

## Chapter 10

# The Majesty of Cognition

## *The Sublime in Baumgarten, Mendelssohn, and Kant*

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At first glance, it might seem odd to look to Alexander Baumgarten for thoughts on the sublime. After all, his contributions to aesthetic theory, associated with his views of beauty as the perfection of sensible cognition, appear to leave little room for it. But in fact a significant portion of the *Aesthetics* (1750) is devoted to the sublime. It is not just tucked away in this influential work, but explicitly discussed in numerous sections on “aesthetic magnitude” (Sections 16–25; paragraphs §177–§422). At almost 250 paragraphs, it is in fact his book’s longest chapter.<sup>1</sup>

Since the author of the *Aesthetics* counts as one of the modern founders of the discipline called aesthetics, it is surprising that Baumgarten’s theory of the sublime has been largely overlooked. After all, the sublime has been one of the core concepts in aesthetics since at least the 1690s (for instance in the work of John Dennis), which is itself almost a century and a half after numerous Latin and Greek editions of Longinus’s *On the Sublime* appeared in the middle of the 1500s.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, Baumgarten’s view of the sublime has been far less examined than that of Mendelssohn and, needless to say, of Kant.

Nearly all of the histories of the sublime either skip over Baumgarten’s theory or mention him in passing as one of the founders of “aesthetics,” without any substantial discussion of his theory of the sublime, aesthetic dignity, or aesthetic majesty. Dagmar Mirbach, who translated the *Aesthetics*

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<sup>1</sup> The passages on the sublime range from Section 15 on “aesthetic magnitude” starting at §177, through Section 26, the “greatest magnanimity in aesthetics” ending with §422. Section 21 is given the title, “The Sublime Way of Thinking.”

<sup>2</sup> On this history, see the texts collected in *The Sublime Reader* as well as my Introduction to it.

into German, observes that the chapter devoted to *magnitudo aesthetica* (§177–§422) is “hitherto almost unread.”<sup>3</sup> Since nearly all of the histories of the sublime overlook Baumgarten on the sublime and how he fits into that history,<sup>4</sup> there is a need to understand his contribution better. The present chapter begins to fill in this gap.

According to a narrative of early modern aesthetics that is starting to become more prevalent, Baumgarten is being given a more central role. Within this perspective, the practical and ethical aspects of his aesthetics are receiving more attention.<sup>5</sup> In keeping with this realignment, I will also explore the connection between the sublime and the moral and practical aspects of his thought, especially his views on freedom and the moral sublime. I will also consider how this sublime-moral relation is handled by Mendelssohn and Kant and thereby observe to what extent they are influenced by or instead depart from Baumgarten’s account.

This naturally raises the issue of what is meant by the “sublime.” There is no final, once-and-for-all definition of the term, but instead there are various historically situated answers, instantiated in different particular cultures and times. Still, let it be (provisionally) submitted that the experience of the sublime is paradigmatically a “mixed” yet pleasing aesthetic experience in response to an object or event that exhibits striking vastness or power. (This leaves open whether or not this greatness and/or power has moral qualities.) The experience of the sublime, then, is “mixed,” which means that the experience has both negative and positive elements or aspects, even if on the whole it is gratifying and even exhilarating: people find the experience pleasant overall and want to continue having it. So, the experience of the sublime is an intense feeling of uplift and elevation in response to the powerful or vast object, which is otherwise normally experienced as menacing or threatening—capable of eliciting fright or a sense of being overwhelmed.<sup>6</sup> While undergoing the overall positive experience, a person thinks they are safe (whether they actually are is another matter); otherwise they would simply

<sup>3</sup> Mirbach, “*Magnitudo aesthetica*,” 103. Her article, based on the Introduction to her 2007 German translation of the *Aesthetics*, is one of the few scholarly (philosophical) studies devoted to Baumgarten on aesthetic magnitude. For a historically and theologially oriented overview mentioning Baumgarten and the sublime, see Fritz, *Vom Erhabenen*, 230–283. Guyer briefly discusses Baumgarten on aesthetic magnitude in Guyer, *History of Modern Aesthetics*, vol. 1, 333–335, as does Beiser, *Diotima’s Children*, 122.

<sup>4</sup> Neither Philip Shaw nor James Kirwan’s overviews of the topic, *The Sublime and Sublimity*, respectively, discuss Baumgarten on the sublime, nor does Timothy Costelloe’s collected edited volume of essays on the sublime. And while one would expect a book entitled *The Sublime from Longinus to Kant* to cover the sublime in Baumgarten, no such discussion is to be found in this book by Robert Doran’s book.

<sup>5</sup> For example, see Mirbach, “Aesthetic Greatness”; Grote, *Emergence of Modern Aesthetic Theory*, and Buchenau, *The Founding of Aesthetics*.

<sup>6</sup> Clewis, “Towards a Theory of the Sublime and Aesthetic Awe,” 346.

feel a mode of *fear*, plain and simple. The objects eliciting the experience need not be visual (though that is perhaps the easiest case of perception to discuss) but can be construed to include music or poetry. The elicitors can be conceptual too: grand ideas and mind-boggling physical theories, not just what is perceived as vast or powerful, can evoke the response.

By comparing Baumgarten's account (section Baumgarten) with that of Mendelssohn (section Mendelssohn) and Kant and some post-Kantians (section Kant and Post-Kantian German Aesthetics), we can see which elements are distinctive or original in Baumgarten. Rather than attempting to give a comprehensive overview of the account of the sublime in these thinkers, I will center my discussion on two main themes, the subject-object relation and the moral sublime.<sup>7</sup> In presenting their thoughts about the sublime, I shall address how their accounts handle the relation between seeing the sublime as a feeling or sensible cognition, on the one hand, and the quality or feature of an object, on the other. I will also address whether they think there is something called a moral sublime, and if so, describe what that is.

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## BAUMGARTEN

Since the sublime is a "majestic" cognition, we would do well to begin by reviewing Baumgarten's conception of aesthetics as "the science of sensible cognition."<sup>8</sup> Sensible cognition is clear and confused, rather than (like intellectual cognition) clear and distinct. According to Baumgarten's (1735) *Reflections on Poetry*, an idea is *clear* in that it allows us to recognize what thing is being represented, because it contains representations of those characteristics of the thing that allow us to distinguish it from other things. An idea is *confused*, as opposed to distinct, in that those distinguishing characteristics are not made explicit, so that the thing represented cannot immediately be classified according to a definition.<sup>9</sup> To put it more simply, we have a *clear* idea of a thing, we know what a thing is and can identify it. But when we have a clear cognition that is also *distinct*, we know not only what the thing is but also why it is that way or what makes it what it is.

Beauty, Baumgarten claims, arises from the presence of six qualities or criteria of sensory cognition: richness/abundance/wealth (*ubertas*), magnitude/greatness (*magnitudo*), truth (*veritas*), light or clarity (*lux*), certainty

<sup>7</sup> While there will be some reference to their other works, my focus will be on Baumgarten's *Aesthetics*; Mendelssohn's "On the Sublime and Naive in the Fine Sciences," and Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.

<sup>8</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, §1. Unless stated otherwise, translations of Baumgarten are my own.

<sup>9</sup> Grote, *Emergence of Modern Aesthetic Theory*, 73. Baumgarten, *Reflections on Poetry*, §13–§14.

(*certitudo*), and life (*vita*). He examines these six criteria (though the sections on life were never written) under the heading “heuristics” in the *Aesthetics*. Magnitude is discussed second and, as mentioned, at the greatest length. The six qualities are mentioned at §22:

The richness, magnitude, truth, clarity, certainty, and life of cognition constitute the perfection of every cognition, insofar as they are in a representation and in agreement with each other; for example, richness and magnitude in agreement with clarity, truth and clarity with certainty, and all of the rest in agreement with life, and insofar as the various different parts of cognition agree with it (§18–§20), they constitute the perfection of every cognition (*Metaphysics* §669, §94). As phenomena they constitute the beauty of the sensible (§14), namely a universal beauty (§17), especially of the things and the thoughts (§18), in which please [*iuvat*]: copiousness [*copia*], nobility [*nobilitas*], and the certain light of the moving truth.<sup>10</sup>

The concept of the “sublime” in Baumgarten can be broadly construed to include his references to aesthetic magnitude/greatness (*magnitudo*), aesthetic dignity or nobility, and aesthetic majesty. Although at some level there may be minor differences between the concepts of the aesthetic great, dignified, noble, majestic, and sublime, he appears to use them as near synonyms or very closely related terms.<sup>11</sup>

Since the sublime cognition requires the perfection of the sensible, Baumgarten sees the sublime as a kind of *beauty*. As he puts it, “The sublime way of thinking is beautiful in the fullest sense.”<sup>12</sup> This seems to follow from its being a sensible perfection of cognition that is combined with, or exhibits, aesthetic magnitude. Of course, not all beauty is or should be rendered sublime, and in that same paragraph Baumgarten claims that it is an error to attempt to render everything that is beautiful as also sublime.

As might be expected, Baumgarten does not come up with his theory in an intellectual vacuum. But what is somewhat surprising is that he engages more with ancient authors than with his contemporaries. Mirbach observes that Baumgarten does not offer “argumentative reflection,” but rather a “rich fund of metaphors and quotations” from (mostly) ancient Roman poetry and rhetoric.<sup>13</sup> The account of the sublime in the *Aesthetics* contains many quotes from

<sup>10</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, §22. Cf. Baumgarten, *Metaphysics*, §515, §531, §669.

<sup>11</sup> Buchenau makes this point too. See Buchenau, *The Founding of Aesthetics*, 141. Baumgarten never describes the sublime’s phenomenology and his discussion is not centered on pleasure or on identifying its sources. He never says that in the sublime there is a play between imagination (or a lower faculty) and reason.

<sup>12</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik* §319.

