

# The Historical, Religious, and Political Significance of Art: A Cautionary Note

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## Abstract

A proper grasp of Thomas's understanding of the life of mind — in particular the interaction between intellect and will that means that, in the words of Reinhard Hütter, the intellectual gaze «is not just conceptual but volitional» — allows one to develop a Thomistic theory of artistic creativity that can deal meaningfully with developments in the history of the arts right down to our own times. In order to make this case this article outlines St. Thomas Aquinas's thought concerning the dynamic interaction of intellect and will, an interaction that imparts a hermeneutical character to his account of knowledge. This hermeneutical character informs art, which Thomas defines as «*the right reason of things to be made (recta ratio factibilium)*,» and our experience of aesthetic artefacts. Given the various factors that enter into the constitution of a contemporary worldview, which is all too often communicated in artworks, I argue that we must be discriminating with regard to the kind of art that we promote in society.

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Thomas defines art as «the *right reason of things to be made (recta ratio fabricilium)*»<sup>1</sup> in contradistinction to prudence which is «the *right reason of things to be done (recta ratio agibilium)*.»<sup>2</sup> He has in mind the kind of making that comes under the rubric of craftsmanship: building, sawing, and so on. The craftsman, by his art, «works upon materials furnished by nature, giving these, moreover, a merely accidental form, such as a new shape and so forth.»<sup>3</sup> This new configuration of matter is effected in virtue of its idea and likeness in the mind of the craftsman. Thus, for example, «a piece of furniture is in the mind of a cabinetmaker by means of its idea and likeness,»<sup>4</sup> which idea and likeness functions as exemplar or idea of the artefact.<sup>5</sup> Sometimes what is made imitates its archetype perfectly. In such a case, Thomas tells us, «the operative intellect when preconceiving the form of what was made, possesses as an idea the very form of the thing imitated precisely as the form of the thing imitated.»<sup>6</sup> At other times, however, the imitation falls short of the form imitated. In that case «the operative intellect would not take as its idea or archetype the form of the archetype itself, absolutely and exactly as it is, but it takes it with a definite proportion varying according to the degree of closeness with which the copy imitates the original.»<sup>7</sup>

In Thomas's understanding art has nothing to do with the tenor of the artist's willing. As he puts it, «art does not presuppose rectitude of the appetite. The consequence is that more praise is given to a craftsman who is at fault willingly, than to one who is unwillingly.»<sup>8</sup> This point still stands allowing for the fact that his construal of artistic creativity is very different from what we now understand by the fine arts. It is nevertheless possible to develop a theory of artistic creativity on the basis of the principles enunciated in his thought, as has in fact been done. Perhaps the most famous piece of speculation in this regard is Jacques Maritain's *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*. While at one time I would have argued that Maritain's notion of creative intuition, while highly speculative, is a legitimate development of Thomas's thought, more recent reflection has led me to depart from that point of view.

Maritain's speculations nevertheless do highlight the role of affectivity in the act of artistic production. In this regard I think that he is correct. An adequate grasp of Thomas's understanding of the life of mind — in particular the interaction between intellect and will that means that, in the words of Reinhard Hütter, the intellectual gaze «is not just conceptual but volitional»<sup>9</sup> — allows one to develop a Thomistic theory of artistic creativity that can deal meaningfully with developments in the history of the arts right

down to our own times. It can offer some kind of explanation for the cults of the ugly and of the banal that have come to dominate Western culture in general and art in particular. In order to make this case otherwise than the manner in which Maritain argues, it is necessary in the first instance to delineate briefly how Thomas construes the relationship between intellect and will in order to substantiate the claim that the intellectual gaze «is not just conceptual but volitional.»

## 1 THE INTERINVOLVEMENT BETWEEN INTELLECT AND WILL: ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

According to the demands of his anthropological hylomorphism, the cognitive and volitional activities of the soul are inseparable in their principle, even though they constitute distinct operations. For Thomas there can therefore be no such thing as pure reason or pure will in the sense of faculties that are independent of the influence of each other. While intellect and will are indeed distinct faculties, they nevertheless mutually inform each another. Thomas neither compartmentalizes these two faculties, thereby rendering each impervious to the influence of the other, nor does he confuse their operations. His construal of the relationship between intellect and will is more nuanced than that of later philosophers such as Kant and Nietzsche, representatives of these two extremes. In various works Thomas asserts a relationship of «interinvolvement» between intellect and will. Thus, he states: «[T]hese two powers, intellect and will, involve one another,»<sup>10</sup> where intellect refers both to the speculative and to the practical intellect.<sup>11</sup> This interinvolvement can be conceived in terms of circulation: both intellect and will furnish both the beginning and end of each other's activities. In other words, the intellect both moves and is moved by the will while the will both moves and is moved by the intellect. As Tibor Horvath, S.J., expresses the point: «There is a turning back on each other which, as in circular movement, the origin can become the end and the end can again become a new beginning.»<sup>12</sup>

