

Art and the Desire for God: A Thomistic Perspective in Aesthetics

Roger Pouivet

Abstract

“Aesthetics” is mainly devoted to the description of an assumed aesthetic experience. My intention is to try to show that this modern account, defining a large part of Aesthetics as a discipline, does not allow a correct description of our aesthetic life. Criticism of this modern and contemporary conception will be followed by the defence of a completely different thesis according to which we are made to apprehend in natural things and works of art those properties by which they signify, and in particular their aesthetic properties. Apprehension and appreciation of works of art presuppose the ability to respond to the aesthetic properties of things and works of art. We need to exercise virtues, intellectual and moral ones, to answer appropriately to aesthetic properties of works of art and natural things. Good in general, and good in our aesthetic life and in art, can be understood according to what Aquinas calls “the gradation to be found in things”. I will try to show that it is a reason to think that a successful aesthetic life is a form of desire for God as the source of all perfection.

Keywords

Art, God, Virtues, Aquinas, Aesthetics, Aesthetic Experience, Rational Animals, Perfection, Fourth Way, Aesthetic Life

I

We read novels and poetry; we visit museums and exhibitions, cities and important monuments; we listen to music. Why? Is it a case of what has been called “aesthetic pleasure”? Obviously, we like to do all these things, even if, for philosophers it is not easy to determine the exact nature of the pleasure we are supposed to experience. But it remains to be seen *why* we like, for example, to listen to music or read a novel. After all, why silence is not far more preferable, or to jog, for example?

Psychologists or sociologists give numerous and divergent answers on this topic. I will not comment on them. The answer I want to sketch is quite different. To simply state it for the moment, I will defend the idea that the existence of art is strongly related to the desire that human beings have for God. But many philosophers would ask why, when it comes to the notion of art, and our aesthetic attitude, the notion of God and of this supposed human desire for God could be relevant. Then, I will begin by giving the reasons why the thesis I am defending is clearly not dominant in contemporary philosophy, and totally absent from the common conceptions in the human and social sciences.

II

In what has been called “Aesthetics”¹, as a discipline, art is fundamentally linked to a certain kind of experience and pleasure, specifically aesthetic. Art and natural things give rise to this specific experience and pleasure. Numerous philosophers have thus judged that philosophy must question the nature of aesthetic experience and of aesthetic pleasure. Consequently, “Aesthetics” is mainly devoted to the description of this assumed experience. It pretends to show how this experience arises and why it is pleasurable. What has been called “Aesthetics”, since the eighteenth century, is mainly such a philosophical program.²

This project is linked to what has been the turning point taken by modern philosophy: the idea that we have access only to our own representations of things in our experience. So, we have no direct access and even we never access, according to many modern philosophers, to things themselves. Hence, it would be only in terms of our own and even private experience that we apprehend the nature, sense and value of things. And it is not the nature, sense, and value that things really have that we objectively apprehend. Certainly, in a cognitive experience, our representation of things is directed towards reality or the “reality”; even if the idea that one could reach it would be, for most modern philosophers, an illusion. In the case of the aesthetic experience, so it is claimed, we do not even try to reach a reality. The aesthetic experience is directed towards our *representations* of things and not at all towards things in the world.

Thus, the aesthetic experience is the effect produced on us, not by an external reality, situated in the world, but by mental representations. In aesthetic experience we are supposed to experience our

¹ In this paper, I present the outline of my book *L'Art et le désir de Dieu*, Rennes: Presses Universitaires de, 2017.

² There is a quite important exception: Hegel's *Aesthetics*.

own interiority, as it has been said by some of the most renowned philosophers, especially phenomenologists. But it already was Kant's claim in the first paragraph of the *Critique of Judgment*: in the aesthetic experience, he says, "the subject feels itself as affected by the representation". And since Kant, for most modern philosophers, aesthetic life is then not related to the world, but consists mainly in a relation of the mind to itself. Consequently, Aesthetics is a philosophical discipline in charge of examining mainly two things: firstly, a specific relation: the one of the mind to itself, when the things of the world count less than the effect felt on our own representations; and secondly the alleged specific pleasure we feel when we have an aesthetic experience.