<sup>13</sup> Mirbach, “Aesthetic Greatness,” 114.

classical authors such as Longinus, Cicero, Seneca, Horace, Virgil, Pliny, and Catullus. With his concern for literary style and how to make thoughts great in readers or listeners, Baumgarten writes in the rhetorical tradition associated with Longinus and Cicero. The editor and translator of the Italian edition of the *Aesthetics*, Salvatore Tedesco, views the pages specifically dedicated to the sublime as “surprisingly underdeveloped” with respect to the contemporaneous European debates about the sublime, and attributes this to the fact that Baumgarten’s method of proceeding and theoretical apparatus can sometimes come across as “mechanistic.”<sup>14</sup> Baumgarten’s method and technical apparatus, Tedesco suggests, may have hindered his ability to connect to the debate about the sublime that was prevalent during his time. Perhaps, we might also add, he was not very familiar with contemporary contributions to arts and ideas. Whatever the reason, it is true that Baumgarten sometimes writes as if he were insulated from contemporary debates about the sublime. If and when current writers influenced his ideas on the sublime, he usually does not acknowledge it explicitly.

In presenting his own views, Baumgarten frequently cites Longinus, the pseudonymous author of the first (or possibly third) century treatise, *On the Sublime*. In the important opening of Section 15 (“Aesthetic Magnitude”), for instance, we can see how Baumgarten favorably quotes from Longinus.

The second concern, in thinking of things in a graceful way (§115), is magnitude (*Metaphysics* §515), that is, the one that is aesthetic. We understand by this designation (§22): 1) the importance [*pondus*] of the objects (§18) and their relevance/gravity [*gravitatem*] (*Metaphysics* §166); 2) the importance and gravity of the thoughts proportionate to these objects; 3) and the fruitfulness of both of these (*Metaphysics* §166). *Because what is truly great [vere magnum] is what enriches thoughts and is difficult, even impossible, to put out of mind, but instead leaves an enduring, firm, and indelible memory* (Longinus 7.3).<sup>15</sup>

As he often does in the *Aesthetics*, Baumgarten here refers to his own works, above all, the *Metaphysics*. Moreover, the referenced passage in the *Metaphysics* suggests that *gravitas*, *dignitas*, and *nobilitas* are used as near synonyms: “The magnitude of a ground stemming from the number of

<sup>14</sup> See Tedesco’s introduction in Baumgarten, *L’Estetica*, 15. For an earlier (complete) translation into Italian, see Baumgarten, *L’Estetica*, translated by Piselli.

<sup>15</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, §177. Following Mirbach’s Latin-German edition, I reproduce as closely as possible the references Baumgarten provides to his own works and to those of others (i.e., internal and external references). For another translation of the Longinus quote (from a volume edited by Donald Andrew Russell and Michael Winterbottom in 1972), see Clewis, *The Sublime Reader*, 19–20: “Real sublimity contains much food for reflection, is difficult or rather impossible to resist, and makes a strong and inefaceable impression on the memory.”

consequences is FECUNDITY, and from the magnitude of these, is WEIGHT (gravity, dignity, nobility).”<sup>16</sup>

In the following paragraph, *Aesthetics* §178, Baumgarten distinguishes *absolute* from *relative* aesthetic magnitude.<sup>17</sup> When the aesthetic magnitude is “absolute,” it is necessary for every beautiful cognition (*omni pulcre cogitando*). But the relative or comparative kind is only a degree of the absolute kind. Furthermore, Baumgarten makes a similar absolute/relative distinction with regard to aesthetic *dignity*. The latter, he clarifies, is a part and species of aesthetic magnitude.<sup>18</sup> Even if he does not do much with this specification of a part/whole relation in the *Aesthetics*, Baumgarten appears to be claiming that artworks may, but need not, portray moral subjects that have aesthetic dignity. In other words, they can exhibit aesthetic magnitude in some other manner.

For Baumgarten, “magnitude” refers to the number of “internal characteristics” that allow a thing to be distinguished from another.<sup>19</sup> According to *Metaphysics*, a multitude of parts is “magnitude” or continuous quantity.<sup>20</sup> A “greater magnitude” is a “comparative multitude” while a smaller one is “fewness.”<sup>21</sup> The more distinguishing characteristics (*determinationes, notae, predicata*), the greater the magnitude of the idea (of a thing). And the greater the magnitude of the idea, the greater the idea’s force (*vis*) or strength (*robur*), or the *idea’s power to change the state of mind* of the person in whose mind the idea arises.<sup>22</sup>

On such grounds it is fair to call Baumgarten’s account in part an *aesthetics of truth* (even if he might to some extent recognize the emotional impact of art).<sup>23</sup> Baumgarten’s cognitivism is also evident in a relevant passage from *Metaphysics*:

Therefore, the truer the knowledge is of more and greater beings, the greater it is (§160) until it is the greatest, which would be the truest knowledge of the most and greatest beings. The degree of KNOWLEDGE in which it knows more things [*plura*] is its RICHNESS [*ubertas*] (copiousness [*copia*], extension [*extensio*], riches [*divitiae*], vastness [*vastitas*]); the degree in which it knows fewer things is its NARROWNESS; the degree in which it knows greater things

<sup>16</sup> Baumgarten, *Metaphysics*, §166.

<sup>17</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, §178.

<sup>18</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, §185. For brief discussion of aesthetic dignity, see Guyer, *History of Modern Aesthetics*, 335.

<sup>19</sup> Grote, *Emergence of Modern Aesthetic Theory*, 104.

<sup>20</sup> Baumgarten, *Metaphysics*, §159.

<sup>21</sup> Baumgarten, *Metaphysics*, §161.

<sup>22</sup> Grote, *Emergence of Modern Aesthetic Theory*, 104–105.

<sup>23</sup> Guyer thinks Baumgarten combines an aesthetics of truth (a kind of cognitivism) with a recognition of the emotional aspect of art. Guyer, *A History of Modern Aesthetics*, vol. 1., 323.

[*maiora*] is its DIGNITY [*dignitas*] (nobility [*nobilitas*], magnitude [*magnitudo*], gravity [*gravitas*], majesty [*maiestas*]); the degree in which it knows smaller things [*minora*] is its WORTHLESSNESS (meagerness, shallowness).<sup>24</sup>

While his use of the word dignity or majesty might at first seem to suggest a connection to the *moral* sublime, we see here that he is only speaking of *cognition*. The parenthesis—“dignity (nobility, magnitude, gravity, majesty)” —again suggests that these terms are being used as near synonyms, at least in this context. It seems that the nobility or dignity pertaining to or contained within a degree of (true) cognition is due to the magnitude of the *objects* being thought or cognized. The “greater” things (*maiora*) (containing a multitude of predicates under them) give any cognition of them dignity or majesty of cognition.

As we can see in the previously cited block quote from §177, Baumgarten touches on the difficult issue of whether the sublime is to be predicated of the subject (or something in the subject, i.e., cognition) or of the object. Is the sublime in the subject’s thoughts (way of thinking)—or even in the subject/mind itself—or in the value/importance (*pondus*)<sup>25</sup> located in the object? But it is not clear that he works out the tensions within his position. Aesthetic greatness, in his view, seems to lie in the object, in the subject’s way of thinking that is nonetheless tied to the object, and, finally, in the subject who thinks.<sup>26</sup>

When it comes to the subject-object relation, one philosophical option is to focus on the subjective pole and claim that the aesthetic attribute or quality in question is really (or only) a modification of the subject. For instance, one could speak of a sublime way of thinking, as Baumgarten does in the title of Section 21 (*sublime cogitandi genus*). If the sublime is a way of thinking, it is clearly not a property of a (great) object.

A subset of this approach would tie the sublime to our *free* way of thinking.<sup>27</sup> Baumgarten sometimes takes this route too, and thinks of the sublime as based in a way of thought in which reason is in harmony with

<sup>24</sup> Baumgarten, *Metaphysics*, §515; translation slightly altered. For a German translation of this passage, see Baumgarten, *Texte zur Grundlegung der Ästhetik*, 7.

<sup>25</sup> Baumgarten himself translates *pondus* with *Wichtigkeit* (importance). See Mirbach’s introduction in Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, LXVIII, fn 98.

<sup>26</sup> As Mirbach succinctly puts it, in his chapters on aesthetic magnitude, Baumgarten distinguishes systematically between the greatness of the *object* that is thought (*magnitudo materiae*, §191–§216), the greatness of the *way of thinking according to the respective greatness* of its objects (*ratio cogitationum*, §217–§328), and finally the greatness of the *subject who thinks* (*magnitudo personae*, §§352–422). Mirbach, “Aesthetic Greatness,” 114.

<sup>27</sup> For Descartes, for instance, the will is free; in fact—in comparison to matter—it is *infinitely* so. One could say this counts as a kind of sublimity. The will (*ego*) experiences its own freedom, as being superior to matter. Incidentally, in the *Meditations*, *Discourse on Method*, and *The Principles of Philosophy*, Descartes never (as far as I can tell) uses the term *sublime* or its relatives.

sensibility, a kind of “psychological and inner freedom.”<sup>28</sup> Freedom, according to *Metaphysics*, is the dominion of the mind or soul over *itself* (not over the sensory per se), in which sensory desires and rational motives work together harmoniously.<sup>29</sup>

Alternatively, one could instead see the *object* as sublime. Here the object that is said to be “sublime” can be construed broadly. The most obvious object or elicitor (as found in the accounts of Dennis and Shaftesbury) is the divine being: God is the example here, the most sublime object (however different from all other ones). In medieval and early Renaissance thought, the experience of the sublime was closely connected to religious feelings in response to the God of the Christian philosophers. Bonaventure and Aquinas refer to the sublime (*sublimis* and its linguistic relatives) in a theological context, where God, above all, is sublime. For instance, Aquinas defines such *admiration* as a species of fear that results from the apprehension of the sublime truth (*sublimis veritatis*), or God, in which our contemplative faculty is exceeded.<sup>30</sup> Baumgarten probably would not deny that God is sublime, but he does not really emphasize it either.

Another obvious candidate for a sublime “object” is a marvel of nature. But Baumgarten’s examples of the sublime tend to be, not natural objects, but *poetic* descriptions and citations of Latin authors. Even if it is compatible with his account for the sublime object to be a natural wonder, he does not emphasize this kind of case either.

Other sublime objects would include great acts of virtue, or supererogatory acts, as well as the agents performing them. It would also include works of art and poetry *describing* such acts, that is, poetic descriptions of moral greatness. Baumgarten takes this approach above all. In short, for Baumgarten, the object is typically a virtuous act and agent, and their representation in works of art.