On the basis of this interplay between intellect and will, the unfolding of love and knowledge cannot be divorced from each other. Indeed, their interaction imparts a unified sense of direction as intellect circles and overflows into will and as will circles and overflows into intellect. The logic of their interaction means that, on the one hand, true perception cultivates right willing and vice versa; the dynamic interinvolvement of their activities conduces to the attainment of the *bonum verum* and the *verum bonum*.

On the other hand, however, erroneous perception undermines the operation of the will while a distorted operation of the will renders the intellect's ability to discern the truth more difficult. In this case the dynamic reciprocity between the operations of intellect and will leads to a downward spiralling which entails the knowing and willing subject embracing what is in effect a deformation of the *bonum verum* and *verum bonum*. In Thomas's estimation, the spiritual activity of man is a synthesis of knowledge and love: love involves knowledge and knowledge involves love. If either the intellect or will functions in a defective manner, then the other will necessarily be distorted in its operation.

If the will's ultimate satisfaction can be alone found in God as the Final End of all its desiring then to seek to fulfil this desire with finite goods can only serve to impart a different quality and even direction to its activity. As Thomas tells us, the condition for uprightness of will in this world is that it be ordered to its final end, which end is related to intermediate purposes as form is to matter. «[N]one can obtain Happiness, without rectitude of the will.»<sup>13</sup> A similar point can be made concerning the activity of the intellect: failure to acknowledge, by way of causal inference, God as the First Truth on Whom created reality depends gives a different quality and even direction to the exercise of rationality. To seek to answer a desire for infinite fulfillment with finite goods constitutes a fundamental distortion of the operation of the will while to fail to acknowledge, on the basis of causal inference, the dependence of creation reality on a First Efficient Cause that is itself not caused by anything else, is an intellectual error of the greatest magnitude. If man no longer seeks God as his final end in response to the restless desire for happiness inscribed within his being by God – even though he may well not explicitly recognize God as the true object of his fulfillment – then his capacity to discern rationally what constitutes the good life will be adversely affected. The distorted directionality of his reasoning will, moreover, undermine his ability to appreciate the force of cogent proofs for the existence of God.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, in the absence of intellectual assent to the notion of God as first cause, rectitude of will intent on its true final end is rendered impossible for him. As a result all reasoning about the moral life, both practical and theoretical, is rendered problematic.<sup>15</sup>

The dynamic interplay between intellect and will allows us to talk in terms of a hermeneutical consciousness in the thought of St. Thomas, where hermeneutics is understood in the sense elaborated by Hans-Georg Gadamer, for this interplay colours one's interpretation of reality.<sup>16</sup> This interpretation «is enhanced or undermined according to the extent to which it is informed both by right understanding and reasoning, on the

one hand, and right willing, on the other hand.»<sup>17</sup> The hermeneutical consciousness that one can discern in Thomas's thought is, like Gadamer's, ontological rather than methodological. As David E. Linge explains in his introduction to Gadamer's *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ontological hermeneutics «seeks to throw light on the fundamental conditions that underlie the phenomenon of understanding in all its modes, scientific and unscientific alike, and that constitute understanding as an event over which the interpreting subject does not ultimately preside.»<sup>18</sup> Translating this idea into Thomistic terms means that hermeneutics in its ontological construal is concerned with those influences beyond one's knowing and willing that enter into and condition the acts of intellect and will and that therefore shape one's understanding of reality. The next section seeks to offer a very limited sampling of some of the influences that shape an understanding of reality in contemporary Western society.

## 2 THE INTELLECTUAL AND VOLITIONAL TENOR OF CONTEMPORARY WESTERN SOCIETY

The true object of the will, according to Thomas, is ultimate beatitude. The organization of the fabric of the whole of one's personal existence according to ultimate beatitude as the fundamental guiding principle thus furnishes an indispensable condition for optimal flourishing. It is possible however and, indeed, happens all too often that individuals construe the ultimate end of their existence in some other way and construct their lives around one or other finite good. Such finite goods include wealth, honours, fame and glory, power, bodily goods, pleasure, and even goods of the soul.<sup>19</sup> Whole societies are characterized by the kinds of goods that rule the lives of their citizens. Bearing in mind that the intellectual gaze is not simply conceptual but also volitional it ought to be evident that this gaze and the reasoning that starts out from it and resolves back into it is subject to the influence of the range of values represented by these finite goods. One can readily imagine a man whose life is devoted to the pursuit of wealth as his ultimate end. Other elements of his life will find their place relative to this 'fundamental' guiding principle. Even if he purports to believe in God, this belief will in fact not provide any significant direction to his life. His wife and children will also have to be content playing second violin — although they might be happy to do so since they construct their own lives in a similar way and are happy with the financial advantages the husband and father in question brings to them.

