

Essay Review

What's the Big Idea? On Emily Brady's *Sublime*

THE SUBLIME IN MODERN PHILOSOPHY: AESTHETICS, ETHICS, AND NATURE, by Emily Brady. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. 240 pp., \$99.99, hc.

"The sublime is a massive concept," Emily Brady states in her book's first sentence. Her lucid study of the sublime should interest scholars from a wide range of disciplines, from environmental philosophy and aesthetics to the history of philosophy, art history, and literary criticism. Although its title refers to modern philosophy, the book examines not only the period typically classified in philosophy as "modern," but also romanticism and contemporary aesthetics. Brady aims "to reassess, and to some extent reclaim, the meaning of the sublime as developed during its heyday in eighteenth-century aesthetic theory by the likes of Addison, Burke, Kant, and others, and mark out its relevance for contemporary debates in philosophy, especially for aesthetics." According to what she calls her "relational" theory, the core meaning of the sublime, as tied mainly to nature, "presents a form of aesthetic experience which engenders a distinctive aesthetic-moral relationship between humans and the natural environment."¹

The popularity of the sublime has waxed and waned over the years. It is a bit ironic that Kant, a major theorist of the sublime, called his theory of the sublime a "mere appendix" (*CPJ* 5:246) to the aesthetic judging of the purposiveness of nature.² The sublime played a diminished role in Hegel's aesthetics, and, in light of Hegel's strong influence on early and mid-nineteenth-century German philosophy, this marginalization was significant. The concept experienced a surge in the late 1980s and the 1990s, especially among francophone theorists writing about art and the "postmodern." There have been some recent articles questioning whether a coherent theory of the sublime is possible,³ and there continues to be interest in the concept among aesthetic theorists, as well as Kant scholars.⁴ Theorists have proposed accounts of sublimity as an aesthetic concept,⁵ and I would place Brady's book in this context, building on her previous scholarship.⁶

The sublime has been influential in fields beyond philosophy and philosophical aesthetics, and it continues to be studied from various perspectives.

In fact, with such liberal use of the concept and so many kinds of sublimity popping up—the technological sublime, feminist sublime, ecological sublime, literary sublime, postmodern sublime, American sublime, romantic sublime, the cultural and political sublimes—one is tempted to conclude that the concept itself has become *too* massive, hence diffuse and uninformative. Brady characterizes and defends yet another kind, an “environmental” or “natural” sublime, and her addition proceeds in a philosophically nuanced manner, giving a compelling riposte to the sentiment that the concept is outmoded and should not be used beyond its limited eighteenth-century context.

Brady argues for the continued relevance of Kant’s account, thereby providing a worthy model for engaging and interpreting the history of aesthetics. She is committed to the claim that contemporary theorists may use historical theories of the sublime, “lifting their core out of a historical framework.”⁷ The success of her effort shows that this is a reasonable commitment. Here I cannot examine all of her arguments, so, after giving an overview of the book, I will address four main topics: the artistic sublime; “adherent” sublimity, environmental ethics, and the role of culture.

Overview

The book consists of an Introduction, Part I (“The Historical Sublime,” Chapters 1–4), and Part II (“The Contemporary Sublime,” Chapters 5–8). Part I discusses the sublime in the theories from the history of aesthetics, covering John Dennis, Hume, Burke, Kant, Schiller, and even the leading romantics and Schopenhauer. (There is a brief footnote on Nietzsche, and a page mentioning Hegel.⁸) Brady devotes two chapters to the author of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* and even discusses Kant’s pre-Critical theory. Her interpretation emphasizes the role of nature in Kant’s theory of the sublime. In Part II, she clarifies the relevance of the sublime to selected issues in aesthetics and discusses related negative emotions.

Brady first traces the concept of the sublime chronologically with respect to its subject matter, qualities, and objects, focusing on eighteenth-century theorists such as Dennis, Addison, Baillie, Gerard, Burke, Home (Kames), and Archibald Alison.⁹ She devotes her attention mainly to British theorists of the sublime before turning to Kant, whom she depicts, following the plausible standard interpretation, as the Continent’s preeminent theorist of the sublime. Brady argues that, although the sublime has its roots in literary style and rhetoric reaching back to Longinus, these British theorists brought the concept to the fore of aesthetic theory and applied it to a range of subject matter, with nature becoming more and more central. Dennis stands out as somewhat of a philosophical opponent, representing, in addition to the sublime of style, the “self-admiration” account of the sublime, according to

which the self, rather than the natural object, is esteemed in the experience. Her analysis of various theories leads to a general understanding of the sublime “as an aesthetic response to qualities of greatness, with an intense imaginative and emotional character.”¹⁰

Chapter 2 opens with notable discussions of Moses Mendelssohn and of the pre-Critical Kant, before turning to the Critical sublime in *CPJ*. The following chapter acknowledges that Kant’s apparent emphasis on the human mind and freedom as sublime seems to leave much less room for attributing the sublime to the external world, namely, to nature or natural objects. She addresses this potential problem by rejecting what I would call the “mentalistic” or “subjectivist” interpretation of Kant. This controversial issue hinges on how one reads Kant’s answer to the following question, which Kant discusses under his technical term “subreption”: in the sublime experience, does the aesthetic observer recognize her mind (self, way of thinking) as what is truly sublime, or does she attribute sublimity to an external object?¹¹ In defending the latter, Brady reasserts the centrality of natural objects, which are conceived not as mere triggers of the sublime, but instead as playing a key causal role.