To see some of the tensions within his account, we can look at *Aesthetics* §18, §118, and §189. He notes—in agreement with Aristotle—that ugly things can be thought (*cogitari*) in a beautiful manner, and beautiful things can be cognized in an ugly way.<sup>31</sup> This implies that beauty/ugliness lies not exclusively in the object, but in the manner of presentation or depiction.<sup>32</sup> At §118, discussing aesthetic richness or abundance (*ubertas*), he mentions what turn out to be *objective* elements. They are either in the thing or material (“There are objects that as it were present themselves in their own richness”) or in the artist (in the person or mind

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<sup>28</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, §414. Mirbach translates all of §414 in Mirbach, “Aesthetic Greatness,” 116–117.

<sup>29</sup> Mirbach, “Aesthetic Greatness,” 114. See Baumgarten, *Metaphysics*, §725, §730.

<sup>30</sup> See Introduction, in Clewis, *The Sublime Reader*, 10. Mendelssohn will call this admiration *Bewunderung*.

<sup>31</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1448b.

<sup>32</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, §18.



[*ingenii*], i.e., one's *capacity to represent* the object richly).<sup>33</sup> (As we will see, Mendelssohn accepts a very similar distinction.) In §189, Baumgarten applies this distinction to aesthetic magnitude and dignity (i.e., the sublime). Both the *object (rerum, materiae)* depicted artistically and the *manner of representation* adopted by the subject or person (*personae*) can appropriately be qualified having aesthetic magnitude and dignity.<sup>34</sup>

This brings us back to the question of objects that are moral or have moral qualities, including when the object, thing, or subject matter is virtue. At §203 he first agrees with Seneca that “every kind of vice is limited, dismal, and base” and that “virtue alone is sublime [*sublimis*] and elevated (from a moral perspective too).” But he adds, “But for us this discourse concerns objective magnitude and dignity, not insofar as they are inherent [*inhaeret*] in the objects” but rather insofar as “the objects, whatever they might be, contain in themselves a ground on which great and dignified cognitions can be formed, in conformity with the object.”<sup>35</sup> Baumgarten thus walks a very fine line. Unlike extension or shape, the sublime is not strictly inherent in the objects or an “objective” quality (i.e., what the moderns like Locke called “primary qualities”). If the object is a kind of magnitude, in turn defined by the number and properties it contains (or by the predicates contained in its definition), the great or sublime can be called a capacity in the object to give evoke thoughts in us (observers, readers) or in artists depicting (*pingi*) them. The thoughts so elicited need to be “in conformity with” the object. But even if it is somehow in the object, the sublime quality is still response dependent and requires someone to think it and/or to depict or represent it in artistic forms such as poetry. In other words, the “great and dignified cognitions” have to be “formed.”

Since poetry is the perfection of sensible cognition, it is no surprise that majestic cognition can be found in it. In fact, majestic cognition is not limited to great objects of nature and natural wonders, but seems to be found in poetry above all. (He appears to offer no discussion of the sublime in music.) Baumgarten often cites poetry in his chapters on the sublime in the *Aesthetics*.

About nine years before the publication of the *Aesthetics*, he even wrote a poem that mentions the sublime, claiming that it is reason that makes souls sublime (noble, great). I translate it as follows:

Reason and virtue make souls  
sublime, noble, great, and free,  
swift in thinking and clever in choice.  
Yet one thing is not there to see:

<sup>33</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, §118.

<sup>34</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, §189.

<sup>35</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, §203.

souls live in bodies here;  
 whatever moves body, moves soul too.  
 For the soul to be free of care,  
 the body has the first move to do.

Baumgarten published this poem in 1741, it implicitly argues for being *moved* by feeling and sentiments, that is, love and beauty.<sup>36</sup> He here appears to argue *against* a (stoic) view that sees affects as something to be controlled or tamed: the body has to make the “first move,” even if reason and virtue make souls “sublime.” And in the *Aesthetics* he appears to repudiate stoicism (“not one of the wise stoic”) in a description of sublime magnanimity that includes a quotation from Horace:

Although a mind which has enough greatness for sublime things is not the one of  
 the wise stoic, who,  
*if the universe crashes down shattered,*  
*keeps intrepid in face of the smashing wreckage* (§353),  
 it will nonetheless never be tormented by minor troubles nor will it be deprived of  
 its calm serenity which emulates the life of the gods.<sup>37</sup>

Baumgarten’s poem from the *Philosophical Letters* and his apparent repudiation of stoicism in the *Aesthetics* leads to the question of the moral sublime. It should be recalled (as recent scholarship has begun to emphasize) that Baumgarten’s aesthetics has a practical (and religious) dimension. An aim of aesthetics, he thinks, is to exhibit virtue (good morals) in its various sensible forms or ways of being expressed.<sup>38</sup> Aesthetics is part of cultivating the whole person.<sup>39</sup>

This practical-religious aspect of aesthetics is evident in the case of the sublime.<sup>40</sup> Sublime magnanimity turns out to be a community of the virtuous person with the divine.<sup>41</sup> At §181, Baumgarten puts the moral in “connection” with freedom (*libertate connectuntur*):

Furthermore, *aesthetic magnitude* (§177), both absolute (§178) and relative (§180), is either *natural*, which pertains to what is not closely connected with

<sup>36</sup> Baumgarten, *Philosophische Briefe*, 90 (my translation). Grote cites, translates, and comments on the poem in Grote, *Emergence of Modern Aesthetic Theory*, 140.

<sup>37</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, §403; translated in Mirbach, “Aesthetic Greatness,” 115.

<sup>38</sup> Marbach, in Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, 966, fn 3, on §211.

<sup>39</sup> See Anne Pollok’s contribution to this volume.

<sup>40</sup> Tedesco claims that, in constant dialogue with Longinus, Baumgarten uses the concept of “aesthetic magnitude” to promote this ethical dimension. Tedesco, “Introduction,” in Baumgarten, *L’Estetica*, 15.

<sup>41</sup> Mirbach, “Aesthetic Greatness,” 119.

freedom, or *moral*, which applies to objects and cognitions insofar as they are more closely connected with freedom [*libertate connectuntur*].<sup>42</sup>

First, it is worth noting that cognitions can be “connected” with freedom, since we will come back to this point when we turn to Kant, where it is not entirely clear whether, with his theory of the “dynamical” sublime as opposed to the mathematical sublime, Kant is extending and building on Baumgarten’s view that there can be an aesthetic magnitude that is “moral” rather than “natural,” or instead repudiating Baumgarten’s category of a moral aesthetic greatness by replacing it with a pure aesthetic judgment of the power of nature (which in the end, however, is based on an estimation of our *own* power and thus presupposes our status as presumably free beings, which for Kant, implies being subject to the moral law). Second, by “nature” Baumgarten is not here referring to natural marvels as such. When he gives an example of the “natural,” it is not a natural wonder but a *description* from Virgil’s *Aenead*<sup>AQ: Should “Aenead” be “Aeneid” in the sentence “When he gives an example of the “natural,” it is...”?</sup> of Entellus’s bodily strength and large muscles. Likewise, he mentions a poet (Lucretius) who says “great things” about Sicily, when describing nature (“great Charybdis” and “menacing Etna”).<sup>43</sup> It is a *poet* writing about aesthetically great objects of nature. In §182, he further describes “moral” aesthetic magnitude as the kind “that is possible due to (*per*) the freedom that is determined in conformity with moral laws.” He adds that *moral* aesthetic magnitude can also be called “aesthetic dignity” (*dignitatem aestheticam*).<sup>44</sup> Please check spelling.

Equipped with this distinction between the moral and the nonmoral (or natural), Baumgarten employs a distinction between positive and negative dignity. Great natural objects (described by the poets) might seem “insignificant from a moral point of view,” because they are just objects of nature. Nonetheless, they still belong to the sphere of “dignity,” even if it is a “negative” kind.<sup>45</sup> He continues in the next paragraph: “Among these same objects possessing generically the greatest magnitude (§203), sometimes emerge ones that have, in addition to natural magnitude and negative dignity (which can be said to pertain to the great), a certain positive dignity (§193).”<sup>46</sup> Divinely inspired people—he mentions Socrates—can have such positive dignity. A connection to the divine thus surfaces here. He claims that “first law of the positive dignity for sublime things [*per sublimia*]” is: “Everything human [*humana*], whatever it is, even the great [*maxima*] in a specific manner, is to

<sup>42</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, §181. Guyer claims that this natural/moral distinction, even if Baumgarten applies it mainly to artworks, “anticipates Kant’s later distinction” between the “mathematical” and the “dynamical” sublime. Guyer, *History of Modern Aesthetics*, vol. 1, 333.

<sup>43</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, §205.

<sup>44</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, §182.

<sup>45</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, §205.

<sup>46</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, §206.

be subordinated to the divine [*divinis*].”<sup>47</sup> So it turns out that positive dignity lies not only in the moral but also in the divine or divinely inspired: there is an overlap of the ethical and the theological.

Like his Italian contemporary Vico (whom he apparently never mentions in the *Aesthetics*), Baumgarten thinks that heroic actions and qualities are sublime.<sup>48</sup> Using his view that heroic virtue is sublime, Baumgarten offers a scale of the “aesthetic dignity” of ways of life: the honest, noble, and heroic.<sup>49</sup> He then matches these with the simple/plain, medium/moderate, and sublime way of thinking (in other words, the low, medium, and high). Thus, the scale proceeds from the simple, honest way of life (which corresponds to the modest or plain), to the noble way of life (analogous to the moderate), to the heroic way of life full of virtue.<sup>50</sup> The heroic corresponds to the “sublime” (*heroicum: sublimia*). The sublime style and discourse (or way of speaking) best suits the heroic way of life.

If temperament is an inclination to desire certain kinds of objects, the *aesthetic* temperament desires the great. We ascribe to the “aesthetic temperament” an “inborn magnitude of the heart” and “an instinct for the great [*magna*],” he claims.<sup>51</sup>

This applies to both the heroic and the tragic: tragedy too can represent the sublime. A “sublime manner of thinking” is required by dramatic tragedy. Baumgarten refers to tragedies by the “buskins” or boots worn by the ancient Greek actors performing tragedy: “Who doesn’t know that slippers of comedy require the simple/plain [*tenuē*] way of thinking, while buskins of tragedy require the sublime way of thinking [*sublime cogitandi genus*]?”<sup>52</sup> Unfortunately, it is not very clear whether he means—by “requiring” (*postulare*: require, need) the sublime way of thought—to claim that tragedians need to have a sublime way of thought in order to compose their works, or instead that spectators and readers typically respond to tragedies with the feeling of the sublime.