Brad S. Gregory, in his *The Unintended Reformation*, describes the tenor of a society, namely Western society, that has in effect established wealth — which cashes out (no pun intended) in terms of capitalism and consumerism — as its ultimate goal. Capitalism and consumerism have brought it about that «Practices once regarded as dangerous and immoral because detrimental to human flourishing and to the common good have in a dramatic reversal been redubbed the very means to human happiness and to the best sort of society.»<sup>20</sup> This fundamental shift with regard to the distant past «affects politics, morality, religion, education, marriage, families, and every other domain of human life.»<sup>21</sup> In the first chapter of his study Gregory details how the intellectual revolution effected by Scotus's univocal metaphysics proved to be «the first step toward the eventual domestication of God's transcendence,»<sup>22</sup> the result of which has been, among other things, the phenomena of atheism and scientism. Another consequence has proved to be the world's becoming «so much raw material awaiting the imprint of human desires.»<sup>23</sup> In this Promethean culture, remarks Chantal Delsol, modern man has failed to distinguish between what is permanent and what is merely circumstantial, a failure that has led to him eliminating «the structures of his own existence.»<sup>24</sup> In the process he has tried to rid himself of «political authority, of the oppositions between good and evil, of God, and of imperfection in general.»<sup>25</sup> Now he lives in a world that has generally lost a sense of meaning and of identity. Delsol writes strikingly: «It is as if someone has thrown him into a game without giving him the rules. When he asks around for instructions, he is invariably told that they have been lost.»<sup>26</sup>

These influences and a complex myriad of others lie beyond the knowing and willing of any individual but nevertheless enter to some degree or other into the specific acts of these faculties in the case of most people although there are doubtless exceptions to this general rule. Artists are no different from other mere mortals in this regard. To be rejected is the Romantic notion of the artist as a «prophet and visionary whose art evidences what David Tracy calls 'the instinct for the essential'.»<sup>27</sup> An artist's engagement with the material conditions of being — the *recta ratio factibilium* — means that the particular configurations that he brings about convey in some way the worldview that he espouses. I say «in some way» because, as Maritain elucidates, the intelligibility of a work of art «cannot be disengaged or separated from its sensory matrix, and thus does not yield a *theoretical* knowledge of the sort expressible in a concept.»<sup>28</sup> Or, as Aidan Nichols expresses the point: «The meaning embodied in the artwork is communicated, then, in a unique, *sui generis* manner.»<sup>29</sup> With specific reference to painting he con-

tinues: «It is found in the very organization of the sensuous and lies in the spatial schemata of the canvas.»<sup>30</sup> With regard to music one might say that the meaning lies in the temporal schemata of successive combinations of sounds — perhaps elucidated by and elucidating the texts that they set. By way of concrete illustration one might take Fauré's *Requiem*. I don't think that it is possible to contradict Carlo Caballero's observation concerning Fauré's arrangement of liturgical texts and the music: they «revealed a personal vision of the afterlife which stood apart from conventional Christian views of death and judgment.»<sup>31</sup> Louis Laloy describes Fauré's Paradise as «a Paradise without hell, where the soul, without being judged, is admitted by right of innocence or by right of beauty — it is hard to decide which — or rather it is because of a beauty so pure that it signifies innocence.»<sup>32</sup>

One might be exceedingly grateful that a work of such exquisite beauty evokes the idea of the transcendent and of life after death at all. One might venture, however, that Fauré not only distills and communicates a newly emerging theological vision in this regard but that his work at the same time promotes this kind of vision. *Mutatis mutandis* one can say more or less the same thing with respect to works of art shaped by artistic worldviews that are more atheistic in tenor.