III

The philosophical doctrine just sketched, the one inherited from Kant, is today implied in much of the art discourse well beyond philosophy. In the aesthetic experience, we would learn nothing about the world, and not more about certain aesthetic properties that things would possess and that would make them pleasant. These aesthetic properties, just like the objects in the world of our aesthetic experience, are themselves only aspects of our representations. They are not real. Nothing is *really* beautiful, it is only us who see something as beautiful due to our own experience, and this experience is not supposed to be *faithful* to anything. When we attribute to things properties such as being beautiful, moving, elegant, ugly or disgusting, we cannot be faithful to anything except our own mental representations. Right or wrong would even not make sense in aesthetic situations. There would be finally no relation between, on one hand, the fact that certain things in the world are works of art or the fact that certain things in the world possess aesthetic properties, and, on the other hand, our aesthetic life.

This conception also has an ontological and metaphysical counterpart, that is to say, as regards the existence and the nature of works of art. According to most of modern aestheticians, we could not say that works of art exist in the world, that certain things are *really* works of art. A thing would be art only by the way we look at it. This claim is typical of the aesthetics and philosophy of art today. It is even considered as one of the great discoveries of modern times in philosophy. We could simply note that we engage in a certain kind of experience, aesthetic experience, and feel a certain kind of pleasure, aesthetic pleasure; and we could note also that we call certain things "works of art", even if we disagree about the definition of this notion and what it means to something to be a work of art. But we could not affirm that works of art are real things in this world, with properties we could apprehend rightly or not.

IV

My intention now is to try to show that this modern account, defining a large part of Aesthetics as a discipline is not the best description of our aesthetic life. It is not more the best way to understand what art is. I rather propose to renew some insights borrowed from Thomas Aquinas.

In this Thomistic tradition, human beings are defined as rational animals. Part of what it means is that, from what exists naturally, the human being is able to add things to the world, artifacts. Artifacts man products are of two sorts: tools and symbols. For example, a hammer is a tool. A map is a symbol. A hammer I used primarily in a certain activity, in order to achieve a result, such as planting a nail. A map fulfills its function by meaning something, which is the function of a symbol. Works of art also function or mean, but in a specific way, aesthetically. This aesthetic functioning supposes the possession of aesthetic properties. Thus, a work of art can be defined as an artifact, a product of human rationality, which works aesthetically, according to its aesthetic properties.³ A work of art thus belongs to the ontological intersection of two sets, that of things that are artifacts, and that of things that have aesthetics properties. What works of art are among all the things in this world, what sort of things they are, is not really mysterious.

Now, a work of art is an entity that really exists but always in constitutive relation to human being capable of understanding, by apprehending aesthetic properties, what a work of art means.⁴ “Constitutive” means that works of art, as artifacts, depend, for their existence, on rational beings as we are. They depend causally of course. But they also depend ontologically on human beings. To exist depending ontologically on something else, is not, at all, not to exist, or to exist less. To exist this way is even the mode of existence of artifacts, and among them of works of art. For those who think that everything in the world depend on the Creator of all things, that a dependent existence is a real existence, it is of course not a problem, even if the relation of dependence in both cases is not of course the same.

The apprehension of aesthetic properties of works of art presupposes more precisely the existence of the kind of beings we are: both sensible and rational. These beings are sensitive, because it is through their senses that they maintain a relationship with the world and especially with the works of art in this world. It means that these beings are material and corporeal, like non-rational animals, but quite

³ See Roger Pouivet, *Qu'est-ce qu'une oeuvre d'art?*, Paris: Vrin, 2007; *L'Ontologie de l'oeuvre d'art*, 2e ed., Paris: Vrin, 2010.