In any case, to conclude this overview, we can say that Baumgarten’s thoughts on the sublime fit in with the practical aims of aesthetics. Poetry (and tragedy) can not only depict but even *extol* virtue (the morally good), and thus represent it in a manner that has great “magnitude.” The poet is to

<sup>47</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, §399.

<sup>48</sup> Giambattista Vico, “On the Heroic Mind,” 69–77. Nicolas Boileau likewise calls the father in Corneille’s *Horace* an “old hero” who elicits our “heroic grandeur.” See Boileau Despréaux, “Preface to His Translation of Longinus on the Sublime,” in Clewis, *The Sublime Reader*, 60.

<sup>49</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, §214.

<sup>50</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, §213. On heroic virtue or way of living, see also Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, §281, §363.

<sup>51</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, §45.

<sup>52</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, §236. At §294, he mentions tragedy in its sublimity (*tragodiae cum sublimitate*).

take what is great and make it greater (*augere*), which is indeed the topic of Section 23 (*argumenta augentia*). This point is summarized in the direct and personal advice Baumgarten offers at the end of Section 25, which concludes the discussion on the great or “sublime” in the *Aesthetics*:

So that you love the truth in beautiful thoughts, here is what you have to do to augment (sec. 23) what is great (sec. 15) in an absolute way (sec. 16), according to its relative magnitude (sec. 17), using thoughts proportionate to the matter (sec. 18)—either in a lowly (sec. 19), or moderate (sec. 20), or sublime manner of thinking (sec. 21)—without the defects that are often quite conspicuous in the greatest things (sec. 22): You have to build up, with absolute importance [*gravitatem*] (sec. 24), that inborn greatness of heart that to a certain degree you must have (§45), and elevate it as much as you can (sec. 25). You are fortunate [*felix*] if this is sufficient and you are able to touch the sublime (sec. 26).<sup>53</sup>

The sublime is central to the project of helping shape a person into a *felix aestheticus*.

## MENDELSSOHN

Let us now turn to the reception of Baumgarten’s theory of aesthetic magnitude, dignity, and the sublime, beginning with Mendelssohn, one of the foremost German aesthetic theorists following Baumgarten.

In this section, I explore the question of the sublime and its possible relation to morality by examining an essay in Mendelssohn’s *Philosophical Writings* (1761). I will not try to explain Mendelssohn’s *entire* theory of the sublime and “mixed sentiments” (“mixed,” in the sense that we take pleasure in what is otherwise unpleasant or even shocking and astonishing, e.g., when we viewing a dramatic tragedy). Rather, I will address the question of the moral sublime and the sublime’s relation to virtue, by examining the essay “On the Sublime and Naïve in the Fine Sciences.”<sup>54</sup> It may well be true that, as one scholar claims,<sup>55</sup> in order to understand properly Mendelssohn’s theory

<sup>53</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, §422.

<sup>54</sup> An excerpted version of the essay (translated by Dahlstrom) can be found in Clewis, *The Sublime Reader*, 91–101, which will be cited here. The complete version (of the same translation) is found in Mendelssohn’s “On the Sublime and Naïve in the Fine Sciences.” See Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 192–232. On the essay, see also Guyer, *History of Modern Aesthetics*, vol. 1, 361–363, and Beiser, *Diotima’s Children*, 217–221.

<sup>55</sup> Pollok, “Mendelssohn’s Notion of Admiration,” 92 n. 30. The essay studied here was published as the penultimate essay in the 1761 *Writings*, but it had been published anonymously in 1758 in *Library of the Fine Sciences and Free Arts* under the title, “Considerations of the Sublime and the Naïve in the Fine Sciences.” See Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, xxxvi.

of “mixed sentiments” in their final version, one needs to read “Rhapsody,” “On the Main Principles,” and “On the Sublime” together (all published in *Philosophical Writings*). Yet my aim is more limited and I am focusing only on “On the Sublime and Naïve in the Fine Sciences.” This chapter, as its title suggests, examines the representation of the sublime in the fine arts, by which is meant poetry, tragedy, painting, music, and architecture. Mendelssohn quotes poets and tragedians, and in this sense he is like Longinus and Baumgarten. Yet Mendelssohn gives more attention to music and architecture than Baumgarten.

Mendelssohn conceives of the moral sublime (if I can put it this way) under what is called the sublime of power, or intensive magnitude, a category that includes virtue. Awe (*Bewunderung*) is the response to such perfection, which is found in a sublime object, person, or act. To see this, let us examine his views of the sublime more generally.

Mendelssohn, having published in 1758 a review of Burke’s *Enquiry*, was familiar with the latter’s empirical, psychological account of the sublime. As Pollok observes, Mendelssohn takes over many of Burke’s examples while applying or appealing to his own theory of perfection and mixed sentiments.<sup>56</sup> Still, there are differences between their accounts. Whereas Mendelssohn concentrates on (objective) sublimity and the largely positive *Bewunderung* (awe) it inspires, Burke focuses more on the fearful jolt that verges on terror.<sup>57</sup> They also come from different intellectual frameworks. Beiser helpfully observes: “Mendelssohn continued to uphold the aesthetics of perfection of Leibniz, Wolff, and Baumgarten, according to which all aesthetic experience is a sensible perception of rational structure.”<sup>58</sup> Mendelssohn draws from this German scholastic tradition (filled no doubt with internal philosophical differences) to discuss the admiration felt before an object or person exhibiting a kind of “perfection.”

First, Mendelssohn distinguishes beauty from immensity. Whereas beauty is *bounded* and can therefore be taken in by the senses all at once, immensity (“gigantic or enormous in extension”)<sup>59</sup> is *unbounded*. But when “the boundaries of this extension are deferred further and further, then they ultimately disappear completely from the senses and, a result, something *sensuously immense* emerges.”<sup>60</sup> This typically gives rise to a pleasing shudder. The

<sup>56</sup> Pollok, “Mendelssohn’s Notion of Admiration,” 85.

<sup>57</sup> Pollok, “Mendelssohn’s Notion of Admiration,” 85. See also Koller, “Mendelssohn’s Response to Burke on the Sublime,” 331.

<sup>58</sup> Beiser, *Schiller as Philosopher*, 196. Also quoted in Pollok, “Mendelssohn’s Notion of Admiration,” 92, n 27. In contrast to the Mendelssohn-Burke relation, there is little scholarship on Mendelssohn as a response to Baumgarten on the aesthetically great.

<sup>59</sup> Mendelssohn, “On the Sublime,” 93.

<sup>60</sup> Mendelssohn, “On the Sublime,” 93.

“objects of nature” that elicit such an “alluring” trembling are vast or extensive: the vast sea, far-reaching plain, innumerable stars, heights and depths that cannot be comprehended, eternity.<sup>61</sup>

Artists, meanwhile, imitate nature: art, for Mendelssohn, is mimetic. Art, through imitation, can elicit this pleasing shudder or “mixed” sentiment. “Because of the pleasantness of these sentiments art also makes use of them, seeking to produce them through imitation.”<sup>62</sup> Such art is able to awaken this response because it *appears* boundless; it is not itself an unlimited magnitude (*Größe*). For instance, the uniform repetition of temporal intervals in music can represent the experience of an extended immensity.

Mendelssohn identifies two kinds of *immensity* in such art: extended and nonextended (“intensive”). The *extensively* immense can be called the *enormous*, while the *intensively* so can be called the *strong*. The extensively immense is the vast or great in size, the intensive one is the mighty, the great in strength or power. Moreover, “the enormous is for the outer sense precisely what the sublime is for the inner sense.”<sup>63</sup> The sublime in art falls under the latter. When the strength is “a matter of a perfection,” it is said to be *sublime*. As he summarizes it, “In the fine arts and sciences the sensuously perfect representation of something immense will be *enormous*, *strong*, or *sublime* depending upon whether the magnitude concerns an extension and number, a degree of power, or, in particular, a degree of perfection.”<sup>64</sup>

The term commonly applied to what is intensively enormous is “strength,” and strength in perfection is designated “the sublime.” In general, one could also say: each thing that is or appears immense as far as the degree of its perfection is concerned is called *sublime*.<sup>65</sup>

In particular, virtue—including *artistic* virtue or genius—can be seen as a display of intensive immensity. It is a kind of capacity or power.

Whereas *Bewunderung* (awe) is the feeling we have before the sublime, the sublime is characterized as being an objective quality. The sublime is in the object, and its effect on subjects is the feeling of *Bewunderung*.<sup>66</sup> He defines the *sublime in art* as a “sensuously perfect representation” of something immense, one that is capable of inspiring *Bewunderung*.

<sup>61</sup> Mendelssohn, “On the Sublime,” 93.

<sup>62</sup> Mendelssohn, “On the Sublime,” 93. He uses the term “mixed” here.

<sup>63</sup> Mendelssohn, “On the Sublime,” 95.

<sup>64</sup> Mendelssohn, “On the Sublime,” 94.

<sup>65</sup> Mendelssohn, “On the Sublime,” 94.

<sup>66</sup> The sublime is the “object of awe” according to Mendelssohn. Mendelssohn, “On the Sublime,” 96. Dahlstrom sometimes translates *Bewunderung* as “awe” and sometimes as “awe or admiration.”

All these sentiments blend together in the soul, flowing into one another, and become a single phenomenon which we call *awe*. Accordingly, if one wanted to describe the sublime in terms of its effect, then one could say: "It is something sensuously perfect in art, capable of inspiring awe."<sup>67</sup>

*Bewunderung*, he specifies, is a "debt" we owe to the "extraordinary gifts of spirit" or genius creating the work.<sup>68</sup> *Bewunderung* is the soul's condition when it looks at the "unexpectedly good,"<sup>69</sup> the good in turn being another kind of perfection. The sublime experience, Pollok observes, must "contain some reference to a higher perfection" either in the "grandness of the object that overwhelms our sensible apparatus" or in the "genius of the artistic presentation of a subject."<sup>70</sup>

Pollok attributes to Mendelssohn the view that the awe response or *Bewunderung* is "a necessary ingredient in the experience of the sublime." It seems that this "ingredient" of the experience of the sublime is why Mendelssohn considers the experience to be positive and pleasing.<sup>71</sup> (In contrast, Baumgarten does not really explain the sources of the pleasure in the sublime.) In a moment I will suggest two further reasons why, for Mendelssohn, the experience might be pleasant.