### 3 CONCLUSION

A speculative development of Thomas's theory of artistic creation on the basis of an understanding of his portrayal of the relationship between intellect and will as one of dynamic interaction, leads to the conclusion that art has political, religious, and history-shaping implications. As Iain D. Thomson writes: «Great art works in the background of our historical worlds, in other words, by partially embodying and so selectively reinforcing an historical community's sense of *what is and what matters*.»<sup>33</sup> Thomson continues:

In this way, great artworks both (1) “first give to things their look,” that is, they help establish an historical community's sense of what things *are*, and they (2) give “to humanity their outlook on themselves,” that is, they also help shape an historical community's implicit sense of *what truly matters* in life (and so also what does not), which lives are most (or least) worth living, which actions are “noble” (or “base”), what in a community's traditions most deserves to be preserved (or forgotten), and so on. In this way, an artwork can first open the historical sense for what is and what matters that an ontotheology will subsequently disseminate.<sup>34</sup>

Thus art can facilitate historical transformations by communicating intelligibility in the particularity of sensuous form. As Heidegger puts it, «*art is the becoming and happening of truth*.»<sup>35</sup> Thomson explains this assertion

as meaning that «great artworks open up the implicit (or “background”) ontology and ethics through which an historical community comes to understand itself and its world.»<sup>36</sup> On this basis they promote the reconfiguring of cultural worlds.

The psychological basis for this phenomenon is implicitly contained in Thomas's famous definition of beautiful things as «those which please when seen (*pulchra enim dicuntur quae visa placent*).»<sup>37</sup> The seeing involved in the perception of beautiful objects is intellectual in character while pleasure is a function of human affectivity which encompasses the will along with the concupiscible and irascible appetites. The dynamics of interinvolvement between intellect and will already described are equally operative in the experience of beautiful things. Thus, the experience of any particular artefact involves an interinvolvement of the world of meaning embodied in sensuous matter and the world of meaning that contributes to and is partly constitutive of the aesthetic subject's apprehension of reality and, in this case, of the artefact. While this interinvolvement opens up a space that a multitude of varying interpretations can occupy, it also facilitates a reconfiguring of one's worldview, not least on account of the affective impact of artefact. Gadamer relates the force of this impact as the following words: «Great art shakes us because we are always unprepared and defenceless when exposed to the overpowering impact of a compelling work.»<sup>38</sup> The force of this impact is accentuated by the fact that «the essence of the symbolic lies precisely in the fact that it is not related to an ultimate meaning that could be recuperated in intellectual terms. The symbol preserves its meaning within itself.»<sup>39</sup>

If the argument that I have outlined in this paper is correct than my conclusion must be cautionary in character.

The message that an artist communicates is not necessarily one which enriches the inner life of the beholder or, indeed, which conduces to his flourishing as a human being. It can happen that art poisons the inner man, contributes to a distortion of his perception of reality and, in so doing, undermines the conditions of his flourishing.<sup>40</sup>

It follows that we must be discriminating with regard to the kind of art that we promote in society. If I might be allowed a conjecture: I wonder to what extent church architecture, the music employed at Mass, and the paintings and sculptures the populate church buildings have unwittingly served to undermine the faith of Catholics in the last number of decades. The extent to which the aestheticization of art so ardently criticized by Heidegger has taken a grip of us might well prevent many from seeing the point of this conjecture, much more from accepting it.



## NOTES

1. *STh* I-II, q. 57, a. 3.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Comm. De Anima* II, 1 [218].
4. *De Veritate* q. 3, a. 1, *sed contra* 7.
5. See *Ibid.*, q. 3, a. 1.
6. *De Veritate*, q. 3, a. 2.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *STh* I-II, q. 57, a. 4.
9. Reinhard Hütter, *The Directedness of Reasoning and the Metaphysics of Creation*, in Paul J. Griffiths and Reinhard Hütter, *Reason and the Reasons of Faith*, T & T Clark, New York and London 2005, p. 171.
10. *Disputed Questions on Virtue: Quaestio Disputata de Virtutibus In Communi and Quaestio Disputata de Virtutibus Cardinalibus*, trans. Ralph McInerney, St. Augustine's Press, South Bend, Indiana 1999, *Quaestiones disputatae de virtutibus* 7.
11. *Ibid.*: «But it should be noted that the intellect, both speculative and practical, can be perfected by a habit in two ways. In one way absolutely and as such, insofar as it precedes will as moving it; in another way as it follows will which elicits its act on command, because, as has been seen, these two powers, intellect and will, involve one another» («Sciendum est autem, quod intellectus tam speculativus quam practicus potest perfici dupliciter aliquo habitu. Uno modo absolute et secundum se, prout praecedat voluntatem, quasi eam movens; alio modo prout sequitur voluntatem, quasi ad imperium actum suum eliciens»).
12. Tibor Horvath, S.J., *Caritas est in Ratione: Die Lehre des hl. Thomas über die Einheit der intellektiven und affectiven Begnadung des Menschen*, Aschendorff, Münster 1966, p. 64: «Es gibt eine Zurückwendung zueinander, in der, wie in der Kreisbewegung, der Ursprung ein Endglied und das Endglied wieder neuer Anfang werden kann.» My trans.
13. *STh* I-II, q. 4, a. 4: «[N]ullus potest ad beatitudinem pervenire, nisi habeat rectitudinem voluntatis.»
14. An obvious objection to this line of argument is that there are many Christians, including philosophers, who reject the validity of all proofs for the existence of God. In response, attention must be called to the fact that the philosophical presuppositions that underlie this rejection can be traced back to a voluntarist construal of the relationship between intellect and will, on the one hand, and between God and the universe, on the other hand. Indeed, the objection serves to highlight the contention of this article: how one understands in practice the nature of the relationship between intellect and will and between God and the world has hermeneutical implications for the life of reason. For a treatment of the origins of modernity in medieval voluntarism and nominalism, see Michael Allen Gillespie, *Nihilism before Nietzsche*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 1995 and *The Theological Origins of Modernity*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 2009. Gillespie focuses the beginning of his narra-

