

Jacques Maritain on the Morality of Art and Artists

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Abstract

This article offers a solution to the debate whether art is within the sphere and bound of morality. One extreme position argues that art is amoral and cannot be judged morally; the other extreme says that art is within the complete control of morality, religion or the state. Jacques Maritain acknowledges that art and morality are two autonomous worlds. There is no direct and intrinsic subordination between them. But while it is true that art and morality are distinct and separate, Maritain says they are extrinsically and indirectly related to each other. We may not have the right and reason to judge the morality of an art, we can certainly judge however the actions of the artist. In this article I argue that there is another way of looking at this issue. I agree with Maritain that the first responsibility of the artist is toward creating an excellent work of art. Here the artist has complete autonomy. But her/his first responsibility changes if and when she/he decides to exhibit her/his artwork. Exhibiting one's artwork is no longer art. It is a human act. Therefore, it is now governed by the virtue of prudence. This is even more important when the artworks to be exhibited are malicious, irreverent and blasphemous to some religious and cultural sensibilities. We may not be able to judge morally an artwork, we can judge the morality of the decision on the part of the artist to exhibit offensive film, song, cartoon or any work of art for that matter.

Keywords: Jacques Maritain, Morality of Artists, Morality of Arts, Aesthetics, Art Sensibilities

Introduction

In January 7, 2015 at around 11:30am in Paris, France Said Kouachi and Cherif Kouachi, they were brothers, shot several people, killing eleven persons inside the building where the offices of Charlie Hebdo newspaper were located. One French National Police officer outside the building was also killed. All in all they killed twelve persons and wounded eleven. The reason for the killing was due to the several cartoons published in several issues of the newspaper that were considered irreverent, even blasphemous, against the Prophet Muhammad. Muslims generally forbid any depiction of Prophet Muhammad. Almost half of those killed were artists or cartoonists: Stephane Charbonnier, Jean Cabut, Philippe Honore, Bernard Verlhac and George Wolinski. Almost immediately there was a huge expression of condemnation against their killers and unity and support to the victims. The slogan that captured the feelings of millions was: “Je suis Charlie” or “I am Charlie.” Many thought that the attack perpetrated by the two Islamist terrorists against the newspaper staff was an attack against art itself and the freedom of artists. Expectedly enough, many artists came to the defense of art and artists. More concretely on February 14, 2015 a public event was organized in Copenhagen, Denmark to honor those who were killed. The theme of the event was: “Art, Blasphemy and the Freedom of Expression.”

The issue about the relationship between art and the freedom of artists, religion and morality is not actually foreign to us. Closer to home, a similar, though thankfully not as violent, controversy raged in 2011. On June 17, 2011 Mideo Cruz exhibited his work “Poleteismo” at the Main Gallery of the Cultural Center of the Philippines. Part of his exhibits included pictures of Jesus Christ and the Blessed Virgin Mary alongside condoms and crucifixes and rosaries placed next to wooden phalluses. Because of the many protests against the exhibit, and in spite some expressions of support from artists, it was finally shut down. Imelda Marcos herself, the former First Lady of the Philippines and who was

instrumental in the construction of the Cultural Center of the Philippines, personally requested the CPP board to stop Cruz's exhibit.

In both cases, however, those who supported the staff of Charlie Hebdo and the Filipino artist Mideo Cruz argued that arts and artists are and should be free to do their craft. Art is a free activity and should be seen within the sphere of the freedom of expression. Therefore arts and artists should be exempt from religious and moral purview. Arts should be judged only by using artistic criteria. Any other criteria would be an infringement of artistic autonomy. But is it really the case that art is and should be exempt from moral scrutiny?

In this paper I will use the philosophy of art of Jacques Maritain to address the question we have just raised above, and hopefully I will be able to offer some solutions. Jacques Maritain was born in Paris, France in 1882 and died in Toulouse, France in 1973. He was very interested in art. Maritain's wife, Raissa Oumançoff, was a poet and mystic. Also some of his friends and acquaintances were well-known artists like Marc Chagall and Georges Rouault, both were French painters, and the author Georges Bernanos, the famous author of the novel "Diary of a Country Priest" published in 1936. The following are some of his books related to art: *Art and Scholasticism* (1920), *Art and Faith: Letters Between Jacques Maritain and Jean Cocteau*, *Art and Poetry* (1935), *The Situation of Poetry* (1938), *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (1953), and *The Responsibility of the Artist* (1960). So is art exempt from moral judgment? We find Maritain's concept of art and the relationship between art, artist and morality very enlightening and we hope to answer adequately the question at hand using his explanations.