Mendelssohn identifies more value in nonextended, *intensive* immensities. Presumably he does so because of their clearer link to *perfection* (on the objective side) as opposed to an imperfection on our part (a limited cognitive-perceptual faculty), as when we cannot comprehend or fully take in a seemingly unbounded object. He claims that mere vastness, magnitude, or greatness (*Größe*), by itself, can start to feel monotonous. The extensively great must contain some kind of order and structure if it is to "awaken a pleasant shudder."<sup>72</sup> It must be the great multitude in a vast unity that hints at a harmonious whole (even if we struggle to comprehend it).<sup>73</sup>

In contemplating the sublime, the mind shares in the object's strength (*Stärke*) and perfection. One feels a union or connectedness with the object, "latching on" to it. "The sentiment produced by the sublime is a composite one. The *magnitude* captures our attention, and since it is the magnitude of

<sup>67</sup> Mendelssohn, "On the Sublime," 94.

<sup>68</sup> Mendelssohn, "On the Sublime," 98.

<sup>69</sup> Mendelssohn, "On the Sublime," 95n.

<sup>70</sup> Pollok, "Mendelssohn's Notion of Admiration," 85.

<sup>71</sup> Pollok, "Mendelssohn's Notion of Admiration," 85. For criticisms of the (Mendelssohnian) view that awe is an *ingredient* of the experience of the sublime and defense of the claim that the sublime experience is instead a kind of awe, see Clewis, "Why the Sublime is Aesthetic Awe" (Forthcoming).

<sup>72</sup> Mendelssohn, "On the Sublime," 93. Pollok, "Mendelssohn's Notion of Admiration," 86.

<sup>73</sup> Pollok, "Mendelssohn's Notion of Admiration," 86. See also Koller, "Mendelssohn's Response to Burke on the Sublime," 340.

AQ: Please update all the references of "Forthcoming".



a perfection, the soul enjoys latching on to this object so that all adjoining concepts in the soul are obscured.”<sup>74</sup> In the experience of the sublime we identify with the power and perfection of the object, and this is one reason why it is uplifting or why the “mixed” experience is ultimately pleasant. We take pleasure in the assumed perfection of the sublime object. In addition, the *imagination* is engaged in (or even expanded by) the sheer number of impressions, producing a “sweet shudder.” The passage continues: “The *immensity* arouses a sweet shudder that rushes through every fiber of our being, and the *multiplicity* prevents all satiation, giving wings to the imagination to press further and further without stopping.”<sup>75</sup> This seems to be another reason why (for Mendelssohn) the experience is pleasing.

Mendelssohn’s preference for intensive immensities can be seen in the following passage:

The intensively great is less likely than the extensively great to lead to satiation and disgust:

Power, genius, virtue have their unextended immensity that likewise arouses a spine-tingling sentiment but has the advantage of not ending, through tedious uniformity, in satiation and even disgust, as generally happens in the case of the extended immensity.<sup>76</sup>

As can be seen from this passage, Mendelssohn places moral qualities such as “virtue,” as well as artistic ones such as “genius,” alongside “power”: these are all kinds of capacity or strength. When we behold the creative genius, stunning virtuoso, or wholly virtuous person, whom we admire precisely because we know we cannot achieve what they do, we sometimes feel a pleasant shudder or even a delightful dizziness.

The perfect representation of intensive immensity (in response to the sublime) produces *Bewunderung* because it passes beyond our ordinary, customary expectations. Echoing Baumgarten, there are two kinds of *Bewunderung*, one felt in response to the *perfection in the object represented* and the other at the *perfection in the artist*. The second kind is a response to the artist’s powers of representation and artistic abilities: the artist represents ordinary objects in an extraordinary way. In the perfection in the presentation, we discern the stamp or footprint of genius.

<sup>74</sup> Mendelssohn, “On the Sublime,” 94.

<sup>75</sup> Mendelssohn, “On the Sublime,” 94. Kant will also identify an expansion of imagination in the sublime.

<sup>76</sup> Mendelssohn, “On the Sublime,” 93–94.

In the works of fine arts and sciences, the awe, like the perfection which it presupposes, belongs to two different genera. Either the object to be represented possesses awesome properties in and for itself, in which case the awe at the object becomes the dominating idea in the soul; or the object in itself is not so extraordinary, but the artist possesses the skill of elevating its properties and showing them in an uncommon light. In this case the awe is directed more at the imitation than at the original, more at the merits of the art than at the merits of the object.<sup>77</sup>

In the sublime in art in which the artist represents a sublime object (the first kind of sublimity, “in which the basis for awe is to be found in the very matter to be represented”<sup>78</sup>), the *naive and unaffected* expression and presentation are most appropriate. The artist (e.g., Klopstock and Shakespeare) need not and should not embellish the magnitude represented. “It becomes clear from this that excessive embellishment in the expression of things is not compatible with something sublime of the first type.”<sup>79</sup> Rather, “in representing something sublime of this type, the artist must devote himself to a naive, unaffected expression which allows the reader or spectator to think more than is said to him.”<sup>80</sup>

But in the second type of sublimity (concerning the perfection of the *artist*) matters are different. Here the poet’s *manner of presentation* can make use of “embellishments” and “beauties,” for instance, in the selection of adjectives that designate “the most sensuous properties,” in word combination, and in melody and harmony.<sup>81</sup> This view of the combination of “objective sublimity” and “subjective sublimity” is summarized in the following:

Hence, subjective sublimity can in many cases be combined with objective sublimity. Depending, however, upon whether the awe [*Bewunderung*] redound more to the object itself or to the skill of the artist, the expression can be more or less embellished, something that must be judged in each case on the basis of the makeup of the subject treated or of the aim of the artist.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Mendelssohn, “On the Sublime,” 95.

<sup>78</sup> Mendelssohn, “On the Sublime,” 97.

<sup>79</sup> Mendelssohn, “On the Sublime,” 96.

<sup>80</sup> Mendelssohn, “On the Sublime,” 96–97. The representation of the objective sublime in mimetic or representational art can be contrasted with the representation by what Lyotard’s calls “avant-garde” art, where this is a *negative* presentation of the infinite or transcendent, and the image (in part) represents what cannot be fully represented. Lyotard writes, “The avant-gardist attempt inscribes the occurrence of a sensory *now* as what cannot be presented and which remains to be presented in the decline of great representational painting.” See Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde,” in Clewis, *The Sublime Reader*, 268.

<sup>81</sup> Mendelssohn, “On the Sublime,” 99.

<sup>82</sup> Mendelssohn, “On the Sublime,” 99.

Moreover, the distinction between sublimity in the matter or object represented, on the one hand, and the intentions of the artist to represent it in a certain way, on the other, turns out to be useful. Toward the end of the essay, Mendelssohn makes use of it in proposing a way to resolve certain aesthetic disagreements when judging the sublimity of a line or phrase. For instance, a long-standing debate surrounding the Biblical passage from Genesis, “God said, Let there be light,” can be resolved by appealing to this distinction. According to Mendelssohn, some “art critics” are focusing on the “intention” of the author (which was *not* to utter a sublime statement). Other critics, meanwhile, are paying attention to the “action” or “event” described; on this view, the passage would be sublime.<sup>83</sup>

What of the moral sublime? As we can see from the passages cited so far, Mendelssohn’s account contains something we can call the moral sublime, in that he considers virtue to be a sublime quality. Virtue includes both moral and artistic displays of excellence. As a kind of power or intensive sublime, virtue can be a sublimity: it is a kind of power or capacity to perform the morally great act. Note that the felt *Bewunderung* is a *response* to observing virtue, not the sentiment one feels when being virtuous.

To be sure, Mendelssohn does not use the terms “noble” or “moral” sublime. He does not identify a unique subspecies of sublimity to account for remarkable, stirring displays of virtue. Rather, he places such sublimity at the very heart of his theory. The moral sublime is already captured by his conception of the sublime as a strong, intensive immensity, a kind of perfection in the object. There is no need to carve out a subspecies named the “moral sublime.”

Finally, let us consider the question of the divine. Recall that according to the Judeo-Christian tradition, God is seen as the most divine being; this is reflected in the theories ranging from the Christian scholastics (writing on *sublimis* and its relatives) to Dennis and Burke. Mendelssohn continues this line of thinking in a passage that was partially quoted above and continues as follows:

In general, one could also say: each thing that is or appears immense as far as the degree of its perfection is concerned is called *sublime*. God is called “the most sublime being.” A truth is said to be “sublime” if it concerns a quite perfect or complete entity such as God, the universe, the human soul and if it is of immense use to the human race or its discovery would require a great genius.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>83</sup> Mendelssohn, “On the Sublime,” 100.

<sup>84</sup> Mendelssohn, “On the Sublime,” 94.

After giving a working definition of the sublime (“in general, one could also say”), in other words, he observes that God is called the most sublime being. This is very much like Aquinas’s claim about reverence for the sublime truth (God). And a few lines later Mendelssohn writes: “The properties of the Supreme Being which we recognize in his works inspire the most ecstatic awe [*Bewunderung*] because they surpass everything that we can conceive as enormous, perfect, or sublime.”<sup>85</sup>

On this issue, Mendelssohn is largely in agreement with the preceding theological-aesthetic tradition. To see a more radical turn on the moral sublime and God, we will have to go Kant.

### KANT AND POST-KANTIAN GERMAN AESTHETICS

We now turn to the sublime in general in Kant’s third *Critique*. He famously divides the sublime into two forms, the dynamical and the mathematical, the mathematical form of the sublime being a response to extent or vastness and the dynamical a response to great power. It may well be, as Guyer suggests, that Baumgarten’s distinction between natural and moral kinds of aesthetic magnitude, on the one hand, and Mendelssohn’s distinction between extensive and nonextensive immensities, on the other, anticipated or even influenced Kant’s subsequent division of the sublime into the mathematical and dynamical forms of sublimity.<sup>86</sup> Since Kant’s theory of the sublime has been the object of a vast scholarly literature, the following discussion will indeed focus on the similarities and differences between Kant and his predecessors on the sublime (i.e., Baumgarten and Mendelssohn).

