the historical development of modes of the distribution of the sensible by what he calls 'artistic (or aesthetic) regimes'—different forms of organisation encompassing forms of visibility, ways of doing and making art, and ways of conceptualising such in a democratising movement that aims at freedom of thought and practice.

Rancière distinguishes three regimes. The 'ethical regime', exemplified by Plato, conceived art as merely mimetic, giving art and the artist the same social status as common labour and labourer and an ethical status of inferiority as compared to philosophy.⁵² The 'representative regime' conceived art as not merely as the activity of making resemblances of reality, but also as *poetically* representing it by means of and through categories exclusively *artistic*, such as genres, making art a 'visible' activity in society, and therefore autonomous from other activities in the community.⁵³ Finally, the aesthetic regime, in which the term 'aesthetic' does not refer to a theory of sensibility and taste, but rather refers to the mode of being in which artistic phenomena are recognisable as such; that is, 'the regime that strictly identifies art in the singular and frees it from any specific rule, from any hierarchy of the arts, subject matter, and genres.'⁵⁴ 'The aesthetic regime asserts the absolute singularity of art and, at the same time, destroys any pragmatic criterion for isolating this singularity.'⁵⁵ It is in the aesthetic regime that the revolutionary changes in the conceptions, methods and presentations of art and the relationship between art and morality occurred.⁵⁶

Now, in my analysis, if we take the Christian view that Christ is Lord of our mind as well as our hearts,⁵⁷ there is indeed a 'politics of ideas' that determines the conception of art, as well as its method of production and presentation and dissemination in Maritain's thought, which I have dubbed 'purifying the source'. With respect to the quotes by O'Connor and Camus concerning art and truth given at

⁵¹ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. G. Rockhill (2006 reprint) (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011), pp. 7–8.

⁵² *Ibid.* p. 16.

⁵³ *Ibid.* pp. 16–17.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 18–19.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 19–24.

⁵⁷ Cf. 2 Corinthians 10:5 and Matthew 5:27 in most translations of the New Testament.

the start of this article, we may justifiably posit that Maritain would be in full agreement with them, with the qualification that the truth to be served in creating art is *Christian* 'Truth'—truth being a transcendental and thus *ontologically* synonymous with God. This would mirror Maritain's view that philosophy is negatively governed by right Christian theology and that adherence to Christian Truth ought to be the first and foremost concern of the Christian philosopher.⁵⁸ 'Purifying the source', then, applies particularly for the Christian artist, and perhaps one could make use of Maritain's thought to develop Rancière's historical analysis of the distribution of the sensible—perhaps introducing another artistic regime that pertains to the *Christian* ethics of art, which unlike the others is ever-present for *Christian* artists—even in our presently secularised society—involving the extrinsic, negative regulation by morality on art and the positive notion of freedom with which the Christian artist works, as the condition of his or her faith.

The questions to be explored in conceiving such an artistic regime would be how art is conceived with respect to the artist's personal relationship to God, how the artist can or should represent the divine, the responsibility the artist has in adhering to Christian Truth, the function of art in relation to liturgy, prayer and worship, and how art functions for or affects the general life of the community of the Church. Such considerations are significant for every art form and artefact that has relevance for the Christian artist and the Christian community, including poetry, hymns, statues, stained glass art, the design of churches and clerical vestments and plays, commissions and exhibitions sponsored by churches or church organisations.⁵⁹ These considerations also touch upon and perhaps challenge Maritain's distinction of senses in the term 'Christian art', between 'ecclesiastical art'—created in accordance with specific religiously-sanctioned rules as if Christian art was a genre—and Christian art as art produced in accordance with the moral law and aiming at beauty as described

⁵⁸ Jacques Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne: An Old Layman Questions Himself about the Present Time*, trans. M. Cuddihy and E. Hughes (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1968), pp. 87–94.

⁵⁹ I have in mind, for example, such organisations as the Sheen Center for Thought and Culture in New York. The Center, which opened in 2014 and is named in honour of Catholic Archbishop Fulton Sheen, is funded by the Archdiocese of New York, and while it states that it aims 'to proclaim that life is worth living, especially when we seek to deepen, explore, challenge, and stimulate ourselves, Catholic and non-Catholic alike', the Center also states that it 'is a forum to highlight the true, the good, and the beautiful' and that it is 'Cognizant of our creation in the image and likeness of God'. The Center offers commissions and artistic residencies to Catholic artists and has caused controversy for disallowing the performance of Neil LaBute's short play 'Mohammad Gets a Boner', for reasons that are obvious. Cf. <http://sheencenter.org/about/> and <http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/sheen-center-church-new-mission-bowery-article-1.2357492>.