Jacques Maritain: Art, Artists and Morality

One of the philosophical interests of Jacques Maritain is art and the nature of beauty. Maritain did not actually offer any theory of aesthetics. He focused more on the question of what art is. Following Thomas

Aquinas¹, Maritain described art as “a virtue of the practical intellect that aims at making.”² As a virtue artisans and artists alike are said to be doing art. This means that to do art is not something spontaneous and automatic. No one is born an artist. For Maritain art has to do with the practical intellect and has an intellectual character. However since it has to do with the practical intellect doing art is not speculative. It is not theoretical. The difference between the speculative intellect and the practical intellect is that as regards the former, the intellect knows for the sake of knowing; whereas as regards the latter the intellect knows for the sake of doing. The speculative intellect is only interested to know and enjoy and rest in the truth or object known. But art, Maritain explains: “belongs to the practical order. It is turned towards action.”³ Therefore it necessarily involves nurture, trial and error and a lot of experimentation and practice. Maritain explains that with the speculative intellect the object known is being *already* in existence, while with the practical intellect the object to be known is still in the process of coming-into-being.

This means that for Maritain an artist is a person who makes beautiful things. What distinguishes an artist from a non-artist is that she/he makes and fabricates with beauty as the end of her activity. Obviously when artisans fabricate, like when they make tools and even weapons, they manufacture them for useful purposes. However these tools are made beautifully. Aside from being useful the tools are also beautiful. Maritain agrees with Thomas Aquinas that beauty is not only sensory. It is also intellectual. Beauty is not only that which pleases the eyes but also the intellect. For Maritain art has a relation to the world. Artists can use their art as a response to the world.

Maritain distinguishes Action or ‘agibile’ in Latin (in other translations they use ‘Doing’; we personally prefer ‘Acting’) and Making or ‘factibile’ in Latin. According to Maritain, action is no other than the

¹ Thomas Aquinas defined art as: “Recta ratio factibilium” or “the right reason of things done” *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 57, a.3, c.

² Maritain, J: *Art and Scholasticism*, Chapter I (Quotations are all taken from: Jacques Maritain, “Art and Scholasticism” <http://ww3.nd.edu/Departments/Maritain?etext/art.htm>. The translation was made by Joseph W. Evans).

³ Maritain, J: *Art and Scholasticism*, Chapter II

free use of our faculties. And one can do a good or bad action depending on whether the exercise of her/his free will or her/his action is in line with his or her ultimate end: God. Since it is the virtue of prudence that dictates what is the right act to do in a given time, place and circumstance, it is prudence that governs any action. Action is therefore a moral act. Broadly speaking, an act that is prudent is moral, while an act that is imprudent is immoral.

On the other hand Making is related to the object that one makes or fabricates. It has nothing to do with the exercise of one's free will or with freedom. If prudence is the one that governs Action, the measure or standard that governs Making is the object to be made itself. "Art . . . has an end, rules, values, which are not those of man, but those of the work to be produced."⁴ For Maritain, art is within the confines of Making, not Action in the immanent sense. Making is a productive action. Maritain insists, however, that art as Making is not essentially the same as manual skill. It is still an intellectual activity, being a virtue of the practical intellect. "It follows . . . that manual skill is no part of art; it is but material and extrinsic condition of it. The labor through which the zither player acquires nimbleness of finger does not increase his art as such nor does it engender any special art; it simply removes a physical impediment to the exercise of the art: art stands entirely on the side of the mind."⁵ Therefore strictly speaking, art is not mere activity. Maritain explains that the virtue of a craftsperson is not her/his dexterity in producing her/his craft or in her/his muscles. These are extrinsic to art. Art is a virtue of the intellect.

By saying that art belongs to the sphere of Making, not Action or Doing, the implication is that art is not governed by prudence; art is outside the bounds of morality. The good of the work is the only rule that governs and measures whether a work of art is beautiful or not. "The fact remains that the pure artist abstractly taken as such, is something entirely amoral. . . . Art perfects the intellect without presupposing the rectitude

⁴ Maritain, J: *Art and Scholasticism*, Chapter III

⁵ Maritain, J: *Art and Scholasticism*, Chapter IV.

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of the will in its own line as human appetite, for the ends at which it aims are outside the sphere of the human good.”⁶ True enough, there are well-known artists whose personal lives may be generally and traditionally considered immoral or at least not morally exemplary: Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890), Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), Salvador Dali (1904-1989).