Unlike both Baumgarten and Mendelssohn, Kant does not think of the sublime as an objective quality. The sublime is in the mind. “Thus sublimity is not contained in anything in nature, but only in our mind, insofar as we can become conscious of being superior to nature within us and thus also to nature outside us (insofar as it influences us).”<sup>87</sup> We, not the object, are sublime. Accordingly, nature is only *improperly* called sublime. The next sentence continues: “Everything that arouses this feeling in us, which includes the *power* of nature that calls forth our own powers, is thus (although

<sup>85</sup> Mendelssohn, “On the Sublime,” 94.

<sup>86</sup> “This [Mendelssohn’s] distinction [between extended and unextended immensity], like Baumgarten’s distinction between ‘natural’ and ‘moral magnitude,’ anticipates Kant’s subsequent distinction between the ‘mathematical’ and the ‘dynamical’ sublime, and while it was not uncommon in British discussions of the sublime, Mendelssohn may be Kant’s most likely source for it.” Guyer, *History of Modern Aesthetics*, vol. 1, 361–362.

<sup>87</sup> Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, §28 (AA 5:264), 136—the last page reference listed in Kant citations will be to the selection in Clewis, *The Sublime Reader*.

improperly) called sublime.”<sup>88</sup> And at the end of his discussion of the sublime (§30), Kant writes: “the sublime in nature is only improperly so called, and should properly be ascribed only to the manner of thinking, or rather to its foundation in human nature.”<sup>89</sup> If we actually think of the sublime as an objective property, he holds, we commit a mistake in reasoning.<sup>90</sup>

The sublime lies in the subject in at least two ways for Kant. First, it is a feeling. He often writes about the *feeling* of the sublime, a feeling of our own greatness and power. Second, he holds it is the mind, reason, or way of thinking (*Denkungsart*) that is sublime (or that “introduces” sublimity). We seek a ground of the sublime, he writes, merely “in ourselves and in the way of thinking that introduces sublimity” into a representation.<sup>91</sup>

Another key divergence from Baumgarten and Mendelssohn is that (at least in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*) Kant does not typically have in mind the sublime in art or the artistic sublime. Almost all of Kant’s examples come from nature: they are natural wonders such as overhanging cliffs, ravines, mountain chains, and the innumerable stars in the night sky. (This is one reason why his work on the sublime is widely invoked in recent environmental aesthetic theory.) Indeed, many of Kant’s examples from nature are the same as those mentioned by his predecessors, including Mendelssohn. They are stock examples.

Kant is not so much concerned with the artistic representation of such object, at least not in the third *Critique*. (In the *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, by contrast, many of his examples come from literature and poetry.) He is interested in the natural object itself as giving rise to an experience of the sublime, the purposiveness of which is found not in the object but in the use we make of it, namely, as it reveals our human freedom and (what he thinks this ultimately implies) our moral vocation or calling. This is not to say that the natural object plays no role in his account. The object plays a role in Kant’s systematic aims in that an object of nature gives rise to an experience that is taken to be an experience of freedom. For Kant, this allows philosophers to forge a bridge (in a way of thinking, if not in an ontological sense) from nature to freedom.<sup>92</sup>

<sup>88</sup> Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, §28 (AA 5:264), 136 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>89</sup> Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, §30 (AA 5:280), 146.

<sup>90</sup> Although I am striving to summarize Kant’s account as clearly as possible, it is worth pointing out that Kant is not consistent about what the predicate “sublime” properly applies to and picks out—a distinct kind of *feeling* or experience, the rational *mind*, *reason*, an *idea of reason* such as the idea of *freedom* or *infinity* (what is beyond all measure, that which is absolutely great), *freedom* itself as a capacity to set ends, the human moral *calling*, to name just a few candidates.

<sup>91</sup> Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, §23 (AA 5:246), 124.

<sup>92</sup> See Clewis, “The Place of the Sublime in Kant’s Project,” 149–168.

But Kant does not completely overlook the artistic sublime and he does not deny its possibility.<sup>93</sup> The *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of view* (1798), a handbook published toward the end of Kant's life on the basis of his handwritten notes for his anthropology course, contains claims about representing the sublime in art, which for Kant (as for Mendelssohn) should be both beautiful and mimetic. The section "On Taste with regard to the Sublime," states:

The *sublime* is the counterweight but not the opposite of the beautiful; because the effort and attempt to raise ourselves to a grasp (*apprehensio*) of the object awakens in us a feeling of our own greatness and power; but the representation in thought of the sublime by *description* or presentation can and must always be beautiful. . . . The artistic presentation of the sublime in description and embellishment (in secondary works, *parerga*) can and should be beautiful, since otherwise it is wild, coarse, and repulsive, and, consequently, contrary to taste.<sup>94</sup>

This position seems quite similar to Mendelssohn's claims about the latter's second form of the sublime. Even if (unlike Mendelssohn) Kant does not focus on the perfection of the *artist*, he agrees that the artist can, even should, appeal to embellishments and various ways of making it more beautiful. Yet such a discussion of the beautiful representation of the sublime in art is not found in the official third *Critique* account (although it is consistent with it).

Related to this, in his 1790 discussion (unlike Baumgarten and Mendelssohn) Kant rarely quotes from other authors who wrote about the sublime. Kant gives what might be called a phenomenological description of the experience of the sublime, and in addition offers a transcendental explanation of the conditions that make that phenomenological experience possible: the interplay between reason and imagination.

There are two possible exceptions to this lack of references: first, when Kant writes that "we call" something sublime, and, second, his citation of the *Exodus* injunction against making images of God. Given his focus on experience, Kant never really clarifies what he means when he says that *we call* something *sublime*, a phrase that occurs several times (e.g., first paragraph of §24, opening line in §25, title of §30). In the end, though, it is not really a genuine citation. A rare instance of quotation occurs, however, when Kant refers to the prohibition of image-making of the divine (Exodus 20:4). "Perhaps there is no more sublime passage in the Jewish Book of the Law than the commandment: Thou shalt not make unto thyself any graven image,

<sup>93</sup> For a defense of the possibility of artistic sublimity in Kant's account, see Clewis, "A Case for Kantian Artistic Sublimity," 167–170.

<sup>94</sup> Kant, *Anthropology*, §68 (AA 7:243), 147.

nor any likeness either of that which is in heaven, or on the earth, or yet under the earth.”<sup>95</sup>

If God cannot be represented, what about freedom? This leads to the question of the moral sublime. Here we see a further difference between Kant and his predecessors. In his work of 1764, the *Observations*, Kant identifies a type of sublimity called the noble (*edel*) sublime.<sup>96</sup> But when he publishes on the same topic some twenty-five years later, there are only two kinds of sublime (mathematical, dynamical), not three. And the noble sublime drops out—at least officially.

Nevertheless, even if Kant does not use the term “noble” sublime or “the moral sublime” in 1790, there are two senses in which Kant can be said to have something like it. First, he describes our responses to virtue as sublime, offering the example of the fearless, virtuous soldier who evokes our admiration. Second, he holds that the sublime is based or grounded on “moral feeling” and freedom: in a loose sense, the sublime already is moral.

Let us examine the first of these. Kant thinks that we can respond with *Bewunderung* to the virtuous soldier who displays fearlessness before death.

For what is it that is an object of the greatest admiration [*Bewunderung*] even to the savage? Someone who is not frightened, who has no fear, thus does not shrink before danger but energetically sets to work with full deliberation. And even in the most civilized circumstances this exceptionally high esteem for the warrior remains, only now it is also demanded that he at the same time display all the virtues of peace, gentleness, compassion and even proper care for his own person, precisely because in this way the incoercibility of his mind by danger can be recognized.<sup>97</sup>

Observers can here feel a sublime response to the genteel soldier’s embodiment of virtue. The soldier is not the one feeling the sublime; instead, with “full deliberation,” he feels apathy. He is unmoved. He possesses self-rule and self-control (“incoercibility of his mind”), rising above nature. (This is yet *another* sense of *Erhabenheit*—he has sublimity in that he is raised above nature, and it should not be confused with the claim that he makes a pure aesthetic judgment of the sublime or has the feeling associated with that judgment. Not everyone who is raised in this sense *feels* the sublime.) It’s

<sup>95</sup> Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, “General Remark” (AA 5:274), 142.

<sup>96</sup> Kant, *Observations*, 106 (AA 2:209). In this “pre-critical” treatise, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, Kant distinguishes the sublime and the beautiful in terms of their phenomenology and qualities. He identifies and gives examples of three kinds of sublimity (noble, terrifying, magnificent). In addition to identifying a form of the moral sublime (noble), he in turn also discusses moral feeling in terms of sublimity.

<sup>97</sup> Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, §28 (AA 5:262), 135.

we who observe the soldier's rising above nature who can feel the sublime and thereby make an aesthetic judgment of the sublime. The structure of this observer-object relation seems similar to Mendelssohn's account where we feel *Bewunderung* in response to a display of virtue.<sup>98</sup>

Let us turn to the second instance. In the third *Critique* Kant clearly connects the sublime to freedom. He bases the sublime on a shared human feature, our own practical freedom (even if we cannot *prove* our freedom—neither to ourselves nor to anyone else). Since for Kant freedom is a moral concept, then, if he grounds the sublime on freedom, he is grounding it on a moral concept. In this important passage, Kant claims that the judgment on the sublime in nature is founded on human nature, namely, freedom, which in turn demands the cultivation of moral feeling.

But just because the judgment on the sublime in nature requires culture (more so than that on the beautiful), it is not therefore first generated by culture and so to speak introduced into society merely as a matter of convention; rather it has its foundation in human nature, and indeed in that which can be required of everyone and demanded of him along with healthy understanding, namely in the predisposition to the feeling for (practical) ideas, i.e., to that which is moral. . . . But because the latter [i.e., the sublime] relates the imagination to reason, as the faculty of ideas, we require it only under a subjective presupposition (which, however, we believe ourselves to be justified in demanding of everyone), namely that of the moral feeling in the human being, and so we also ascribe necessity to this aesthetic judgment.<sup>99</sup>

Kant grounds the necessity that we attribute to claims of the sublime, to our having a capacity for moral feeling, namely, on our human constitution as (presumably) free beings. ("Presumably" means: we operate under the idea of freedom and take ourselves to be free whenever we act, but we cannot prove that we are free.) The experience is grounded on our being rational and finite beings who are aware of the moral law through the "moral feeling" of respect. This way of thinking (*Denkungsart*) is capable of being shared by all human beings. It is a way of thinking that everyone *should* have (even when they do not): the sublime is grounded in this feature of human nature. (Kant's unfortunate claim, above, that the judgment of the sublime in nature "requires" culture seems to be in direct tension with an assertion in that same sentence, viz., that it is "not therefore first generated by culture," and it seems inconsistent with his appeal to human nature and freedom.) The experience

<sup>98</sup> For a classification of the various solicitors of the moral sublime, see Appendix 3 in Clewis, *The Kantian Sublime and the Revelation of Freedom*, 233.