Brady next examines Schiller, Schopenhauer, and British romanticism, especially Wordsworth. She defends the Wordsworthian sublime from the objection that it is ultimately self-regarding, overly humanistic, or egotistical. She shows how the humility and self-awareness of the sublime characterize the human self as a *part* of nature, conceived holistically. Brady also discusses the conservation-conscious account offered by American naturalist John Muir.

Chapter 5 (the beginning of Part II) considers what central meaning of the sublime emerges in light of Brady’s foregoing historical discussion. Her strategy is to consider so-called paradigm cases to outline this core meaning, rather than to propose a philosophical definition. The core meaning of the sublime can be explained through natural objects or phenomena having qualities of great height, vastness, or power, which cause an intense emotional response characterized by feelings of being overwhelmed and feeling somewhat anxious; yet ultimately the experience is exciting and pleasurable. This constitutes what she calls the *original* sense of the sublime. She considers whether artworks can be sublime in this more original sense. In line with a controversial position articulated by Uygur Abaci with regard to the Kantian sublime, she argues that the sublime in art is derivative or secondary.¹² Although artworks can depict, convey, and express the sublime, they cannot themselves *be* sublime. Brady considers a range of cases but, notably, acknowledges that there are exceptions to her claim that only nature can be sublime in an original sense: some works of land art and architecture.

Chapter 6 addresses the sublime and tragedy and uses the much-discussed “paradox of tragedy” (that is, why would sane people deliberately arrange

to have ostensibly painful experiences, and why do spectators get pleasure from terrible events portrayed in tragedy?) to formulate and solve a parallel “paradox of the sublime.” The paradox of the sublime can be explained—that is, explained away—only if theorists recognize that the unsettled appreciator of the sublime feels actual, if limited, fear, and acknowledge the complexity and value of the negative forms of aesthetic experience. The seventh chapter compares and contrasts the sublime with grandeur, “terrible beauty,” and ugliness. Grandeur lacks the more negative pleasure of the sublime and is more positively valenced. The sublime is distinguished from terrible beauty and ugliness in that the sublime possesses greatness of scale and power. Brady argues for the value of these more difficult forms of aesthetic appreciation, pointing out how they expand and enrich our aesthetic interactions through uneasy yet meaningful relationships with the natural world. In the final chapter, she considers the sublime’s relevance to discussions about the natural environment, exploring the role of the sublime in linking aesthetic and moral value in relation to environmental ethics. She develops an “environmental” (“natural”) sublime and defends this aesthetic concept against a number of counterarguments, namely, that it is outmoded, metaphysically suspect, and/or anthropocentric. This challenging yet exciting form of aesthetic appreciation, she holds, is deeply comparative, and appreciators feel humbled by the greatness of nature rather than masterful over it. The admiration felt by appreciators of nature’s scale and power, and their perspectival shift of self, can feed into new forms of self-knowledge and potentially ground moral attitudes toward nature.

Natural and Artistic Sublimity

Although I have some minor quibbles with Brady’s interpretation of Kant,¹³ I will first turn to the possibility of the artistic sublime since the question of how art could be sublime is controversial and nature plays such a prominent role in her book.

First, I should note that I was puzzled about the status of Brady’s general claim that there is no artistic sublimity, given that she admits to exceptions to it. I think it would have been more accurate if she had consistently claimed that the sublime is typically or frequently, but not necessarily, a response to natural, environmental objects. Such a position strikes me as defensible.

If land art is a kind of art (or artifact) and land art gives rise to the experiences of the sublime, as Brady claims, then there can be artistic (artificial) sublimity after all, as she implies.¹⁴ But one could think of other possibilities. Consider Miroslaw Balka’s massive steel container, *How It Is* (2009), of which she writes, “In theory, this could be a sublime experience” (140). (But she does not call it a sublime experience, on the grounds that distractions such as other visitors and cell phones ruin the experience. Yet, surely these

can also block an experience of the natural sublime, and, if so, they should not count as a sufficient reason to reject artistic sublimity. Moreover, she claims that admitting teleological considerations (about the object's purpose or use) into the aesthetic judgment (of architecture) would render the judgment impure or adherent, but then admits that "it does not, however, follow from this that cases of the impure sublime are not sublime."¹⁵ So then, it appears, certain works of architecture can be sublime after all.