There are therefore two different yardsticks that measure a good person and a good art. The former is measured by the virtue of prudence. And the latter is measured by the object or by the work of art itself. This makes it possible that a bad or an immoral person can be a good artist. Maritain explains: “The fact is that by nature Art and Morality are two autonomous worlds, with no direct and intrinsic subordination between them.”⁷ He adds that art acts like a god. It only concerns itself of its own glory. “As concerns its own objects, everything comes under the purview of Art, and of Art alone.”⁸ The same idea is expressed by Oscar Wilde who said: “The fact of a man being a poisoner is nothing against his prose.” Not to be outdone concerning the autonomy of art the French poet Charles Baudelaire exclaimed: “I don’t give a damn for the human race.”

So how can we resolve the problem when art and morality, art and religion collide? Maritain acknowledges the difficulty. If art has nothing to do with morality and morality has nothing to do with art, both being autonomous, the former governed by practical intellect of Making, the latter by prudence, Maritain admits he has no solution. The issue at hand is even more pressing when the artist encounters the problem within herself/himself: “Will I as an artist change my art just because I find my artwork morally questionable and wrong?” Maritain insists that “the first responsibility of the artist is toward his work.”⁹ And art “works for the good of the work made, *ad bonum operis*, and all that turns it from this

⁶ Maritain, J: *Art and Scholasticism*, Chapter IV.

⁷ Maritain, J: *The Responsibility of the Artist*, Chapter I (Quotations are all taken from Jacques Maritain, “*The Responsibility of the Artist*” <https://maritain.nd.edu/jmc/etext/resartI.htm>).

⁸ Maritain, J: *Art and Scholasticism*, Chapter IX “Art and Morality”.

⁹ Maritain, J: *The Responsibility of the Artist*, Chapter I

end perverts it and diminishes it.”¹⁰ In spite the criticisms and threats, Mideo Cruz could have continued the exhibit, and the cartoonists at Charlie Hebdo did in fact continue depicting the Prophet Muhammad. The solution of the impasse will have to be found not in reconciling the irreconcilable but in some other way. Maritain dramatizes the tension:

“Thus, what we are confronted with is the inevitable tension, sometimes the inevitable conflict, between two autonomous worlds, each sovereign in its own sphere. Morality has nothing to say when it comes to the good work (of art) or to Beauty. Art has nothing to say when it comes to the good of human life.”¹¹

William Butler Yeats has a similar concern in his poem “The Choice”:

“The Intellect of man is forced to choose
Perfection of the life, or of the work,
And if it take the second must refuse
A heavenly mansion, raging in the dark.
When all that story’s finished, what’s the new?
In luck or out the toil has left its mark:
That old perplexity an empty purse
Or the day’s vanity, the night’s remorse.

While Maritain acknowledges that art and morality are independent of each other, he also recognizes that prudence is superior to art. The following are statements that point to a possible solution to the problem of making art, artist and morality meet. “But if art is not human in the end that it pursues, it is human, essentially human, in its mode of operating. It’s a work of man that has to be made; it must have on it the mark of man: animal rationale.”¹² “Consequently, since the artist is a man before being an artist, it is easy to see the conflicts which will set at loggerheads within

¹⁰ Maritain, J: *Art and Scholasticism*, Chapter IV

¹¹ Maritain, J: *The Responsibility of the Art*, Chapter I

¹² Maritain, J: *Art and Scholasticism*, Chapter III

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him Art and Prudence, his virtue as Maker and his virtue as man.”¹³ The prudent person “can, no doubt, and he must, judge the work of art insofar as it concerns morality: he has no right to judge it as a work of art. . . Prudence is superior to Art in relation to man.”¹⁴

Therefore while it is true that Art and Morality are autonomous, they meet and are within the unity of the person as subject. Art and morality meet in the artist herself/himself. This leads Maritain to claim that while morality has no direct and intrinsic control over Art, there is subordination of art by morality, but extrinsic and indirect. This subordination between them must be understood correctly. Otherwise it can lead to two extremes: the denial of moral responsibility on the part of Art and the complete control of Art on the part of morality, religion or the state. We find the following statement of Maritain significant: “(T)he painter is not the art of painting, nor is he merely a painter. He is also a man, and he is a man before being a painter.”¹⁵ This means that the virtue of prudence must also govern her/his acts, not as painter, but as person. “And because an artist is a man before an artist, the autonomous world of morality is simply superior to the autonomous world of art . . . In other words Art is indirectly and extrinsically subordinate to morality.”¹⁶ Therefore the artist has also a moral responsibility to the community. Although Maritain is emphatic that Art is not directly and intrinsically subordinate to morality, the artist as person is under the direct governance of morality. “(I)f the artist loves truth and loves his fellow man, 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.”¹⁷