<sup>99</sup> Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, §29 (AA 5: 265–266), 137.



of the sublime is based on our shared capacity and disposition to hold other people accountable for our feelings and actions, and to do so on the basis of reasons. The sublime is grounded in our status as normative beings.

Kant's account of the sublime shows one sense in which Kant is a dialectical thinker (if I can put it this way). At first, Kant separates interest from the sublime: the pure aesthetic judgment of the sublime in nature is disinterested. But after conceptually distinguishing or separating them, he then reunites interest and the sublime. "Even that which we call sublime in nature outside us or even within ourselves (e.g., certain affects) is represented only as a power of the mind to soar above *certain* obstacles of sensibility by means of moral principles, and thereby to become interesting."<sup>100</sup> We can here discern a distinction between first-order and second-order. On the first-order, a pure aesthetic judgment of the sublime is disinterested,<sup>101</sup> but on the second-order we can take an interest in it—just as we can take an interest in the experience of beauty which is itself disinterested.<sup>102</sup> Reason always has an interest in such demonstrations of claims to universal validity (an "interest in disinterestedness," as it were), in claims to intersubjectivity and agreement, since such demonstrations can promote one of the ends of reason, morality. If the sublime is a sensible expression of ideas of reason and an experience of freedom, it is evidence of the presence of reason in the world, and as such, can be taken to support and promote reason's practical-moral interests.

Finally, when it comes to the question of God and the sublime, Kant rejects the traditional view. It is not God who is sublime, it is rather *we* (our reason, etc.) who are. It is not God who is truth; it is *we* who, by virtue of our faculties of intuition and categories, are capable of making truthful judgments. Moreover, he holds that we should not adopt a slavish or fearful attitude toward God, but should feel self-respect and self-esteem, based on our status as (presumably) free beings capable of morality.<sup>103</sup>

As for freedom, there is no risk that freedom, which cannot be put into an image, will not motivate us via the moral law. "It is utterly mistaken to worry that if it were deprived of everything that the senses can recommend it would then bring with it nothing but cold, lifeless approval and no moving force or emotion."<sup>104</sup> Freedom is always strong enough to act as a motive, since we are constituted so as to feel pure respect for freedom in the form of the moral law. While technically it is impossible for us to have a sensible intuition of freedom (for reasons Kant gives in the first *Critique*), freedom can

<sup>100</sup> Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, "General Remark" (AA 5:271), 141.

<sup>101</sup> Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, §24 (AA 5:247), 125.

<sup>102</sup> On the intellectual interest in beauty, see Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, §42 (AA 5:298).

<sup>103</sup> Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, §28 (AA 5:263), 136.

<sup>104</sup> Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, "General Remark" (AA 5:274), 143.

be represented symbolically or analogically. In fact, one of the aims of art is to provide sensible symbols of freedom, and the artist represents symbols of freedom in various ways—a point that Schiller and other post-Kantian philosophers will take up.

Let us thus briefly explore some of their ideas, to glimpse how the concept of the sublime will develop in the German aesthetic tradition after Baumgarten, Mendelssohn, and Kant.

Friedrich Schiller shares some of the psychological elements deriving from Burke and Mendelssohn, offering vivid, rich descriptions of the experience of the sublime. Unlike Mendelssohn, however, Schiller accepts the Kantian transcendental arguments for the view that the sublime is grounded on freedom and moral feeling. For instance, Schiller emphasizes the “practical” sublime over the “cognitive” sublime.<sup>105</sup> Like Baumgarten and Mendelssohn, Schiller views the sublime as a paradigmatic response to tragedy. Like them, then, Schiller emphasizes sublimity in art.

G. W. F. Hegel repudiates an anthropological-psychological orientation, whether non-transcendental (as in Baumgarten and Mendelssohn) or transcendental (as in Kant and Schiller). He construes the sublime ontologically.<sup>106</sup> In his lectures on fine art (published posthumously in 1835), Hegel rejects seeing the sublime as a merely subjective state and more generally is critical of psychological accounts of the sublime. Accordingly, Hegel offers scant reference to the moral or to moral greatness in his account of the sublime. Rather, the sublime consists in an attempt to grasp God (the infinite) in finite expression, that is, in poetry. This attempt necessarily fails, he thinks, and thereby turns into the next stage of the dialectic.

If Hegel makes freedom a core notion of his view of the sublime, it is in a sense that differs from the transcendental-psychological one found in Kant and Schiller. For *this* freedom is not a subject’s freedom of the will. If Hegel makes any connection of the sublime to freedom, it is only insofar as Hegel’s philosophy itself is posited as an expression of freedom, namely, the idea coming to know itself in and through external forms, distinct from itself, or: spirit knowing itself in the form of spirit (in and for itself). The sublime is for Hegel a stage in the “Symbolic” form of art that will pass into “Classical” form of art. In turn, the Absolute (the idea) will find a deeper expression in religion than in art, before being grasped most fully in conceptual thought by philosophy.

<sup>105</sup> See Schiller’s 1793 essay, “On the Sublime: (Toward the Further Development of Some Kantian Ideas)” —not to be confused with his 1801 essay “Concerning the Sublime”—in Clewis, ed., *The Sublime Reader*, 150–160.

<sup>106</sup> For the account of the sublime found in Hegel’s lectures on fine art, see Clewis, *The Sublime Reader*, 200–210.

Arthur Schopenhauer, finally, proposes that a person perceiving the sublime feels a connectedness or union with a world-whole or universe. Unlike Baumgarten and Mendelssohn, however, Schopenhauer does not describe this union (a bond with the world-whole, not with the object) in terms of *perfection*. The experience, involving a loss of self, reveals the world as pure striving or willing, which in his view is blind, not guided by the morally good or any kind of perfection. Schopenhauer would question Baumgarten's and Mendelssohn's appeals to a scholastic notion of perfection. For related reasons, Schopenhauer rejects what he perceived as Kant's moral "scholastic philosophy," although he accepts Kant's conception and division of the mathematical and dynamical sublime.

The impression of the sublime can arise in quite a different way by our imagining a mere magnitude in space and time, whose immensity reduces the individual to nought. By retaining Kant's terms and his correct division, we can call the first kind the dynamically sublime, and the second the mathematically sublime, although we differ from him entirely in the explanation of the inner nature of that impression, and can concede no share in this either to moral reflections or to hypostases from scholastic philosophy.<sup>107</sup>

Since Kant's theory itself repudiates much of German scholasticism, Schopenhauer's remark seems rather unfair, even if he is honing in on an undeniable element of moralism in Kant's account. For his part, Schopenhauer prefers to look to the ancient religious texts of India (such as the *Upanishads*) rather than the theological texts of medieval philosophy or the Leibnizian tradition to which Baumgarten and Mendelssohn belonged and contributed.

Finally, it is worth mentioning Schopenhauer on the sublime and art. Like Baumgarten, Mendelssohn, and Schiller (to name a few from the German tradition alone), Schopenhauer sees a deep connection between dramatic tragedy and the sublime. Schopenhauer writes, "Our pleasure in tragedy belongs not to the feeling of the beautiful, but to that of the sublime; it is, in fact, the highest degree of this feeling." The effect of tragedy is "analogous to that of the dynamically sublime, since, like this, it raises us above the will and its interest, and puts us in such a mood that we find pleasure in the sight of what directly opposes the will."<sup>108</sup> So, whereas in the third *Critique* Kant does not present the sublime as one of the main ways to respond to dramatic

<sup>107</sup> Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Vol. 1, §39. See also Clewis, *The Sublime Reader*, 197.

<sup>108</sup> Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, quoted from Clewis, *The Sublime Reader*, 194.

tragedy, Schopenhauer does so by employing Kant's category of the dynamical sublime.

### CONCLUSION: THE MORAL SUBLIME?

Baumgarten's theory is in part an *aesthetics of truth*, since the majesty of cognition is a perfection of sensible cognition. Baumgarten might not *deny* the emotive or affective side of the sublime, but in the *Aesthetics* he does not really emphasize it either, for he offers little to no description of the phenomenology of the sublime. In contrast, given the central role Mendelssohn gives to the notion of *Bewunderung* and his recognition of an expansion of imagination (pressing further on its "wings"), his account is in part a theory of emotion and of imaginative play. But it is *also* one of truth, since the sublime discloses goodness (to which "awe" is a response) and perfections in the world.

Both Baumgarten and Mendelssohn work with a conception of perfection, although not the same one. For Baumgarten the focus is on the perfection of *sensible cognition*. For Mendelssohn it is about the perfection of the *object*, whether in the object presented or in the artist representing.

Kant, in turn, rejects most of this perfectionism. To be sure, the third *Critique's* notion of adherent or dependent beauty (§16) does recognize the active role played by concepts in the formation and articulation of disinterested and subjectively universal aesthetic judgments, and perhaps there could be said to be partially intellectualized aesthetic judgments of the sublime.<sup>109</sup> Nevertheless, Kant generally thinks that aesthetic theory should focus on the play of imagination and mental faculties and, in the case of the sublime, on emotion, more than on the perception of perfections in the object. If there is any perfectionism in Kant's 1790 view of the sublime, it lies in his claim that in sublime experiences we admire our own reason.<sup>110</sup>

Baumgarten has a version of the moral sublime, claiming that virtue alone is sublime (*sublimis*) and elevated from a moral perspective. Here it would be useful to recall the practical ends of Baumgarten's aesthetic project, the second practical part of the *Aesthetics* that he never completed, as well as the practical thrust of his thinking as a whole. The ends of thinking are practical; the aim is to realize the talents God gave us.<sup>111</sup> In accordance with this, there

<sup>109</sup> Though it is missed by most commentators, Kant suggests at least the possibility of partially intellectual (adherent) judgments of the sublime. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, §29 (AA 5:269–270), 140.

