

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: The Aesthetic in Moral Imagination

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Maritain holds that methodological purposes determine the formal distinctions made and the vocabulary used in the analysis of different modes of knowing. For instance, the Augustinian concern with the person's concrete modes of activity divides the soul's higher faculties into three: *understanding, memory, and will*, while the Thomistic speculative and ontological analysis has a bipartite division of *intellect and will*.¹ He also maintains that we can distinguish a moral science midway between moral philosophy and prudence, a *practically practical science*. This science is not to be confused with prudence but is more closely tied to contingent circumstances than moral philosophy. It is the work of the practitioners of moral science—the moralist or moral counselor, and the psychologist insofar as the work is directed to the development and implementation of moral pedagogy.² There need be no conflict in different modes of analysis so long as the truth of the various distinctions made and relations identified are grounded in the complex unity of the object analyzed. In this paper no new distinctions are introduced, rather it is suggested that the division of imagination into the moral and aesthetic need not be strictly held for purposes of a practically practical science.

The fusion of the moral and the aesthetic is common in art, literature, and conversion experiences. A recent example that suits my purpose is taken from Bernard Nathanson's *The Hand of God*. There is nothing especially distinctive about what he relates, but rather its poignancy stems from

¹ Jacques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. Gerald B. Phelan, in *The Collected Works of Jacques Maritain* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), vol. 7, p. 35.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 333–35.

the complex and incommunicable nature of concrete moral judgments. Formerly a leading proponent and practitioner of abortion, this autobiography provides an account of his twenty-five year journey from “that *revolting* extravaganza playing itself out on the bodies of pregnant women and their slaughtered babies,”³ to his acceptance of the value of unborn life. In that moving passage, Nathanson expresses his dismay at his former uncritical acceptance of the “shoddy” practices of “shabby” practitioners and wonders why these scenes of the “grotesque” did not lead to his recognition of their evil. He reflects on Aquinas’s teaching that Being is apprehended as Oneness, Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. “The apprehension of each aspect helps us uncover the others so that we can apprehend, for instance, the Truth by its Goodness, or the Good by its Beauty. Why could we not triangulate from the *shoddy* to the shameful?”⁴

A first response to his question is the perennially troubling Augustinian one: you could not apprehend the evil and the ugliness because there was nothing to apprehend; evil is the absence of Goodness, and ugliness the absence of Beauty. This is in keeping with a metaphysical account of the problem, but Nathanson’s question is more psychological. It is, as Nathanson recognizes, a matter of *seeing*. A move in his medical career, perhaps through the hand of God, afforded him the opportunity to see through a new *lens* of technology. “Ultrasound opened up a new world. For the first time, we could *really see* the human fetus, measure it, observe it, watch it, and indeed bond with it and love it. I began to do that.”⁵ But these fuzzy, two dimensional electronic images are unlike the very real, solid, three dimensional fetuses that he studied in anatomy and handled in the abortions that he performed. It could not have been that he was previously unaware of what he now saw on the ultrasound screen. Why did he now see?

In groping for some explanation of his prior blindness, he recalls an example of skewed vision from the history of medicine. Vigevano, a fifteenth-century anatomist, who published the first illustrated anatomical text, “persisted in drawing things he could not possibly have seen.” He drew the liver as having five lobes when it should have been obvious to him that it had only four. “Vigevano did this because he viewed the human body—open as it was to his objective and disinterested search—through the *lens* of Galen,”⁶ and ignored what was presented through the lenses of his own

³ Bernard Nathanson, *The Hand of God* (Chicago: H. Regnery, 1996), p. 106 (italics added).

⁴ *Ibid.* (italics added).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 125 (italics added).

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 145–46 (italics added).

eyes. It is as if both he and Galen had been mesmerized. There is some factor in concrete judgment that distorts seeing.

The emphasis on seeing is the central matter here. Thomism acknowledges that the senses are the foundation of all knowledge. But knowledge is not something, it is someone, *someone-who-knows*; there is no science without the scientist. Knowledge is, as Newman says, a “personal possession” and thus will be shaped by factors in the individual’s history. These subjective conditions do not entail relativism. It is a personal possession of a *shared reality* that the human mind did not create. Knowledge is true by being obedient, by being personally submissive to that reality. “Creation is what it is by its correspondence with the ‘standard’ [of] God’s creative knowledge; human cognition is true by its correspondence with the ‘standard’ of objective reality.”⁷ But human knowledge is always limited to being the *what-I-have-seen-so-far*.

