

Précis of “The Kantian Sublime and the Revelation of Freedom”

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ROBERT CLEWIS | The Kantian Sublime and the Revelation of Freedom | Cambridge University Press 2009

By Robert Clewis

My book *The Kantian Sublime and the Revelation of Freedom* (Cambridge University Press, 2009) shows how crucial concepts in Kant’s aesthetics and practical philosophy fit together: aesthetic judgments of sublimity, empirical and intellectual interests, disinterestedness, the moral feeling of respect, political and moral freedom, the idea of a republic, and so on. It examines in what ways mathematical, dynamical, and moral sublimity are experiences of freedom and can indirectly contribute to morality. The book is distinctive in arguing that there can be adherent, dependent judgments of sublimity as well as a Kantian account of the moral sublime. It holds that there are no fewer than five distinct senses of disinterestedness, and it offers an account of intellectual interest in *disinterested* sublimity. It even shows how Kant’s account of natural sublimity implies we have an indirect duty to preserve and protect the natural environment, a crucial source of the experience of the sublime. Unlike other studies of these themes, before turning to Kant’s Critical account, my book first examines the sublime and moral feeling in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764) and the notes (*Bemerkungen*) that Kant wrote in his copy of the former in the following year or so. It contributes to a contemporary debate in Kantian aesthetics by arguing that Kant’s position accounts and allows for sublimity in response to art and artifact. Finally, it takes seriously the third *Critique*’s claim that enthusiasm (*Enthusiasmus*, not *Schwärmerei*) is aesthetically sublime, showing how this claim reveals Kant’s initially puzzling and controversial views on the French Revolution to be consistent after all.

I begin by examining sublimity, the moral feeling, and freedom in Kant’s writings from the 1760s, above all the *Observations* and the corresponding notes known as the *Remarks* (Chapter 1). I do this not only in order to put us in a better position to understand and appreciate the origins of the Critical account, but also to enable us to see that the earlier accounts do not clearly distinguish between the moral feeling and the sublime. Moreover, some crucial claims from the early period reemerge in Kant’s Critical period, sometimes in modified form. For example, Kant takes a common opinion, in this case the view that “nothing great can be achieved” without enthusiasm (cf. VK, AA 2:267), as a starting point for his own claim that enthusiasm is aesthetically sublime (KU, AA 5:272). Moreover, the terrifying, splendid, and noble forms of sublimity as well as the notion of the monstrous resurface in some way or other in the third *Critique* or the published *Anthropology* (1798). And in ‘A Renewed Question’, the second section of *The Conflict of the Faculties*, Kant appeals to a distinction between the false and the true sublime that can be traced back to his pre-Critical distinction between the grotesque and sublime.

In the next chapter, I turn to the judgment of sublimity as a pure aesthetic judgment that is based on a feeling of negative pleasure. I characterize the relation between feeling and judgment and the difference between dependent and free aesthetic judgments of the sublime. I argue that it seems necessary to reconsider the widely-accepted typology of the sublime in order to make sense of the third *Critique*’s suggestive claim that enthusiasm is aesthetically sublime: the official division of the sublime into the dynamical and the mathematical, while undoubtedly

rooted in Kant's text, seems too narrow to account for other forms of the sublime that are also found in the third *Critique*—the moral sublime above all. Of course, it might be possible simply to ignore the moral sublime, but it seems to me that our understanding of Kant's aesthetics and practical philosophy suffers if we do so, as the notion helps us understand several passages in Kant's corpus and his views on the French Revolution. I conclude the second chapter by examining "the colossal" and "monstrous" (*Ungeheuer*) as well as arguing for the possibility of the sublime elicited by art.

In Chapter 3, I analyze the similarities and differences between the moral feeling of respect and the sublime. Some interpreters tend to reduce the Kantian sublime to a moral feeling or read the sublime as a disguised form of the latter, confusing the fact that the sublime is *based* on practical freedom with the erroneous view that the sublime amounts to or is the moral feeling. Both this moralist tendency and the inclination (found in Lyotard and Lacoue-Labarthe, for instance) to overemphasize the extension of the imagination in the sublime are misleading.^[1] Nonetheless, these interpretive poles each contain an element of truth. After all, the Kantian sublime is ultimately grounded on the human capacity to adopt and act on moral maxims, and the imagination does enjoy an exhilarated delight even as it fails to meet reason's demand. I argue that, by having a structural similarity to the moral feeling of respect, the sublime can prepare us to esteem even contrary to our own interests, and I here show that this structural similarity can give us another reason to care for the natural environment, as noted.

In the following chapter, I discuss the various senses of disinterestedness, defending distinctions between positive and negative interests, first-order and second-order interests, and empirical and intellectual interests. My account of empirical and intellectual interests in sublimity is based on Kant's account of these interests in beauty in *KU* §41 and §42. I flesh out and describe five distinct senses of disinterestedness: i) not taking pleasure in the existence of the object; ii) not based on a rational or sensory desire; iii) not directly promoting one's welfare or happiness; iv) not attempting to achieve a moral or prudential end; v) not being partial. The aforementioned distinctions help us to understand better how a (first-order) disinterested, aesthetic judgment of the sublime can lead to one's taking a (second-order) intellectual interest in it. This issue is important if enthusiasm in 'A Renewed Question' is (as Kant suggests) an experience of the sublime, since Kant takes a morally-based, intellectual interest in this affect. In addition to helping us understand Kant's intellectual interest in sublime enthusiasm for a just republic, my proposal is the only sustained attempt to provide an interpretation of Kant's curious claim that certain affects such as enthusiasm can become "interesting" (*KU*, AA 5:271).