<sup>110</sup> Guyer, *History of Modern Aesthetics*, vol. 1, 362–363.

<sup>111</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, §12.

is a religious-theological element in his thoughts on the sublime: Everything human, even the great, is to be subordinated to the divine. Aesthetic theory has practical, not just theoretical, aims: to make individuals better through aesthetic exercises and practices. The goal is to acquire, among other things, an aesthetic habit.<sup>112</sup> Aesthetics should help cultivate the lower faculties of cognition for moral improvement. In this there is some affinity with Longinus, since the one of the objectives of Longinus's *On the Sublime* is to help us improve our natural gifts and thereby elevate us.

Mendelssohn, we have seen, sees virtue as an objective sublimity. Virtue, including artistic virtue, is a kind of objective perfection, and we respond to it with *Bewunderung*.

When it comes to the moral sublime, Kant is more indirect. But even here, as we have seen, Kant thinks we respond with *Bewunderung* to the gentle, moral soldier. Moreover, Kant's theory of the sublime is clearly based on everyone's having a capacity for moral feeling. This is not to say it is the moral sublime in a way that will *reduce* the sublime to the moral feeling, but it does show that morality (like freedom) underlies this theory. This is after all what Schopenhauer found to be repugnant in Kant's moral "scholasticism."

How innovative is Kant here? Whether one thinks that Kant is innovative or not probably depends to some extent on one's preference for focusing on differences rather than continuities. At least in this case, I prefer to be a "lumper" rather than a "splitter" and to emphasize the continuities. As noted, Kant offers the examples of the virtuous soldier to which we respond with a feeling of the sublime; and he bases the sublime on our shared human freedom and moral feeling—a way in which the sublime could merit being called (in a loose sense) already a "moral sublime," though of course not in a way that reduces the aesthetic to the moral or that loses sight of Kant's distinctions between these spheres. Accordingly, when Baumgarten writes of the natural and moral forms of aesthetic magnitude, "lumpers" might be inclined to see these reemerge in Kant's theory of the pure aesthetic judgment of the mathematical and dynamical sublime in nature, seeing the dynamical as Kant's modified version of what Baumgarten called the "moral" kind of aesthetic magnitude. In contrast, "splitters" might instead wish to say that it is precisely Kant's *rejection* of and failure to defend a category of the "moral" sublime (at least in 1790) that constitutes his unique contribution to the aesthetics of the sublime. But, in addition to what has already been mentioned, splitters have the additional burden (to name just one) of having to explain the numerous passages in which Kant describes our aesthetic, disinterested experiences and responses to moral phenomena (the moral law itself and its embodiments

AQ: Should "since the one" be

"since one" in the sentence "In

this there is some affinity with Longinus...?"

Please check.

AQ: Is it "everyone's" or "every-

one" in the sentence "Moreover,

Kant's theory of the sublime is clearly based...?"

Please check.

<sup>112</sup> Grote, *Emergence of Modern Aesthetic Theory*, 128–141. Buchenau, *The Founding of Aesthetics*, 148.

and representations) in way that does not see these as merely experiences of the dynamical sublime or subsume these experiences under the dynamical. Presumably such aesthetic (disinterested) responses to the moral law or its embodiments cannot be experiences of the dynamical sublime, since for Kant the moral law, unlike the menacing object that initiates an experience of the dynamical sublime, cannot elicit fear in us.

Other scholars might understandably stress what is new in the third *Critique* and insist that it contains no official concept of the moral sublime; technically they would be right. But I think it would be a mistake not to see, in Kant's writings, how freedom connects up with morality. In the 1764 *Observations*, he explicitly recognizes the moral or noble (*edel*) sublime, leading one to inquire whether or not it emerges in the other elements of his thought after all. And one might likewise wonder if Kant had in mind something like the intellectual interest in the sublime (on par with the beautiful) when he describes the "interest" we take in "enthusiasm" (where *Enthusiasm* is defined in the third *Critique* as "the idea of the good with affect"), both in 1790 and a few years later.<sup>113</sup> In a work published in 1798, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, he describes the intellectual interest we take in the sublime-like response of enthusiasm (*Enthusiasm*) for the first French Republic. He characterizes the distant onlookers' participation (*Theilnehmung*) as "exaltation" (*Exaltation*) and calls this response universal (*allgemein*) and disinterested (*uneigennützig*).<sup>114</sup> The overlap with the experience of the sublime should be clear. Accordingly, Kant can be said to describe (or even himself take) an intellectual interest in something (i.e., enthusiasm) that shares some of the key features of the experience of the sublime; moreover, an experience that too is morally based.<sup>115</sup>

<sup>113</sup> Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, "General Remark" (AA 5:272), 141. Immediately before that he had written: "Even that which we call sublime in nature outside us or even within ourselves (e.g., certain affects) is represented only as a power of the mind to soar above *certain* obstacles of sensibility by means of moral principles, and thereby to become interesting."

<sup>114</sup> Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, 301–303 (AA 7: 85–87). He writes at AA 7: 86, in my translation: "True enthusiasm moves only towards what is ideal and, indeed, purely moral, including the concept of right, and it cannot be grafted onto self-interest." I give a fuller defense of the present interpretation in *The Kantian Sublime and the Revelation of Freedom*.

<sup>115</sup> The concept of enthusiasm (*enthousiasmos*, which Baumgarten writes in Greek) seems important to Baumgarten's thoughts on the sublime, in part because of the enthusiasm's traditional connection to artistic creation. In line with the pre-Kantian and modern stance on artistic creativity, Baumgarten believes in the compatibility of the idea of exercise and method with genius, or enthusiasm, impetus, and divine breath. Buchenau, *The Founding of Aesthetics*, 149. On *enthousiasmos*, see especially Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, §78, §95. At *Aesthetics* §416, Baumgarten even characterizes enthusiasm as having rational elements and as occurring "with the approval of reason" and "in the presence of rational conscience" before, during, and after the moving pathos. On such tranquility, see also Baumgarten, *Ethica philosophica*, §445. Whereas Baumgarten does little to define enthusiasm in terms of the morally good, Kant quite pointedly characterizes enthusiasm as "the idea of the good with affect."

Before closing, it might be useful to see how contemporary empirical research on the sublime (or aesthetic “awe”) might be like or unlike the accounts we have examined. Empirical studies hardly talk of the “perfection” of sensible cognition, like Baumgarten, or call the sublime the “majesty of cognition.” But insofar as current empirical research in aesthetics looks at the psychological and physical responses to the sublime (“awe”), it follows the same path as Mendelssohn, who accepted much of the psychological account of Burke and used many of his examples. While Kant is still widely cited in philosophy, it is Burke above all who dominates (as citations and references attest) this subdiscipline of empirical research. The preference for Burke is perhaps due to Kant’s transcendental (hence nonempirical) method and penchant for a philosophical system, and in part to the difficulty of the expression and presentation of his ideas (even in the original German), not to mention the content. Specifically, I doubt many contemporary empirical researchers would accept Kant’s thesis the experience of the sublime is based on and requires the notion of freedom, on the grounds that it is too hard to test empirically. (Incidentally, that freedom is not empirically verifiable is a point Kant would readily grant.)

For philosophers and aesthetic theorists, meanwhile, the question remains: is it fruitful to capture the morally noble or virtuous using the notion of the sublime?

It depends on which conception of the “aesthetic” we employ. If we regard the aesthetic as free from any practical-moral elements, there is hardly room for a *moral* sublime. In Baumgarten and Mendelssohn (like Shaftesbury and many others), however, there *is* room for a moral sublime, as well as, more generally, for blending virtue and beauty (and in turn beauty and the sublime), or the sublime and religious feeling. In short, there is room for combining the aesthetic and the moral.<sup>116</sup>

Today, the experience of the sublime tends to be seen as “aesthetic” in the sense that was developed and consolidated above all by Kant. For introducing and defending rigid distinctions and divisions among the aesthetic, moral, and religious spheres, it is common to blame Kant (or praise him, depending on one’s view). It is widely accepted that Kant, at least according to a prominent interpretation of him, divided up these three spheres and, even more than

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<sup>116</sup> On this issue, see Kathrine Cuccuru, “The Problem with the History of Aesthetics before Aesthetics.” Mirbach includes her article with the following lines: “Man can come near to God by striving for the perfection not only of his cognitive, but also of his appetitive faculties. In this last point I believe there is (*especially in the chapter on aesthetic greatness*) a fundamental ethical and theological meaning for aesthetics as theory of sensory cognition. This ethical and theological import of aesthetics for Baumgarten has hitherto not been realized to the extent it deserves. But it opens up a new horizon for the understanding and the evaluation of the complexity of Baumgarten’s aesthetic theory in the history of aesthetics.” Mirbach, “Aesthetic Greatness,” 120; emphasis added.

Baumgarten, helped shape aesthetics into the discipline it is today. Hence Buchenau can justly claim: “While the practical origin of Baumgarten’s aesthetics has not completely escaped the notice of interpreters, these interpreters, paradoxically, have preferred to view its *primary impulse* as *incompatible* with modern aesthetics. In their account, Baumgarten’s practical view is a relic from pre-modern art theory, and one of the main *problems* immanent in his aesthetics.”<sup>117</sup> Whether one thinks that Kant improved Baumgarten’s account or (as she hints) made things worse, what seems true is that, had current aesthetic theory followed the author of the *Aesthetics*, there would now be much less hesitation in accepting the blending of the aesthetic and the moral found in accounts of the sublime. It is the (apparently) Kantian division that makes us pause at the notion of a moral sublime or even view the concept of a moral sublime as being in tension with itself.

As noted, such a judgment may well involve a caricature of Kant. As we have seen, Kant reunites (after separating them) interest and disinterest in the sublime. Moreover, he combines (after distinguishing) the aesthetic and the moral features of the experience of the sublime, by claiming that the sublime is based on freedom and a capacity for moral feeling. Nevertheless, for those who prefer straightforward and non-dialectical combinations of the aesthetic and the moral, rather than a distinguishing and reuniting, Baumgarten could function as a viable source of inspiration.

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<sup>117</sup> Buchenau, *The Founding of Aesthetics*, 178.