The role of the senses, as Nathanson recognizes, is crucial to morality. The practical intellect’s field of action is in the sensory encounter with a real and objective world in concrete, individual, and unrepeatable conditions. It is here that we have the incommunicable work of prudence and art, where the conditions of truth are relative to the person. In morality, the intellect is operating in the heat and stress of the situation and not in the comfortable cool of a conversation in a friendly pub.

Man as conscious being, as intelligence making use of the senses, is at the center of the order of the *moral Good*, and it is with respect to him, with respect to the senses informed with intelligence that *acts* are divided into *good and evil*. This distinction between *the good and evil* applies in *all situations for action known* to the senses, but is relative to man as conscious center.⁸

A major difficulty in contemporary thought has been the reduction of moral judgment and rational action to propositional thinking. A rational act is considered to be one that has been preceded by a proper chain of principled propositions. As Ryle warned, our separately mentioning the “thinking” and the “being anxious” in a mother’s *thinking anxiously* about her ill child, does not two distinct realities make. The anxious mother does not first dispassionately consider the truth of her child’s illness and then, recognizing its rational appropriateness, generate feelings of anxiety and start

⁷ Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980), p. 7.

⁸ This passage is an alteration of a passage from Maritain. The changes are in italics. See note 21 for the correct quotation.

acting in an anxious fashion. "She thinks anxiously, and she is anxious enough to keep thinking about her child, and to think little of other things, unless as things connected with and *colored* by her child's danger."⁹ Just as "separately mentionable characteristics" of a facial expression are not entities or parts distinct from it, so the anxiety is not a distinct entity apart from the thinking.

Neither Maritain nor the Thomistic tradition can be charged with reducing moral judgment to mere propositional thinking. This is notable in accounts of the moral virtues and the role of practical reason. Prudence's truth is the reality of the person in the existential situation. It is a *properly-discerning-reason-in-action*; it is "nothing less than the directing cognition of reality."¹⁰ This requires the proper fusion of reason, appetites, and senses. The simultaneously *properly-oriented-appetites-here-and-now* provide focus for correct discernment of the situation and impetus for proper action. This is in marked contrast with the imprudent person who "sees the arena in which he must act through the *lens* of his disordered appetites."¹¹ The prudent person knows the arena of action by a special, concrete sensory knowledge which Aquinas calls the *vis cogitativa* and *ratio particularis*. In some unspecified way it partakes of reason, but nonetheless this sensory knowledge is so essential that by comparison the knowledge provided by the study of moral philosophy (or even practically practical moral science) is of little importance.¹²

The observations of the educational psychologist William Kilpatrick dovetail with the moral philosophy of Aquinas and Maritain. "It is nice to think that moral progress is the result of better reasoning, but it is naive to ignore the role of moral imagination in our moral life. . . . The more abstract our ethic, the less power it has to move us."¹³ Kilpatrick follows Edmund Burke and Russell Kirk in the employment of the notion of "moral imagination" and in so doing offers an additional insight into the working relationship between the senses and practical reason. Kirk described moral imagination as "that power of ethical *perception* which strides beyond the

⁹ Gilbert Ryle, "A Rational Animal," in *Reason*, eds. R. F. Dearden, P. H. Hirst, and R. S. Peters (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 133 (italics added).

¹⁰ Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, p. 25.

¹¹ Ralph McInerny, *Art and Prudence* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), p. 106 (italics added).

¹² Cf. *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 78, a. 4; *De Veritate* q. 10, a. 1; *In II Ethicorum*, lect. 4, 284–85.