⁴ See Roger Pouivet, *Le Réalisme esthétique*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2006.

differently, because they are able to apprehend meanings, to understand symbols, and among them those symbols whose functioning is aesthetic. So, the sufficient reason for which there is art in our world and for which we have an aesthetic life is that there are beings such as we are: rational animals. This is said this way by Thomas Aquinas: “the senses are given to man, not only for the purpose of procuring the necessaries of life, for which they are bestowed on other animals, but also for the purpose of knowledge. Hence, whereas the other animals take delight in the objects of the senses only as ordered to food and sex, man alone takes pleasure in the beauty of sensible objects for its own sake⁵”.

V

There is thus a correspondence between what we are, as human beings, and what the works of art by themselves are. In both cases, these are material things in the world, and in both cases what they are is not exhausted by their materiality. On the one hand, human beings are rational, that is, they understand what things are and what they mean. On the other hand, works of art are not reducible to material things because they mean something and have aesthetic properties. In the created world, at the same ontological level, we therefore have natural beings, human beings, and artifacts that they produce. This ontological level is that mixed or hybrid zone in the scale of beings where beings are both corporal and spiritual.

We are now far from the sort of thesis with which I began, namely, that what matters in aesthetics is the experience of some sort that we are supposed to have by turning to our mental representations without consideration to the way things are in the world—this account that I have presented as characteristic of a large part of modern philosophy. On the contrary, the following statements are made: one, aesthetic properties are really possessed by the things to which they are rightly attributed; two, works of art are artifacts which function aesthetically; and three, we are made, thanks to our rationality which is the mark of our spirituality, to apprehend in natural things and works of art those properties by which they signify, and in particular their aesthetic properties, which are meaningful.

VI

Now, perhaps you regret that, in this account, the notion of aesthetic experience completely disappeared. Was it not necessary to

⁵ *Summa Theologiae*, I. 91. 3. ad. 3.

characterize what our aesthetic life is? Can we really do without it, contrary to what modern philosophers thought?

My answer is positive. I think to have much better than this notion of aesthetics experience to describe our aesthetic life: it is that of *aesthetic virtue*. What is meant here by “virtue” is a human dispositional quality by which we excel and thus realize, as much as possible, our nature. When it comes to the virtues, one obviously think of the cardinal virtues, prudence, courage, temperance and justice, which allow us to excel in moral action. But here, the virtues are not so much a matter of action, but rather of apprehension and even of contemplation. Aesthetic properties are response-dependent: they are powers of producing responses in perceivers. This apprehension and contemplation—but also appreciation—presuppose the ability to respond to the aesthetic properties of things and works of art. The virtues of which I speak are precisely dispositions to answer appropriately to aesthetic properties of works of art and natural things. These virtuous responses, because appropriate, constitute a fundamental aspect of a person’s flourishing. And then, aesthetic virtues are themselves dispositions to *adequately* respond to aesthetic properties. It is not enough to have senses to apprehend aesthetic properties. There must be certain intellectual and likely moral dispositions, and they must function at their best, making us, in passing, better humans.

What then are the virtues at work in the apprehension of aesthetic properties? I see no reason to add to the traditional types of virtues—the theological, moral and intellectual virtues. The aesthetic virtues, through which we identify works of art and respond appropriately, through which we are sensitive to the aesthetic properties of natural things, these virtues are nothing else than the intellectual virtues and moral virtues (and even I guess the theological virtues). But when the apprehension of aesthetic properties is at stake, I propose to call them “aesthetic”. What makes them aesthetic is intellectual sensitivity to aesthetic properties. So I have not to elaborate a specific list of aesthetic virtues. The aesthetic virtues are the same as those by which we excel intellectually and morally, and even theologically—those which ensure our flourishing as human beings.

To flourish is for a being to realize its own nature. That the apprehension of aesthetic properties consists in a virtuous response signifies that this apprehension is part of the realization of our nature. As they are understood here, virtues are traits of character, well entrenched in their possessors, to notice, expect, value, feel, desire, choose, act, react, in certain characteristic ways. To possess a virtue is to be a certain sort of person. Virtues are excellent dispositions by which we realize at best what we are. Aesthetic virtues are also means for us to have a good aesthetics life, and then to be a good person.