Accordingly, I then show how the aforementioned instance of enthusiasm could be considered to be an aesthetic feeling of the sublime, calling this "aesthetic enthusiasm" (Chapter 5). I argue that enthusiasm should not be confused with fanaticism (*Schwärmerei*), although some English-language scholarship and translations continue to contribute to this conflation. With both positive and negative features, however, aesthetic enthusiasm is doubtless a deeply ambiguous phenomenon. As an affect, it overwhelms the rule of reason. Nonetheless, in Kant's account it can still reveal human freedom, act as a morally encouraging sign, give us a strong affective response to the morally good or to moral ideas (the republic), and share some of the structural features of moral experience (e.g., disinterestedness and universal validity). Accordingly, my interpretation takes seriously Kant's claim that enthusiasm not only "seems to be sublime" to many, but also is "aesthetically sublime" (*KU*, AA 5:272). I argue that if this enthusiasm is an experience of the sublime, then, on account of its conceptual moral content, it has to be an experience of dependent rather than free sublimity. Although enthusiasm can reveal freedom and can indirectly contribute to the ends of morality (say, by acting as a moral sign that is given in the natural order), I argue that it is not a necessary condition of moral agency.

Chapter 6 defends Kant against the charge that his view of the French Revolution is either motivated by political pressure or is philosophically imprecise. I show how my interpretation of enthusiasm, means and ends, first-order and second-order interests, and the like can clarify this otherwise perplexing issue. I maintain that Kant's positive, morally-based interest in enthusiasm for the establishment of a republican form of government is compatible with his condemnation of the means used to bring about the first French Republic. I argue that it is consistent to repudiate the violent means used to bring about a transition to a republic even if one *supports* the ends the means are

supposed to achieve. The idea of a just republic, which is intended to ensure the freedom of the citizens, elicits aesthetic enthusiasm, we read in 'A Renewed Question'. The enthusiasm felt, communicated, and shared by observers of the events in France counts as a feeling of the sublime. The observers are disinterested spectators, not interested agents attempting to realize the revolutionary ends. Expressing their enthusiasm may even be *contrary* to their personal interests, since it puts them at risk of being harmed or injured. I thus establish that we can and should understand Kant's interest in enthusiasm as a second-order, morally-based interest in sublimity in the sense articulated in Chapter 4.

The seventh and final chapter defends Kant's grounding of the sublime (which I call his "basis in freedom" thesis), since some contemporary aesthetic theorists such as Malcolm Budd have criticized Kant's position.^[2] I conclude with a few remarks about how pure aesthetic feelings can contribute, either directly or indirectly, to the transition to freedom. Finally, there are three appendices: an historical discussion of the *Bemerkungen* (*Remarks*), a table that describes the features of the aforementioned moral and aesthetic feelings, and a classification of what elicits the sublime.

But why does any of this matter? I give Kant a way to respond to criticisms of the divide between nature and freedom that he created. For instance, in *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Hegel comments on the postulate for God's existence and on the highest good as follows:

Will has the whole world, the whole of the sensuous, in opposition to it, and yet Reason insists on the unity of Nature [and] the moral law, as the Idea of the Good, which is the ultimate end of the world. Since, however, it is formal, and therefore has no content on its own account, it stands opposed to the impulses and inclinations of a subjective and an external independent Nature.^[3]

In the 'Addition to Section 124' in *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel puts it vividly: "The laurels of mere willing are dry leaves, which have never been green."^[4] But the relation between nature and freedom, and aesthetics and morality, is more complicated than Hegel's criticism implies. I show how sublimity, like beauty, helps fill in a gap in the Critical system. The aesthetic experience of sublimity gives Kant another resource by which to bridge the gulf between nature and freedom (KU, AA 5:176, 197; EEKU, 20:246) by providing the experiencing subject with indirect, aesthetic evidence of freedom, though not an objective, third-person proof or even knowledge. By concentrating on Kant's analysis of judgments of the sublime and of the ways in which these judgments are systematically related to his conceptions of morality, freedom, interest, and reason, I contribute to the ongoing attempt to show that caricatures of Kant's practical philosophy as a cold, rationalistic account are misleading and in need of replacement by a more comprehensive interpretation.

Finally, Kant's theory of sublimity has been criticized by contemporary aestheticians. Jane Forsey, for instance, argues that Kant's theory of the sublime is incoherent, that the sublime is either *nothing*, qua supersensible; or *anything*, qua any cognitive breakdown or failure; or, qua feeling, cannot be theorized at all.^[5] She rejects theories of the sublime in general as incoherent. Malcolm Budd, in turn, maintains that Kant's theory overly moralizes this aesthetic experience.^[6] He argues that Kant's preoccupation with securing a moralized conception of the sublime leads to distortions in his account of the mathematical sublime. I show how a Kantian account could answer these contemporary objections.

[1] J.-F. Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime: Kant's "Critique of Judgment" Sections 23–9*, trans. E. Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press: 1994); P. Lacoue-Labarthe, 'The Sublime Truth', in J. S. Librett (ed.) *Of the Sublime: Presence in Question* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), pp. 71–108.

[2] M. Budd, *The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[3] G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, 'Section Three: Recent German Philosophy. B. Kant. *Critique of Practical Reason*', accessed April 12, 2013 at: <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/index.htm>. I thank Richard Eldridge for the references to Hegel.

[4] G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. Samuel Dyde (New York: Cosimo, 2008), p. 53.

[5] J. Forsey, 'Is a Theory of the Sublime Possible?', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65,4 (2007): 381–9, here p. 388.

[6] M. Budd, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

(A version of this text was presented at an Author Meets Critics session on Robert Clewis's book at the Pacific APA meeting in Seattle, Washington State, USA on April 5, 2012.)

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