¹³ William Kilpatrick, *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right from Wrong* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), p. 142.

barriers of private experience and momentary events.”¹⁴ Kilpatrick adds a rich and multi-faceted description of “moral imagination” in contrast with what he calls “idyllic imagination.” One could say that the contrast is between good moral imagination which is subordinate to *recta ratio* and bad moral imagination which is not. Idyllic imagination confuses fantasy with reality, pleasure with the good, and feelings with knowledge. Moral imagination is grounded in an already established reality and recognizes that there are goals that ought to be realized regardless of feelings. The moral imagination “recognizes that reality does not conform itself to our wishes but often thwarts them.”¹⁵

Moral imagination is not explicitly in Aquinas, but it is in effect described by Maritain. He maintains that preceding conceptual and logical expression, reason and intelligence function in “a quasi biological way, as the ‘form’ of psychic activities and in an unconscious or preconscious manner.”¹⁶ In this originating prereflective state, reason “is enveloped, immersed, unconscious, embodied in images and inseparable from sensory experience, . . . [and] operates like a *pattern* for our inclinations.”¹⁷

I would suggest that this pattern, this melange, is grounded in and held together by the power of memory, the receptacle of images, which is so necessary for such elemental matters as preserving personal identity and familiarity with our surroundings. We would have no continuity of conscious life without the presence of memory. And indeed, Aquinas identifies memory as one of the auxiliary virtues required for prudence. “[We] need experience to discover what is true in the majority of cases . . . experience is the result of many memories . . . prudence requires the memory of many things.” Could we not say that experience requires a “pattern” of memories? And further, Aquinas’s observations coincide with the call to shape imagination early in life because we “remember better what we saw when we were children. . . . [I]mpressions easily slip from the mind, unless they be tied as it were to some corporeal image, because human knowledge has a greater hold on sensible objects.”¹⁸

It is reasonable to suggest that there is a connection between Kilpatrick’s

¹⁴ Russell Kirk, “The Perversity of Recent Fiction: Reflections on the Moral Imagination,” in *Reclaiming a Patrimony: A Collection of Lectures by Russell Kirk* (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, 1982), pp. 46–47 (italics added).

¹⁵ Kilpatrick, *Why Johnny Can’t Tell Right from Wrong*, pp. 208–09.

¹⁶ Jacques Maritain, *An Introduction to the Basic Problems of Moral Philosophy*, trans. Cornelia N. Borgerhoff (Albany, New York: Magi Books, 1990), p. 53.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 56 (italics added).

¹⁸ *Summa Theologiae* II–II, q. 49, a. 1, resp. and ad 2.

imagination, Aquinas's memory and Maritain's quasi-biologically operating intelligence. I would have us consider moral imagination as that undirected, spontaneous portion of memory as it relates to the goods known through inclination and the senses. The moral imagination is not preconscious but *conconscious*¹⁹ intelligence shaping, texturing experience and seeing, but is itself unnoticed. It is a *pattern* which serves as a kind of concrete universal through which possible goods available to choice are recognized and made more or less interesting to the person. It highlights familiar features congruent with the person's full range of experiences.

Kilpatrick urges a return to more traditional pedagogy which presents moral values to children through lessons in history and literature. Memory is crowded not only with objects given in direct sense experience but also with those vivid images induced through the arts. Powerful signs and images in drama, storytelling, and literature provide a kind of dramatic rehearsal for the moral life. Such memories operating in imagination either aid or hinder moral life. The proper development of moral imagination enables the child to locate his acts within the context of traditions which have ennobled human dignity. In contrast with teaching which is abstract and propositional, this type of education promotes a *visualization* of the moral life: "[T]here is a connection between virtue and *vision*. One has to *see* correctly before one can act correctly."²⁰ The moral imagination is an essential element in the proper focusing of the moral lens and it is important that its adjustment begin early in life.

What follows aims to link the aesthetic to moral imagination through memory. I begin with the correct quotation from Maritain which earlier had been changed to apply to the knowledge of good and evil.

Man as conscious being, as intelligence making use of the senses, is at the center of the order of the aesthetic, of Beauty, and it is with respect to him, with respect to the senses informed with intelligence that things are divided into beautiful and ugly. This distinction between the beautiful and the ugly applies to all things *perceptible to the senses*, but is relative to man as conscious center.²¹

The liberties taken in the earlier altered quotation are meant to highlight the similarity of the role of the senses in both moral and aesthetic experience. It is granted that in Aquinas there is a clear distinction between the good and

¹⁹ I use this expression with a reverential bow to Maritain's use of *connaturality*.

²⁰ Kilpatrick, *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right from Wrong*, p. 133 (italics added).