Brady's method raises further questions. She writes that, in the eighteenth century, the sublime, along with other aesthetic concepts, "became a central category of aesthetic value in both nature and art" and that "some writers have taken poetry, painting, and music to be immediately sublime";¹⁶ but, despite her careful consideration of the aesthetic tradition, she emphasizes the sublime in nature. Brady's method is to select "paradigm" cases of the sublime and thereby to give a list of typical features of the sublime: (apparent) formlessness, greatness or power, disorder and wildness, (the appreciator's) physical vulnerability and affect, and a certain metaphysical or relational quality. The notion of *formlessness* has to be handled with care. Assuming that every object that we are able to experience has a spatiotemporal form, an experienced object cannot be formless, even if it can give the *impression* or appearance of being formless. To her credit, Brady is aware of this.¹⁷ But once we allow for that, it is no longer clear why artistic objects must be excluded from the set of objects that have apparent formlessness. A similar response can be made to the other features of the paradigmatic sublime. Clearly a work of art can be *sizeable*, as skyscrapers, large sculptures, and land art demonstrate. Brady seems to recognize this, but calls works of art sublime only in a "secondary" or exceptional sense.¹⁸ Physical objects of art can have a kind of "planned" or intentional *disorder* or apparent wildness, though, of course, they cannot be wild the way natural objects can be. To make literal wildness (similarly for scale and power) one of the sublime's paradigmatic features is to rule out poetry and music. However, the exclusion of poetry should be made with caution if one is using the sublime's history to inform a contemporary account. In the aesthetic tradition, Milton's poetry, above all *Paradise Lost*, was a paradigm catalyst of sublimity, especially in the period from which Brady draws.¹⁹ Moreover, Brady devotes several pages to the sublime in Wordsworth, whose poetry presumably does not merely contain poetic descriptions of natural objects that Wordsworth considered sublime but that could, in principle, also evoke the sublime experience through an appreciator's imaginative activity. Similarly, some art works can create a sense of *vulnerability*, especially ones that are massive or sizable or would expose viewers to a physical threat—say, by having the appreciator walk from a great height, looking down below (or the inverse, as with skyscrapers). It does not seem accurate to restrict the notion of "environing" to natural environments alone. (And how about "interactive" art? One might object that Brady risks taking too limited a view of

artistic possibilities.) It strikes me as evident that works of art can elicit sublime *affects* and emotions; several eighteenth-century theorists thought that poetry and music, tragic plays, and architecture could be sublime since they elicited these emotions. Finally, art could evoke the *metaphysical* aspect of the sublime, inciting appreciators to think of their relations not, of course, (*ex hypothesi*) to nature but instead to a larger whole, at the very least as part of a larger community of appreciators/creators and as members of an art world. The actual practices of art communities, which are quite comfortable with the notion that art can be sublime, are significant and to be accounted for here. In short, although Brady persuasively defends the view that imitative visual art *representing* sublime content cannot be sublime, there may be other ways the various arts (not just visual art) could evoke the sublime, especially if the production and appreciation of art were freed from the beaux arts tradition's emphasis on mimesis and imitation,²⁰ as well as unconstrained by the view that art should embellish and beautify.

A skeptic might accuse Brady's method of determining what counts as capable of evoking sublimity (what counts as sublime) of selective sampling, choosing objects with features that artworks are less likely to have. She examines the sublime's paradigm cases "as developed in aesthetic theory in the past,"²¹ but one wonders how her proposal would be modified if she had taken another theorist (for example, Schiller) as her main inspiration rather than Kant, whose examples are typically from nature. A skeptic might have the feeling that she was playing down the artistic sublime whenever it arose. Without going into detail here, I mention not only Gerard (who thought art could be properly sublime through association) and Kames (who considers gardens, the pyramids, and poetry),²² but also Burke (who, while not focusing on art, thought poetry could have a *greater* sublime effect than nature or the other arts²³), Mendelssohn, Schiller, Schopenhauer (who, in §37 of *The World as Will and Representation*, maintains that aesthetic pleasure is the same whether evoked by an artwork or by the contemplation of nature), and even the Longinian tradition. She does discuss these thinkers, noting, for instance, that Schiller's aesthetic theory emphasizes the role of art in achieving human freedom,²⁴ but her analysis persistently underscores nature. But I wonder if it was necessary, despite her "environmental" aims, to do so.