- tives on Ockham rather than on Scotus. The point in question remains the same, however, namely, the rejection of the preceding medieval synthesis.
15. For Aquinas, the capacity to discern objects of choice as right or wrong, good or bad, on the basis of pleasurable or agreeable reaction of the will presupposes the uprightness of the will itself. See Kevin E. O'Reilly, *Efficient and Final Causality and the Human Desire for Happiness in the Summa Theologiae of Thomas Aquinas*, «The Modern Schoolman», 82 (2004), pp. 45-50.
  16. On this point, see Kevin E. O'Reilly, *Transcending Gadamer: Towards a Participatory Hermeneutics*, «The Review of Metaphysics», 65 (2012), pp. 841-860.
  17. Kevin E. O'Reilly, OP, *The Hermeneutics of Knowing and Willing in the Thought of St. Thomas Aquinas* Peeters, Leuven 2013, p. 9.
  18. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. David E. Linge, University of California Press, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 2008, p. xi.
  19. See *STh* I-II, q. 2.
  20. Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts 2012, p. 242. Gregory shows how «especially from the mid-seventeenth century, Christians willingly permitted their self-colonization by capitalism and consumption whether as an adjunct or a providentially conceived national imperialism, or simply as preferable to the apparent alternative of further religio-political conflicts» (ibid., p. 243). See ibid., pp. 243-297.
  21. Ibid.
  22. Ibid., 37-38. For this account, see pp. 36-73.
  23. Ibid., p. 57.
  24. Chantal Delsol, *Icarus Fallen: The Search for Meaning in an Uncertain World*, trans. Robin Dick ISI Books, Wilmington, Delaware 2003, p. xxiii.
  25. Ibid.
  26. Ibid.
  27. Anne M. Murphy, *Sounds Sacred: Immanence and Transcendence in Music*, in Anne M. Murphy and Eoin G. Cassidy, *Neglected Wells: Spirituality and the Arts*, Four Courts Press, Dublin 1997, p. 75. The quotation is from David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*, SCM-Canterbury Press, London 1981, p. 110.
  28. Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, London, 1947. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, ed. Robert Bernasconi, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1986, p. 37, for a similar statement of this point: «Art is only encountered in a form that resists pure conceptualization.»
  29. Aidan Nichols, OP, *The Art of God Incarnate, Theology and Image in Christian Tradition*, Darton, Longman and Todd London, 1980, p. 93.
  30. Ibid.
  31. Carlo Caballero, *Fauré and French Musical Aesthetics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001, p. 189.

32. Louis Laloy, «Gabriel Fauré», *Musiclovers Calendar* 2 (Dec. 1906), p. 78. Quoted in Caballero, *Fauré and French Musical Aesthetics*, p. 188. Caballero has amended the translation slightly.
  33. Iain D. Thomson, *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2011, p. 43.
  34. Ibid.
  35. Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. A. Hofstadter, Harper & Row, New York 1971, p. 71.
  36. Thomson, *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*, pp. 43-4.
  37. *STh* I, q. 5, a. 4, ad 1.
  38. Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, p. 37.
  39. Ibid.
  40. Kevin E. O'Reilly, *Aesthetic Perception: A Thomistic Perspective*, Four Courts Press, Dublin 2007, p. 96.
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