²¹ Maritain, *An Introduction to the Basic Problems of Moral Philosophy*, pp. 69–70 (italics added).

the beautiful with respect to appetite. "For the good, being what all things want, is that in which the appetite comes to rest; whereas the beautiful is that in which the appetite comes to rest through contemplation or knowledge."²² The good pleases appetite whereas the beautiful gives pleasure in the mere apprehension. The apprehension of the moral good requires the assistance of properly ordered appetites but beauty does not. The apprehension of the beautiful is "*a kind of seeing or looking which is mediated by the senses but is of an intellectually cognitive order, and which is both disinterested and yet produces a kind of pleasure.*"²³

But what is known through the senses may be retained in the memory; thus the object, its beauty, and the pleasure experienced are preserved even if only vaguely. We then speak of an aesthetic imagination. But there are not two separate memories, two separate imaginations. Maritain was fond of diagrams, and in an interesting one he represents the powers of the soul as superimposed inverted cones sharing a common peak. Imagination penetrates into intellect and the external senses penetrate into both.²⁴ There are three distinguishable powers but only one soul. There is but one intellect with all its activities. And there is but one imagination. Aesthetic and moral knowledge, aesthetic and moral imagination are of different orders, but they are unified in the one knower. There is only the one person who remembers and who is presented with images from the distinct orders of goodness and beauty. It may be possible to separate distinct imaginations in philosophical analysis, but the separation cannot be realized in fact in the living person. And it is in this realm of the concrete living person that a practically practical moral science takes interest. In this science, the division of aesthetic and moral imagination may be usefully blurred.

Kilpatrick draws attention to the practical role that aesthetic experiences play in moral life. "Nietzsche saw that most people are convinced not by arguments but by aesthetics—by the force of beauty. Or more accurately, by what they perceive to be beautiful."²⁵ And this may be reinforced with Maritain's claim that our aesthetic delight is greater when the effects of human intelligence are present. The bay of Rio de Janeiro is indeed beautiful he admits, but he is moved more profoundly by "the port of Marseilles, as it opens its man-managed secretive basins one after another, in a forest

²² *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 27, a. 1, ad 3.

²³ Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Hugh Bredin (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University, 1988), p. 58 (italics in the original).

²⁴ Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (New York: New American Library, 1954), p. 77.

²⁵ Kilpatrick, *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right from Wrong*, p. 165.

of masts, cranes, lights, and memories!"²⁶ This may seem odd at first, but it is consistent with Maritain's focus on the person who is the conscious center of the aesthetic. In perceiving beauty, intelligence recognizes its own indispensable role in the aesthetic experience, and in some fashion comes face to face with itself. "The intelligence delights in the beautiful because in the beautiful it finds itself again and recognizes itself, and makes contact with its own light."²⁷ We could add with any appropriate distinctions that the same would apply to moral experience.

Given the vagaries of memory, when aesthetic and moral images entwine the patterning power of the imagination is enhanced. The influence of imagination is most noticeable in children. In the child the imagination is preoccupied with visions of a future self. The child's interest is not set upon the distinctions given in moral philosophy to guide his life, but upon visions of himself as an actor set in a world yet to be lived. "The question for a child . . . is not do I want to be good but who do I want to be like?"²⁸

What we want to be like is ourselves, but that knowledge is given to us incompletely, piecemeal, gradually over time. The desire, however, demands to be satisfied now, and it is here that the role of images/models enters, especially for the young. An image of a "man-managed" and aesthetically appealing life-style is the Sirens' call. The sturdy steed, shining armor, dazzling sword, the accoutrements of honor, courage, and chastity compete with Mercedes, diplomas, gleaming surgical steel, masking ambition, greed, coldness of heart; hot wheels, logo-ed jacket, blazing automatic pistols bound to group loyalty, power, and lust. "Style is of great importance in gang life."²⁹ Style, the beautiful life and its beautiful people, trump the arguments. Mother Teresa and Nietzsche knew this. But she was the wiser because when she said, "Do something beautiful for God," the beauty was always to be united to the separately distinguishable moral good.

²⁶ Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, pp. 6-7.

²⁷ Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, trans. Joseph W. Evans (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), p. 25.

²⁸ Kilpatrick, *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right from Wrong*, p. 167. Kilpatrick is quoting Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), p. 10.

²⁹ Kilpatrick, *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right from Wrong*, p. 169.