If she had focused more on appreciator responses (sublime emotions, imaginative activity, the "passions"), in addition to the qualities of objects, it would have opened up more space for the sublime in art. She implicitly recognizes this when she turns to art in her explanation of the paradox of the sublime:

It might be objected that my claims [appealing to artistically induced emotions] . . . undermine my efforts . . . to distinguish between the original sublime in nature and the derivative sublime in art. . . . [Yet] I

did not deny that intense emotions could be felt in both nature and art cases. My argument for distinguishing the two rested on claims about the failure of art to deliver the distinctive combination of qualities and response we find in the original sublime.²⁵

But formulating the “distinctive combination” the way she does arguably dismisses art and artifact too quickly. A skeptic might find the notion of being “derivative” problematic, too. Brady’s view of how the artistic sublime derives from nature appears to be twofold: certain artworks/artifacts (especially land art) can profit from being set in a natural environment or “environing” site; and, most significantly, “the closer something comes to presenting the actual qualities of sublime nature [size, force, and so forth] . . . the more promising it becomes as a case of the artistic sublime.”²⁶ But an opponent might accuse the latter move of begging the question and/or overlooking some of the historical record. As she notes, in the aesthetic tradition, the sublime was also to be found in religious ideas, moral character or acts, and other nonmaterial objects or events; though I am not recommending we do so, an unconvinced reader may wish to take some of these as paradigmatic or at least to focus on these more than Brady does. The difficult question that this raises—which must remain unsettled here—is how to use the aesthetic tradition and its examples.

Turning to Kant, I agree that, in the paradigmatic Kantian case, a natural object plays an important causal role in the experience. However, Kant’s attributing *true* sublimity to the mind or manner of thinking (for example, *CPJ* 5:280) seems to be an obstacle to using him to develop and defend the natural sublime. She admits this: Kant “settles on the mind and reason’s ability to supply an idea of the infinite as that which is properly called sublime.”²⁷ But if that is right, at least as Kant interpretation, then neither art nor nature can be genuinely sublime for Kant, as I noted in my response to Abaci.²⁸ Kant’s position conflicts with Brady’s overall argument: “[M]y views will also contrast with interpretations of Kant that stress the mental character of the sublime.” But the issue goes beyond Kant interpretation. Indicative of her tendency to accentuate nature is a parse on Baillie, who claims that an “object can only be justly called sublime, which in some degrees *disposes the mind to this enlargement of itself*.” This sounds just like that aspect of Kant’s position Brady renounces, the one that emphasizes self-admiration. Yet Brady reads Baillie here as giving “increased emphasis” on the *natural* world. In my view, the quoted passage indubitably supports a self-admiration reading. I am not suggesting we defend the latter, but some of her readings seem to be more reconstructive than she recognizes.²⁹

Finally, the possibilities that film offers merit consideration. Filmic art may be capable of functioning in ways similar to the naturally sublime object, in particular when it comes to eliciting a sense of vulnerability and affect and having apparent formlessness, power, scale, and disorder. Brady

concedes some of this: “[A] well-executed film of a tornado scene will be thrilling, especially on a huge IMAX screen” and “a 3-D version of a disaster film can probably capture some of the visual characteristics of an environmental experience of the real thing . . . but the two experiences will still be rather different.”³⁰ Yet her reasons for rejecting the possibility of the sublime in film could be accused of unnecessarily raising the bar for this medium. First, a film will lack, by nature of being a film, the place-based appreciation of the *real* thing, so it may be unfair or even question-begging to make the latter a criterion. It may be true that films typically lack the multisensory appreciation of the real object/event. Yet even here it is worth observing that there are 4-D films, and other varieties of film media are imaginable. Finally, claiming that the two experiences will be rather “different” does not really resolve the matter.

In fact, a filmgoer could sometimes be in an even *better* position to experience the sublime than an appreciator of the real event (tornado), since a filmgoer who is seated in a cinema or room will not be as likely to feel the kind of intense fear that blocks sublimity. Moreover, some films might be better equipped than nature to evoke the sublime. They could draw on more traditional shooting and editing techniques to create scenes that cannot be experienced in ordinary life with one’s eyes and ears. More importantly, they could also make use of the latest technologies. Drones could be sent up into a storm or tornado for filming. CGI could be used to create stunning special effects that surpass the powers or magnitudes of nature, as many disaster films reveal.

Adherent Sublimity

I now turn to the notion of “adherent” (= dependent, impure) sublimity, which I characterize in order to contribute to and help resolve a debate between Brady and “scientific cognitivists” concerning the aesthetic appreciation of nature. Scientific cognitivism holds that scientific knowledge is necessary for aesthetic appreciation, that is, that we need knowledge of sciences such as geology, biology, and ecology in order to engage in appropriate aesthetic responses to nature’s actual aesthetic properties.

While the free/adherent distinction is typically used with respect to judgments of beauty, I think it would be useful to distinguish two kinds of judgments of sublimity in similar fashion.³¹ Kant himself suggests this distinction when giving “examples” (*CPJ* 5:272, 270) of pure aesthetic judgments—note that his emphasis on the “pure” may be partly due to his having pedagogical or expository goals. He explains that he is seeking a pure aesthetic judgment of the mathematical sublime, not “in products of art . . . where a human end determines the form as well as the magnitude . . . nor in natural things whose concept already brings with it a determinate end . . .