This signifies that the theory of virtues is directly linked to a metaphysical anthropology, which tells what kind of beings are human beings, and to general metaphysics, which tells what kinds of things exist in the world and what their natures are. This anthropological and metaphysical character of the proposed account can be explained this way. When we understand that an image is sad or is funny, we apprehend non-material properties; what we understand is this image's meaning. To be able to catch this meaning, we must possess certain skills or competencies, some of which are cultural and historical. In most cases, without these skills, it is in particular impossible for us to grasp what a work of art means. And it is the same with respect to the aesthetic properties of natural things. However, emphasizing these skills and competences, we answer the question of *how* the apprehension of aesthetic properties is possible. We do not say *why* we apprehend these properties. To answer this question of finality, the question why, one must invoke the aesthetic virtues. The apprehension of the aesthetic properties of the things around us is one of the ways in which our human nature is realized in the exercise of virtues. But if we have virtues, it is because we are the kinds of beings we are. This is the reason why aesthetics and philosophy of art presuppose a metaphysical anthropology, basically, I think, that of Aquinas.

VII

Now, this metaphysical perspective about art leads us also to abandon another dogma of modern aesthetics and even of modern thought: the dogma that our aesthetic life and the art would possess an intrinsic value. It is a romantic thesis that has spread and been broadly adopted. It leads to a kind of cult of art and to the idea that nothing would be preferable to aesthetic enjoyment. I do not think that it is true for the following reason. If the apprehension of aesthetic properties supposes the exercise of virtues, our aesthetic life can also encourage, and often consists in the development of aesthetic vices. As virtues respond to properties, vices are also human responses to certain properties of things and persons, and as well to aesthetic properties of works of art. It entails that our aesthetic life and even works of art are not *intrinsically good*. Our aesthetic life and works of art are good or bad according to the responses, virtuous or vicious, which they solicit from us.

This means, to be completely clear, that art can be quite bad—it does not mean without aesthetic properties, but *intellectually and morally bad*. It can corrupt us, so far from realizing our nature at its best. Following Tolstoy⁶, I even think, contrary to this cult of art and

⁶ Leo Tolstoy, *What is Art ?*, New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1904.

aesthetic sensibility so widespread in our time, that art *very often* is quite bad, and *always* has to be handled with some caution. Art can sadly be the occasion for human sensible and intellectual responses in which we degrade ourselves. It is even possible, and very common, that the same work may be the subject of vicious or virtuous answers. The aesthetic disgust of a work that deserves this reaction is virtuous and the appreciation of a work that does not deserve this reaction is vicious. It means also that artistic and aesthetic evaluation of works is in solidarity with a perfectionist moral anthropology. Works of art can play a role in the full realization of our rationality as an essential part of our human mode of being, but in this regard, works have an ambivalent value. It also means that an important part of a good aesthetic life is to understand what a work means and to evaluate whether it deserves the aesthetic attention it demands from us. That it is always the case that it deserves is not obvious.

It is also that virtues are modalities of our appetite or desire. This means that the solicitation by works of art—and also by natural things—of the virtues which I call “aesthetic”, is above all an improvement of what we are as beings of desire. When we respond to aesthetic properties, it is because they attract us. This attraction, in the better cases, perfects us by the virtues that they require. But it supposes from our part an effort of understanding and so, of rationality. It supposes more precisely an effort of discernment. And, I repeat, this aesthetic attraction can also be for the worst.

I will now add something quite important about what happens when our aesthetic life is for the best, leaving aside the cases, which are numerous, when it is not so successful as that.

VIII

Good in general, and good in our aesthetic life and in art, can be understood according to what Aquinas calls “the gradation to be found in things”. This notion of gradation appears in one well-known passage of the *Summa Theologiae*, when Aquinas presents five proofs of the existence of God. This passage has been called the “Fourth Way.” I just recall you the text:

Among beings there are some more and some less good, true, noble and the like. But “more” and “less” are predicated of different things, according as they resemble in their different ways something which is the maximum, as a thing is said to be hotter according as it more nearly resembles that which is hottest; so that there is something which is truest, something best, something noblest and, consequently, something which is uttermost being; for those things that are greatest in truth are greatest in being, as it is written in *Metaphysics*, Book II. Now the maximum in any genus is the cause of all in that genus; as fire, which is the maximum heat, is the cause of all hot things. Therefore there

must also be something which is to all beings the cause of their being, goodness, and every other perfection; and this we call God.⁷