Maritain disagrees with the principle “Art for Art’s Sake”. He says that this principle disregards morality and the values and rights of human life. “Art is a virtue of the practical intellect, and the intellect itself does not stand alone, but is a power of man . . . When Art operates, it is man, a

¹³ Maritain, J: *Art and Scholasticism*, Chapter IV

¹⁴ Maritain, J: *Art and Scholasticism*, Chapter IX

¹⁵ Maritain, J: *The Responsibility of the Artist*, Chapter I

¹⁶ Maritain, J: *The Responsibility of the Artist*, Chapter I

¹⁷ Maritain, J: *The Responsibility of the Artist*, Chapter II

particular man, who operates through his Art.”¹⁸ Therefore while Maritain maintains that Art and Morality are autonomous, and artists can face seemingly irreconcilable choices – if she/he does not change her/his artwork, she/he will violate the moral law, and be wrong; but if she/he also changes her/his work, she/he will betray her/his conscience as an artist, Maritain’s only solution to this problem is definitely *not* for the artist to change her/his work. The solution is for the artist to change herself/himself. And after having changed herself/himself, her/his artistic conscience will be the one to inspire her/him to make a different artwork.

That is Maritain’s solution. I would like to offer another. I certainly agree with Maritain that the first responsibility of the artist is toward her/his work. The first responsibility of the artist is to create an excellent work of art. Insofar as she/he makes her/his works of art, her/his artistic autonomy is and must be absolutely respected and guaranteed. But art has a social dimension. While the artist has artistic freedom, the exhibition of her/his works for others to see makes the difference. I am of the opinion that when an artist intends to display publicly her/his work, her/his responsibility changes. The first responsibility of an artist is no longer toward her/his work but toward the community. This is even more necessary when the artist’s artworks are deemed offensive, blasphemous or irreverent to some people. This means that when an artwork can excite violence prudence dictates it must not be shown. I may not be able to judge the morality of an artwork, I can, however, judge the morality of the decision to exhibit or not to exhibit offensive films, songs and cartoons.

Conclusion

This paper tries to offer a solution to the problem whether art is within the sphere and bound of morality. The killing of cartoonists, among others, in Paris, France by Islamic terrorists on account of their irreverent and blasphemous depictions of the Prophet Muhammad has reawakened

¹⁸ Maritain, J: *The Responsibility of the Artist*, Chapter II

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passionate debate whether art is within the purview of morality or not. The poles of opinion could not have been more apart. One extreme position argues that art is amoral and cannot be judged morally; the other extreme says that art is within the complete control of morality, religion or the state.

We have used the philosophy of art of Jacques Maritain to analyse the nature of art and the nature of morality. Maritain says that art is connected to the practical intellect. Therefore it has to do with the production of things. It is not connected with the exercise of one's free will. Since art is connected to doing and not acting, it is not governed by the virtue of prudence. It is autonomous. The only rules and values that art cares about are those of the work to be produced, a work that must be done excellently. The end of art is not a good act but a good art or artwork.

Maritain acknowledges that art and morality are two autonomous worlds. There is no direct and intrinsic subordination between them. The first responsibility of the artist is toward her/his work or to create an excellent artwork. But while it is true that art and morality are distinct and separate, Maritain says they are extrinsically and indirectly related to each other. What art and morality have in common is the artist herself/himself. We may not have the right and reason to judge the morality of an art, we can certainly judge however the actions of the artist. This is what Maritain means by 'indirect' and 'extrinsic' connection between art and morality. Morality is not intrinsically and directly related to art but is extrinsically and indirectly connected to it by way of the artist who does the art. The solution that Maritain offers is not that the artist change her/his work. If by not changing her/his work, she/he will offend the moral law, what she or he can do is to change herself/himself. The change of her/his work will just follow as a consequence.

I, however, have another solution. I agree with Maritain that the first responsibility of the artist is toward creating an excellent work of art. Here the artist has complete autonomy. But her/his first responsibility changes if and when she/he decides to exhibit her/his artwork. Exhibiting one's artwork is no longer art. It is a human act. Therefore it is now governed by the virtue of prudence. It is now within the purview of morality. The

artist has now a responsibility toward the community. This is even more important when the artworks to be exhibited are malicious, irreverent and blasphemous to some religious and cultural sensibilities. We may not be able to judge morally an artwork, we can judge the morality of the decision on the part of the artist to exhibit offensive film, song, cartoon or any work of art for that matter.

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