but rather in raw nature . . . merely insofar as it contains magnitude" (*CPJ* 5:252–53). Kant implies that we can view both the starry heavens and the ocean in free judgments (based on the object's appearance in "immediate intuition") as well as in partly teleological (that is, adherent) judgments; the latter takes, for example, "the sight of the ocean as we think it" or the ocean as containing a wide realm of organisms (one could say, how it really is), rather than how it merely strikes the eye (as a "clear watery mirror") (*CPJ* 5:270; compare 279). Although, to my knowledge, no one else has provided a detailed account of adherent sublimity or applied it to contemporary problems, the general topic has been a matter of some controversy,³² with, for example, Paul Guyer changing his mind on the issue.³³

In an adherent judgment of the sublime, the appreciator would contemplate the object under a concept or set of concepts such as its place in the ecosystem or its natural history. The aesthetic appraiser would apply a concept to the object and bring in "background knowledge," understanding or knowing the object while at the same time appreciating it aesthetically, and doing so in a way that differs from what happens in the case of Kantian "free" sublimity. In Kant's account, the concept in question is technically a concept of the object's presumed *purpose* or end, but I would expand this to encompass, in addition, understanding and knowledge of nature generally, including scientific and historical knowledge. It would involve viewing the object in a certain way, namely, seeing it as it really is, say, as described by the latest scientific theories. Moreover, adherent sublimity would not be a less valuable or diminished kind of sublimity, just as adherent beauty is not a lesser kind of beauty.

The crucial feature of adherent judgment is the incorporation of a concept of the object—not that the object is artifactual rather than natural. The free/adherent distinction cuts across the nature/art divide. As with beauty, with sublimity it would be technically incorrect to say that "free" judgments must be elicited by nature and "adherent" judgments by art,³⁴ even if most judgments concerning art probably would take into account the intentions of the creator(s), the work's place in art history, genre, and other knowable facts. Moreover, one and the same object could be judged either "freely" or in terms of conceptual-intellectual components; hence, we could engage with nature in different ways and have both kinds of aesthetic appreciation of nature.

My proposal for adherent and free sublimity might help Brady resolve a disagreement with the scientific cognitivists³⁵ and like-minded interpreters who imply that the judgments of the sublime must draw on background knowledge of nature or have a cognitive or intellectual basis. On my account, such a judgment would be an adherent judgment of sublimity, still compatible with—indeed partly based on—an aesthetic feeling or experience. The point here is not so much that the appreciator acquires *new* beliefs (for example, about nature) as that her judgment is based on truths or histories that she knows or believes to be true. The appreciator of adherent sublimity

would appreciate nature as it is and on its own terms, in light of facts known or believed about the object of contemplation. Note that these are not facts about the subject (its power, freedom) but, as Guyer noticed (see note 33), about the object considered. If the foregoing is plausible, some judgments of the sublime could be said to have a significant intellectual component, without turning the sublime into either wonder or a desire to know (which Brady understandably wishes to avoid). Though Brady notes that “knowledge can have some role to play insofar as it may be part of the cognitive stock that any appreciator might have when beholding”³⁶ (for example,) the Grand Canyon, she immediately adds that “scientific knowledge need not form the basis” of sublime judgments. I would also add: true, but it may form *a* basis. In an adherent judgment, knowledge (for example, the canyon’s natural history, ecosystem, and so forth) would form only a *partial* basis of the judgment; feeling would form another key element. Since adherent judgment is, after all, still a species of aesthetic judgment, there would be, in addition to a more intellectual consideration of nature (and perhaps our relation to it), an intense emotional response, free aesthetic appreciation, perceptual apprehension, and imaginative activity.³⁷ One could say that the scientific knowledge “enhances” the free aesthetic appreciation of nature; adherent sublimity need not be considered a diminished form of aesthetic experience. Finally, what I am proposing is not a form of scientific cognitivism per se but accounts for an element I find to be plausible within it.

Ethics and the Environmental Sublime

I hope that my earlier comments on artistic sublimity are not read as a repudiation of Brady’s general emphasis on nature. Moreover, Brady is right that most of Kant’s examples of the sublime come from nature rather than art, even if, as she also notes, he offers some artistic or architectural examples. Furthermore, seeing the role of the natural sublime in Kant’s philosophical system is important for understanding the third *Critique* generally.³⁸ Putting aside for a moment Kant’s doctrine of subreption, consider his remarks on nature: “*Nature is thus sublime* in those of its appearances the intuition of which brings with them the idea of its infinity” (CPJ 5:255); “*Nature considered in aesthetic judgment as a power that has no dominion over us is dynamically sublime*” (CPJ 5:260; my emphases).