The predicates cited by Aquinas, good, true and noble, do not include aesthetic properties, not even beauty. However, is it not possible to consider that any positive property, characterizing a significant non-material reality in this world, enters into the scheme proposed by Aquinas? This would probably be the case for the features of the beautiful given by St. Thomas: radiance, proportion or harmony, integrity or perfection.⁸ They are perfections in the things which possess them, and we are capable of apprehending, that is to say, of having answers appropriate to such perfections. We could thus say about the aesthetic properties, those cited by Aquinas, but others as well, that they are realized at their maximum of perfection in what is the cause of their being.

Aesthetic properties are, like the good, the true, and the noble, predicated to a certain degree. Through natural beauty and aesthetic properties of works of art, what is thus solicited is a certain desire—in the words of Aquinas in the passage of the *Summa Theologiae* already quoted, it is a desire for “something which is to all beings the cause of their being, goodness, and every other perfection”. Thus our rational appetite aesthetically solicited, our appetite for the aesthetic values of natural things and works of art, is a form of ascension towards the divine. Let us say, it is a *desire for God*.

IX

My argument is thus the following:

- (1) We apprehend real perfections in things—and aesthetic qualities are such perfections.
- (2) Such an apprehension supposes our own perfection—and this perfection consists in the exercise of our virtues, which are excellences of our nature.
- (3) We are then better, by being attracted by what is best: aesthetic, intentional or spiritual properties.
- (4) The higher degree of this perfection, by which we are attracted, and whose attraction enhances us, is the cause of all perfection, God.

⁷ *Summa Theologiae*, I. 2. 3.

⁸ See *Summa Theologiae*, I. 39. 8.c.

- (5) A successful aesthetic life is a form of desire for God as the source of all goodness.

It is in this sense that aesthetic life can be thought as the mark of the divine. This double perfection in things and in us thus indicates the highest perfection, and, as Aquinas says, a fullness of reality or being. Works of art and our aesthetic life are linked to the divine—at least, I insist, in the best of cases. Our virtues order our sensitive and intellectual appetites to perfections in things. Perfection is ordered to that which is the cause of all perfection, the *perfect being* itself. That is why and how our aesthetic life is a form of desire for God.

For that reason also, works of art have more reality or being than many natural things, because of the role they can play—even if not always nor often—in our own perfecting as human beings. And works of art can make us manifest what is in us the best: our rationality, as image in us of the divine. If works of art and aesthetic perfections are more valuable and exist than many other properties in the world, especially material properties, then there is a being whose worth is supreme, and the aesthetic perfections in Him are realized at their highest. In God, however, this perfection is not realized as a property. God does not *possess* Beauty; God is Beauty. So, by Beauty, we cannot understand here a sensible quality, but what is the most intelligible, and identical then to the Good and the True. Consequently, if art and aesthetic life are ways to perfect of our human nature, then this activity of apprehending aesthetic properties of things is closely related to our desire for God—I mean, God as the source of all perfection, and of all values and perfections in things, including aesthetic ones.

To say it even more directly and simply: our ability to locate aesthetic properties in the world, the production of works of art functioning aesthetically, is understood here as a desire for the divine within us. By inscribing meaning into material things, aesthetic life is a *contemplative life*—and this is what makes it divine, at least as much as it is possible for beings such as ourselves, during our terrestrial life.

X

I will now try to summarize the main ideas of my paper. What interests me is the answer to the question “Why?” regarding art and aesthetic life. What is their sufficient condition?

The notion of virtuous aesthetic life advantageously replaces that of aesthetic experience. The latter suggest a form of subjectivism and idealism—including the idea that aesthetic experience is something hidden in us—which seems to me to be an obstacle to a good

understanding of what happens really in aesthetic life. It is an ability to correctly, and it means rationally, grasp the aesthetics properties of things and to discern their meanings. It is a question of mental acts, not of mental states. And in the best case, living an aesthetic life means having both a better human life that requires virtues and initiates a relation with God as the source of all perfections, the ones aesthetic virtuous permit us to discern.