earlier, but not necessarily having religious purposes or objects.⁶⁰ Maritain argues elsewhere that religion alone can rescue art and artists from a crushing self-consciousness, false metaphysical assumptions about the nature of the world and the human person and pseudo systems of ethics, as well as—and most importantly—direct the artist to the spiritual, illuminating the direct relationship between poetry and God.⁶¹

However, it seems that if one is a Christian artist, regardless of the age in which one works, one will have religious beliefs which define one's existential state with respect to the worth and meaning or purpose of one's life, one's relationship to God and other human beings, and the rightness or wrongness of certain activities in virtue of their means, content or consequences—that is, efficacious notions of vice, virtue and sin. So if what art could or should be is determined by whether it explicitly or implicitly (through observance of the moral law and pursuit of the transcendentals) serves to worship or 'glorify' God as we have seen throughout our analysis of Maritain's ethics of art, then it seems that there is a Christian artistic regime. And this amounts to far more than an intuitive or connatural pursuit of the transcendentals in artistic creation or appreciation.

Maritain and the Ethical Criticism of Art Today

Maritain's definition of (free) art rests on two pillars: first, art as one manifestation of the practical virtue of art, which is the making of objects, and second, a traditional theory of beauty derived from Aristotle, Aquinas and Charles Batteaux. As argued elsewhere, analytical philosophers of art will welcome Maritain's alternative theory of art as a virtue of the creation of objects—despite the fact that he does not once refer to utterly transforming artists such as Duchamp—in that it goes beyond the debates between representative, expressive, formative, institutional and historical-reflexive theories. That art could be a practical virtue of making seems to account well for art's universality in history and among cultures, and particularly well for trends in modern art, such abstract or conceptual and formless (*informe*) or technical art, the former of which rejects most defining categories of art and the latter of which rejects the idea that an artwork has to be 'for' or 'about' anything, and asserts that an artwork can merely be a technical exercise.⁶²

Maritain's aesthetics of love and beauty provides significant insights into contemporary issues of art and ethics. From Maritain's

⁶⁰ Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, pp. 63–64; Cocteau and Maritain, *Art and Faith*, pp. 106–108.

⁶¹ Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, pp. 96–104, 119.

⁶² Haynes, 'Jacques Maritain's Definition of Art', pp. 530–533.

argument that elements of moral praiseworthiness of an artwork in itself or the artist in his intention contribute to the aesthetic quality of an artwork and his concession that moral flaws of an artwork or the artist in his intentions or method of production may be aesthetically necessary and even beneficial, one can identify in Maritain both what is known in the ethical criticism of art as 'moderate moralism' and 'ethicism'. Moderate moralism is the view that we can make moral judgements about artworks and that the moral properties of an artwork can also be aesthetic qualities, such that an artwork's moral defects can also serve as aesthetic defects, and the same goes for an artwork's moral merits.⁶³ Ethicism is the view that:

... the ethical assessment of attitudes manifested by works of art is a legitimate aspect of the aesthetic evaluation of those works, such that, if a work manifests ethically reprehensible attitudes, it is to that extent aesthetically defective, and if a work manifests ethically commendable attitudes, it is to that extent aesthetically meritorious.⁶⁴

Moderate moralism and ethicism are not identical positions given that ethicism, as defined by Gaut, does not feature the modal verb 'can', but rather features 'is', which as Gaut says, implies that 'manifesting ethically admirable attitudes *counts toward* the aesthetic merit of a work, and manifesting ethically reprehensible attitudes *counts against* its aesthetic merit.'⁶⁵ Ethicism is a stronger claim, operating at a deeper level of attitudes manifested in and engendered by artworks.

These positions are to be contrasted with other positions in the ethical criticism of art, such as 'autonomism(s)', which in general hold that moral and aesthetic values and categories are of a completely different order and that the aesthetic values of an art work can never be affected by its alleged moral properties or lack thereof. While 'moderate' autonomism claims that it is sometimes acceptable to make moral judgements about artworks without those judgements also being *aesthetic* judgements, 'radical' autonomism claims that it is always inappropriate to subject artworks to moral evaluation.⁶⁶ Maritain's moderate moralism and ethicism are also to be contrasted with 'radical moralism', the view that aesthetic values are reducible to moral values, including those relevant to moral education and social

⁶³ Noël Carroll, Noël Carroll, 'Art and Ethical Criticism: An Overview of Recent Directions of Research', *Ethics*, vol. 110, no. 2 (2000), pp. 374–375, 377–378.