One outcome of Brady’s “relational” theory of the sublime concerns how we would treat nature. “The admiration we feel in the sublime . . . can . . . potentially ground respect for nature, not in spite of, but very much because of nature’s irresistible scale and power.”³⁹ Though I have much sympathy for her argument,⁴⁰ there is a limit to the extent to which we can make use of Kant’s ethics and philosophy of nature to defend the view that we have duties toward nature. Well aware of this problem, Brady writes that we

“admire” nature and treat nature “as if” it deserved moral consideration.⁴¹ Should we go further than this? On her relational account, aesthetic experiences of the sublime can lead to our moral development as the experiencing selves better understand their relationships to the natural environments. The aesthetic engagement with the natural sublime engenders an aesthetic-moral relationship that can prepare the way for, potentially ground, or partly support our moral attitudes toward the natural environments.⁴² This is just fine, but it would have been welcome if her book, with ethics in the subtitle and a concluding section called “The Sublime and Environmental Ethics,” contained more concrete claims about our actual duties toward nature, direct or indirect. What ought admirers of nature do?

Universality and Culture

Finally, I pose an admittedly difficult question: What is the role of culture in the sublime, or to what extent is the experience of the sublime culturally dependent? Some of Brady’s discussion of historical figures (for example, Alison) suggested sympathy for the view that culture shapes our experiences of the sublime or even makes some of them possible. Yet in the book’s second part, Brady gives the impression that she is adopting a more universalist approach: we can “posit a community of sentiment with respect to sublime appreciation”; the sublime “is not a subjective experience, but one that we can imagine many people sharing.” She wants to avoid relativizing the experience or making it a matter of the appreciator’s psychological makeup or history, or a matter of past cultural tastes (for, say, the once remote wilderness). Yet she emphasizes contexts and our relation to the natural environments as “places” having unique histories and narratives.⁴³ As Alison indicated, having in mind the local story of a woman flinging herself into a deep chasm gives the scene greater effect, and knowing that Hannibal marched over the Alps makes them appear more sublime by association. It would have been nice to have more clarity on this thorny and broader philosophical issue. Is the sublime a theoretical construct, and, if not, what further arguments can we give to show this? Or, more precisely, are the sublime’s poetic-narrative descriptions, and its second-order aesthetic theories, culturally dependent (social constructs, perhaps accompanied by shifting notions about the landscape), but not the feeling and experience of the sublime?

Kant emphasizes that the sublime is not a mere matter of convention. He clearly does not care to list or determine which individuals or societies make or made judgments of sublimity. In the *CPJ*, Kant adopts a normative rather than empirical approach, just as one would expect in a *Critique*. The sublime’s normativity is grounded in morality, that is, in practical reason. The development of moral feeling is required if we are to “demand” (require, not expect) agreement with our judgment of sublimity (*CPJ* 5:265–66). Hence, Kant later writes, “I can still require even that satisfaction [of the sublime]

of everyone, but only by means of the moral law, which for its part is in turn grounded on concepts of reason" (*CPJ* 5:292). Since morality is required of all human beings, even the "unrefined" person ought to assent to the judgment of the sublime in nature; if he does not, we say that he lacks "feeling." All human (hence, finite rational) beings who, moreover, meet the necessary conditions of making a pure aesthetic judgment of sublimity (for example, proper mood, appropriate perspective and distance, safety, limited distractions) can, Kant inferred (rightly or wrongly), be legitimately required to agree with an appreciator's judgment of the sublime. Though *without* following Kant's peculiar grounding of the sublime in morality, Brady appears to think that the sublime is necessary in a broadly Kantian sense of normativity—perhaps it suffices to be a functional, cognitively and emotionally developed, mature human being with all that this entails, including joy and suffering; pleasure and anxiety; reason and imagination; finitude; mortality; and an awareness of all that.⁴⁴

According to psychologist Vladimir Konečni, the sublime is a pancultural, primordial response common to human beings.⁴⁵ Brady restricts the scope of her discussion to the Western European context (understandably, given space limitations): "I will not address how the sublime has been configured or reconfigured within comparative aesthetics, for example, in Asian and South Asian traditions." But in referring here to a "very interesting cross-cultural study of the sublime," she gives the impression that these other cultures have the concept of the sublime or something analogous to it, in agreement with Konečni. She describes her aim as to show that "there is something we can call a contemporary experience of the sublime, where we are confronted not with some social construction." Yet she later claims that the sublime is *not* an important concept in Japanese and Chinese aesthetics (and more examples could be found easily).⁴⁶ But this is evidence for the "social construct" position. In the end, therefore, I found it difficult to identify and assess her position on this topic.

This leads to a final thought about subject/object dualism. She points out that, in Japanese and Chinese thought, "the subject/object dualism of Kant and other Western thinkers is destabilized."⁴⁷ A contemporary theorist in the post-Heideggerian tradition might urge us to move beyond the distinction between the subject (or "self," Brady's preferred term) and object, a distinction that characterizes modern philosophy and is still found in much contemporary anglophone theorizing. Is it possible to offer a theory of the sublime without referring to subjects and objects, and should we?⁴⁸ Perhaps, even if avoidance were possible, there would be compelling reasons to continue to employ the concepts of the self or subject. In any case, her remarks in the book's final pages suggest that these issues in comparative aesthetics can be further clarified and explored.