Some philosophers today are also tempted to say that aesthetics and artistic behaviors are universal and foundational to human nature, like I do. But they think it has nothing to do with our relationship with God. For them, these behaviors would be the products of evolution or at least the by-products of evolution. This is a way to answer the question “why?” which consists in making a genealogy of art—and for contemporary thinkers, genealogy often consists of an evolutionary conception. It is also a “naturalist” conception, in the sense that it tries to explain aesthetics without appealing to anything that is supernatural and it considers that the data of explanation are found in the natural sciences, especially in the theory of evolution. The whole question is then whether this naturalism is correct. Even if I will not explain why here, but I have the kind of reasons given by C.S. Lewis⁹, for example, the account I proposed shows evidently that I think that naturalism is a blind alley of we want to explain what art is and why we have an aesthetic life.

Another way to answer the question “why?” about art and aesthetic life is to make them social practices. It is another way to defend the idea, we already met, that art does not really exist, because it is only *we*, during our aesthetic experience, who see things as works of art. Often it is added that aesthetic experience is purely subjective, that it corresponds to no reality in the world. Then, we cannot answer this question why there is art, at least we cannot give a *sufficient* reason for either art or our rational appetite for aesthetic properties. This account is a fundamentally idealistic one: art and aesthetic are ultimately ideas projected on things, and they only belong to the mental world. They do not help knowing anything about how the world is and why it is as it is.

If “Why?” asks here for a *sufficient* condition, and not simply to a dubious genealogy or to the idea that “art” is a concept corresponding exclusively to social practices, we are lead to accept two metaphysical ideas, which unfortunately disappeared from recent philosophy, but which surfaced in the conception I propose. First, the idea that all that exists enters a *scale of beings*, even a hierarchy of beings. There exists between all things a relation of convenience and harmony, an

⁹ Especially, in the chap. 3 of *Miracles* (London & Glasgow: Collins/Fontana, 1947. Revised 1960.)

oriented order. Secondly, the idea of finality: it is the idea of an essential relation between all things of this world, as opposed to a world made up of distinct entities having only external relations, as described by physical sciences. The question is then: Why, in this hierarchy of all things, is man himself a producer or creator of artifacts and works of art? And the question is also: Why man is able to give a symbolic and aesthetic meaning to material things like natural things and artifacts?

The answer we must give of to the questions why there is art and why we have an aesthetic life art is not different from the answer to the question why there is a world and what is the purpose of everything in creation. This means that the philosophy of art and aesthetics are parts of *metaphysical anthropology*. It questions the nature of man. It is part also of general metaphysics, which questions the nature of what exists fundamentally. If we accept the metaphysical idea that there exists a chain between all things, there is also a link between art, aesthetic properties and God as the ultimate reason for all things.

Why do rational animals, such as we are, are able to understand that a sunset is grand or a picture is sad? My answer is that by understanding that they are, human beings manifest a rational sensitivity to the meaning of the things that surround them. Beyond what natural things and artifacts are, rational beings understand what they mean, not just literally (as it happens when we read a map), but metaphorically (as when we think that a sunset is grand or a picture is sad). Rational sensibility to the meanings of things, in particular their aesthetic meanings, amounts to apprehending a kind of non-material reality. This non-material aesthetic reality is of a higher perfection than material reality: the aesthetic properties of things are thus testimonies of a higher perfection, and even of the highest divine perfection. This is why our apprehension of these properties, when appropriate, is also a form of desire for God. And, as far as art is concerned, this is its sufficient and ultimate reason.

I started from the fact that we read novels and poetry; we visit museums and exhibitions, cities and important monuments; we listen to music, and asking why. My answer is because of what we are, rational animals; and it seems to me quite reasonable to add, because of the divine destination of our life.

Roger Pouivet
Université de Lorraine
Institut Universitaire de France

roger.pouivet@univ-lorraine.fr