⁶⁴ Berys Gaut, 'The Ethical Criticism of Art,' in J. Levinson (ed.), *Aesthetics and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 182.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Noël Carroll, 'Moderate Moralism', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 36, no. 3 (1996), pp. 231–232.

utility.⁶⁷ Maritain holds neither autonomism(s) nor radical moralism for the following reasons.

In the second chapter in *The Responsibility of the Artist*, he claims that the 19th century notion of *l'art pour l'art* (art for art's sake)—which may be taken as the motto for the radical autonomist view—is logically incoherent,⁶⁸ arguing, as we have seen, that the aesthetic content of art works is necessarily bound up with moral content in virtue of the artist's own personality, interests, life experiences, and the context of interpersonal relations in which he works—that is, material causality.⁶⁹ We have also seen that Maritain makes a strong case that art works, in their form, material, content and method of production, can have both positive and negative moral effects upon individuals and the community, but also a normative defining principle of art that amounts to the claim that disturbing, disgusting or offensive 'art' is not strictly speaking genuine art, or *free* art which is created for beauty's sake and is thereby borne of positive attitudes. This exhibits an ethicist line of argument concerning psychological attitudes, which is somewhat deeper than the moderate moralist position that is concerned with surface features, and which seems to me very closely linked with Maritain's notions of 'poetry' and 'creative intuition'.⁷⁰ Clearly, Maritain also does not hold a radical moralist position, because for him, art is *extrinsically* and *indirectly* subordinated to morality; there are no ethico-theological rules for what constitutes a beautiful art work and the rules or methods of art therefore can and do change.⁷¹ Again, art, for Maritain, is the creation of beautiful works valuable in and for themselves, which can by definition, serve neither utilitarian or political purposes. It is also of both biographical and philosophical significance that Maritain was friends with many modernist visual artists, including Cocteau, Picasso, and Rouault, and was considered as something of an artistic liberal in Catholic circles.

The combination in Maritain's thought of moralism and ethicist provides for flexibility in attributing moral properties to art works and examining the relationship between art and morality both generally and specifically as it pertains to particular artworks and to forms and problems that are intrinsic to them, such as the formal and stylistic problem of moral didacticism in writing fiction. Maritain's alternative and composite theories of the relationship between art and ethics parallels his composite definition of art as a virtue of the practical intellect consisting of making beautiful physical artefacts or

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 236.

⁶⁸ Maritain, *The Responsibility of the Artist*, p. 48, 65.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 47–65.

⁷⁰ Haynes, 'Jacques Maritain's Definition of Art', pp. 536–538.

⁷¹ Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, pp. 45–50.

performances, and such a view has considerable explanatory power and scope, as well as clarity as a set of normative principles ascertaining what can or should or should not be art, and moral properties artworks possess.⁷²

This area of contact with apparently differing views in the ethical criticism of art is certainly one that invites further investigation. Of particular interest here, and one which might challenge my interpretation of Maritain's views is Maritain's concession, related earlier, that it is impossible to know whether artworks would be artistically better if their creator had followed the 'moral law' rather than 'merely artistic morality' and the objection to moderate moralism that moral defects of an artwork can have aesthetic merit, or even make conceiving some artworks possible.⁷³

Conclusions

Where the remarks of poets such as Rilke on art, morality and religion have been of a necessarily obscure manner, and those of orthodox Christian writers such as C. S. Lewis, Tolkien and O'Connor have been of a popular manner, Maritain makes a systematic and philosophically-informed case that art is a vocation, necessarily bound up with the life of the spirit and with (Christian) morality. Maritain attempts a philosophical and theological solution of the apparent conflict between art and morality by a distinction between making and doing, such that, taking the human being as a whole, art is extrinsically and indirectly subordinated to morality—and through the pursuit of beauty, goodness and truth, intuitively and freely so. The extent to which this view is internally consistent regarding the distinction between 'Christian art' as Maritain conceives such (the pursuit of the transcendentals) and 'Christian art', as a rigidly defined artistic regime is debatable; however, as I have tried to indicate, Maritain's ethics of art offers important contributions to contemporary debates in the alternative and composite theories of moralism and ethicism in the ethical criticism of art, paralleling his composite definition of art as a virtue of the practical intellect consisting of making beautiful physical artefacts or performances. For these reasons, Maritain's ethics of art, like his philosophy or definition of art, is an area of study which most definitely invites further analysis and calls for a revitalisation of scholarship in Maritain's aesthetics generally.

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⁷² Haynes, 'Jacques Maritain's Definition of Art', pp. 531–535.

⁷³ Carroll, 'Art and Ethical Criticism: An Overview of Recent Directions of Research', pp. 379–381.