In conclusion, Brady's persuasively argues that one can propose and defend a theory of the sublime that meets some crucial objections—that it

is outmoded, anthropocentric, self-regarding, and/or metaphysically overladen. The sublime's vast and influential history already makes it worthy of study. In addition, if most human beings sometimes experience something like the sublime (call it what you will), and, if, as Brady notes, the "more difficult" aesthetic responses including the sublime "have significance" for us,⁴⁹ the sublime deserves a proper account. It merits the careful attention Emily Brady gives it. I therefore hope that these reflections will incite her and other theorists to continue to develop these and related ideas.

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Notes

1. Brady, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy*, 2 ("to reassess . . ."); 3 ("presents a form . . .").
2. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.) Hereafter *CPJ*. Page references are to the Academy Edition of Kant's works as provided in this Cambridge edition.
3. Guy Sircello, "How Is a Theory of the Sublime Possible?" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51, no. 4 (1993): 541–50. Jane Forsey, "Is a Theory of the Sublime Possible?" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65, no. 4 (2007): 381–89.
4. For example, Melissa McBay Merritt, "The Moral Source of the Kantian Sublime," in *The Sublime: From Antiquity to the Present*, ed. Timothy Costelloe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 37–49.
5. For example, Katerina Deligiorgi, "The Pleasures of Contra-purposiveness: Kant, the Sublime, and Being Human," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 72, no. 1 (2014): 25–35. Bart Vandenaabeele, "Aesthetic Ideas and the Sublime in Art," paper presented at the Leuven Kant Conference, Leuven, Belgium, May 31, 2013.
6. Emily Brady, "Imagination and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56, no. 2 (1998): 139–47; Emily Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003); Emily Brady, "The Environmental Sublime," in *The Sublime*, ed. Timothy M. Costelloe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 171–82; Emily Brady, "Reassessing Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature in the Kantian Sublime," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 46, no. 1 (2012): 91–109.
7. Brady, *The Sublime*, 169.
8. *Ibid.*, 99, 99n22. According to Nietzsche, Dionysian art enables us to transcend individuality—a position that would presumably come close to being "metaphysical" in Brady's desired sense, where the "self becomes related to some larger whole" (133), but she does not explore this. She rightly notes that Nietzsche never examines the sublime in its own right.
9. Brady's discussion of the "non-material" sublime, which addresses how moral passions elicit the sublime, is helpful. In *The Kantian Sublime and the Revelation of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009; hereafter *KSRF*), I distinguish between the "sublime of mental states" (which elicit the sublime) and sublime experiences (which are themselves experiences of the sublime).
10. Brady, *The Sublime*, 45 ("self-admiration"); 46 ("as an aesthetic response . . .").

11. A subreption is a “substitution of a respect for the object instead of for the idea of humanity in our subject” (*CPJ* 5:257). Brady “assume[s] that it [the subreption] necessarily occurs” without providing reasons, but I presume it has to do with the prominence of nature in her book; *The Sublime*, 70n4. For the reasons for my alternate reading, see *KSRF*, 72–79.
12. Uygur Abaci, “Kant’s Justified Dismissal of Artistic Sublimity,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 66, no. 3 (2008): 237–51.
13. One example would be how best to understand the pure aesthetic response to the moral law, or what in *KSRF* I called the moral sublime, as Brady notes with some criticism (*The Sublime*, 58n15). I will not pursue this topic here, but simply note that I developed this category (which I considered to be and proposed as an aesthetic, not moral, category) not because Kant officially proposes it—he does not—but because, taking a broad view, I thought that the moral sublime was to be found throughout his writings—an “orthodox” reconstruction, as it were. I still wonder which “reconstructive” proposal is more plausible—subsuming the examples in question under the mathematical sublime (as Brady does, but Kant does not) or under the moral sublime, and whether a reconstruction must stick (as hers does) to the given structure of *CPJ*.
14. Brady, *The Sublime*, 144–45. I cannot here address what constitutes the difference between a work of art and an artifact.
15. *Ibid.*, 65. Thus, I was further puzzled when I read this: “While artworks and architecture may be sublime in this ‘impure’ sense, their teleology ultimately prevents them from attaining genuine sublimity” (*ibid.*, 125).
16. *Ibid.*, 11 (“became a central category . . .”), 119 (“some writers have taken poetry . . .”).
17. For example, *ibid.*, 75–76, 79–80, 107, 124. Nevertheless, like many commentators, she often writes “formless[ness]” without the needed qualifiers (for example, 55–56, 63–64, 81, 86, 119, 194).
18. *Ibid.*, 6, 7.
19. Sanford Budick, *Kant and Milton* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).
20. Brady draws an analogy between art/nature and representation/reality (155).
21. *Ibid.*, 2
22. See Rachel Zuckert, “The Associative Sublime: Gerard, Kames, Alison, and Stewart,” in *The Sublime*, ed. Timothy Costelloe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 64–76. Zuckert concludes: “As all of these thinkers suggest, these characteristic aesthetic responses are not only elicited by large and powerful natural objects but may also be enlisted, heightened, and even transformed by artistic representation” (76).
23. Brady, *The Sublime*, 28. Burke thought small things, too, could have a sublime effect.
24. *Ibid.*, 91.
25. *Ibid.*, 156n19.
26. *Ibid.*, 145.
27. *Ibid.*, 60.
28. Robert Clewis, “A Case for Kantian Artistic Sublimity: A Response to Abaci,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 68, no. 2 (2010): 167–70. Uygur Abaci, “Artistic Sublime Revisited: Reply to Robert Clewis,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 68, no. 2 (2010): 170–73. Complicating the art/nature relation, Kant’s account of creative “genius” as a gift of *nature* also puts pressure on the denial of Kantian artistic sublimity.
29. Brady, *The Sublime*, 138 (“[M]y views . . .”); 18 (“object can only be . . .”; my emphasis); 17 (“increased emphasis”).
30. *Ibid.*, 128 and 128n16, respectively.
31. Clewis, *KSRF*, 96–108.
32. Brady, *The Sublime*, 72n10 and 73n12.

33. See Guyer's comment in an author/critics exchange on *KSRF*:

Thus, I was tempted to think that all judgments of the sublime must fall into the category of adherent aesthetic judgments that Kant illustrates with the cases of adherent judgments of beauty, the idea of beauty, and most cases of artistic beauty. But not only did Clewis adduce a quotation in which Kant indubitably manifests his own acceptance of a pure judgment of the (mathematical) sublime [*CPJ* 5:252–53] . . . he also gives a compelling explanation of how Kant can recognize a pure judgment of the sublime while allowing that all experiences of the sublime involve some role for concepts or ideas of reason: namely, adherent aesthetic judgments are ones that involve in some way a concept of the purpose or purposiveness of their object rather than any concept of the purpose or purposiveness of the subject, the one having the aesthetic experience and making the aesthetic judgment.

Paul Guyer, "Paul Guyer on Robert Clewis's 'The Kantian Sublime and the Revelation of Freedom,'" 2013, at <https://virtualcritique.wordpress.com/2013/10/03/paul-guyer-comments-on-robert-clewis-the-kantian-sublime-and-the-revelation-of-freedom/#more-214>, accessed November 30, 2015.

34. Kant's examples of free beauties include artifacts and artworks—designs *à la grecque*, foliage on wallpaper, musical fantasias (*CPJ* 5:229).
35. Brady, *The Sublime*, 189. She mentions Sandra Shapsay's work. See also Allen Carlson, "Budd and Brady on the Aesthetics of Nature," *Philosophical Quarterly* 55, no. 218 (2005): 106–13. I do not think that my free/adherent sublime distinction overlaps exactly with Shapsay's (similar) thin/thick sublime distinction; a crucial difference is that adherent judgments of the sublime concern truths or facts (including scientific ones) about the *object*, whereas Shapsay's thick sublime tends to emphasize the rational powers of the appreciator.
36. Brady, *The Sublime*, 189n11.
37. The adherent judgment of natural sublimity in terms of scientific knowledge can be viewed as a parallel to the case of adherent judgments of art in terms of art history. On the latter, see my "Greenberg, Kant, and Aesthetic Judgments of Modernist Art," *AE: Canadian Aesthetics Journal* 14 (Summer 2008), at http://www.uqtr.ca/AE/Vol_14/modernism/Clewis.htm, accessed November 30, 2015. Cf. Carlson, "Budd and Brady," 107.
38. See my forthcoming "The Place of the Sublime in Kant's Project," *Studi kantiani* 28 (2015): 63–82.
39. Brady, *The Sublime*, 8.
40. Clewis, *KSRF*, 141–45.
41. Brady, *The Sublime*, 80: "something like respect for natural objects." See also 196.
42. *Ibid.*, 183, 200.
43. *Ibid.*, 163 ("posit a community . . ."); 200 ("not a subjective experience . . ."); 185 (She wants . . .); 33 ("places").
44. *Ibid.*, 58 (Brady appears . . .); 200 (perhaps it suffices . . .).
45. Vladimir Konečni, "The Aesthetic Trinity: Awe, Being Moved, Thrills," *Bulletin of Psychology and the Arts* 5, no. 2 (2005): 27–44; Vladimir Konečni, "Aesthetic Trinity Theory and the Sublime," *Philosophy Today* 55, no. 1 (2011): 64–73.
46. Brady, *The Sublime*, 4 ("I will not address . . ."); 195 ("there is something . . ."); 204 (Yet she later claims . . .).
47. *Ibid.*, 204n45.
48. Degliorgi's recent theory of the sublime employs the subject/object distinction; see "The Pleasures of Contra-purposiveness," 31–32. Brady's discussion of the "self/environment" relation arguably moves beyond the distinction, since it implies that a self is already embedded in a complex configuration of relations with itself and its surroundings.
49. Brady, *The Sublime*, 181.