

Reply to Melissa Zinkin

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

By Robert Clewis

In [her stimulating and interesting remarks](#), Melissa Zinkin suggests framing the discussion of the sublime in terms of empowerment, and she raises concerns about the sublime, the moral feeling of respect, and enthusiasm. Below the fold I respond to Zinkin's suggestions and concerns.

Empowerment or Freedom?

Zinkin writes that the feeling of the sublime is one of empowerment, not freedom. In passages she cites, Kant characterizes the feeling of the mind in the sublime using the terms *vermögend* and *Macht* (KU, AA 5:255; 271). I can accept describing the sublime as a feeling of empowerment, so long as what is under discussion remains an aesthetically sublime judgment, for it seems compatible with my own account and with the texts. For instance, in the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, Kant devotes four paragraphs to the sublime in §68, describing the sublime as a feeling of the subject's greatness or power. In the sublime, "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 [*Kraft*]" (Anthr, AA 7:243).

Zinkin cites Kant's claim that the sublime in nature within ourselves, i.e., in some affects, "is represented only as a power [*Macht*] of the mind to soar above certain obstacles of sensibility by means of moral principles, and thereby to become interesting" (KU, AA 5:271), a passage which, by the way, leads me to distinguish first-order and second-order interests, allowing us to understand taking a second-order interest *in* first-order disinterestedness (sublimity). Zinkin adds: "What the sublime gives us a sense of is not the fact *that* we have a free will, but rather that this will can be strong." But if we are aware that this will can be *strong*, we are of course also aware that we have a free will in the first place: it is an experience of freedom. Accordingly, her view implies the correctness of my reading.

She cites Kant's claim that the mind feels itself "empowered" (*vermögend*) to overstep the limits of sensibility from a moral, practical point of view (KU, AA 5:255). "The feeling here is of empowerment, not freedom." But having a power in this sense implies being free. Moreover, freedom in one sense just *is* a power or capacity (*Vermögen*). I don't see much riding on the terminology here. The term 'power' may be closer to Kant's insistence that the sublime must leave behind a disposition of mind that indirectly has influence on the consciousness of its strength and resolution for morality, but since strength and resolution imply capacity, power, and ability, my use of 'freedom' seems acceptable.

Sublimity and Respect

First, a reminder about the two official subcategories of the sublime: the mathematical and the dynamical sublime are distinguished (among other things) by whether it is practical or theoretical reason that is in relation with the imagination. The term 'mathematical' reflects the fact that the judging subject is confronted with extensive

magnitudes, an extent or greatness in time or space, or as Kant suggests in the *Anthropology*, it has to do with enlargement (Anth, AA 7:177n). The term 'dynamical' likewise reflects the fact that the subject is aware of intensive magnitudes or degrees of power (KU, AA 5:268) or concerns "production" and force (Anth, AA 7:177n). A vast or powerful object itself is not sublime. Accordingly, since a subreption is "substitution of a respect for the object instead of for the idea of humanity in our subject" (KU, AA 5:257), the subject commits a subreption when she attributes sublimity to the mountain in uttering the proposition, or thinking, "The mountain is sublime".

Moreover, in my proposal, moral sublimity is "the effect on consciousness when the moral law, or some representation or embodiment thereof, is observed or perceived aesthetically rather than from a practical perspective" (p. 84). Enthusiasm and admiration (KU, AA 5:272) are two examples of the moral sublime. Since the latter is an aesthetic, disinterested response that does not determine the will to act, it is not identical to the moral feeling of respect. The moral law does not motivate action here, in contrast to instances of moral agency.

Now, I cannot accept Zinkin's suggestion that the moral sublime overwhelms our 'moral capacity' or 'good will'. What would it mean to say that we feel our own moral capacities stretched and feel overwhelmed? My worry is that this sounds too much like one element of the dynamical sublime, with its language of 'overwhelming', and that it threatens the possibility of moral autonomy and ultimately depresses and humiliates the subject without uplifting her. In addition, I would not suggest that a subject who responds aesthetically to a moral exemplar has to ask, "Am I capable of acting like that?", for in my view the experience of the sublime need not be so cognitive and reflexive.

Furthermore, I would distinguish respect as a general category from the moral feeling of respect. If we don't make this genus/species distinction, it is hard to make sense of the third *Critique's* definition of respect in general: "The feeling of the inadequacy of our capacity for the attainment of an idea that is a law for us is respect" (KU, AA 5:257). The moral feeling of respect (KpV, AA 5:78ff., 87ff.) can be subsumed under this general concept. The satisfaction in the sublime is said to "contain" respect or admiration (KU, AA 5:245). This means that it has the general features of respect, which I connect to reason's command to seek the unconditioned for every condition, but it does not imply that it is identical to the moral feeling of respect in the second *Critique*. Furthermore, if respect is "the feeling of the inadequacy of our capacity for the attainment of an idea that is a law for us", it need not be a feeling of awe towards something "morally bigger" than us, as Zinkin suggests. Kant does not mention morality or the moral law in his definition of respect, just an "idea that is a law for us".

Zinkin's suggestion that the term 'sublime' first "applies to a representation, and then respect refers to our attitude towards that representation" strikes me as unnecessarily complicated, perhaps even deficient in textual support. The phrase "and then" suggests a chronological reading that may be ungrounded, too. However, there is a related point on which we agree. She endorses my suggestion that, "[c]ertain feelings that are part of the experience of the sublime may transform from aesthetic judgments into practical judgments" (p. 141). Accordingly, a feeling of the sublime could (but need not) turn into an action-oriented judgment. This would no longer involve an aesthetic experience of the sublime, of course, and the practical and aesthetic judgments would remain logically distinct, as Zinkin notes.

Are There Two Subsets?

Zinkin does not accept my introduction of "two subsets" within the sublime of mental states. According to my view, affects such as righteous anger, courage, enraged despair, moral sadness (*Traurigkeit*), moral sorrow (*Betrübniß*), and moral apathy (KU, AA 5:272–6) elicit the sublime, whereas other ones like enthusiasm and admiration are part of (or are) sublime experiences. It is unclear how moral sadness or righteous anger could *be* experiences of the aesthetically sublime, as she suggests. It is difficult to accept her claim that anger and despair are "not themselves related to the faculty of desire and hence not motives for actions", for they clearly are. Moreover, assuming that Zinkin is right that they are not so related, how could they then strengthen "the will in its determination to act"? These two claims seem incompatible.

I would like to clarify some misunderstandings of my position. The actors in the French Revolution, the revolutionaries, are not undergoing or having experiences of the sublime, but are agents actively contributing to and involved in the violent events. Moreover, my view is that the spectators find sublime, not “the mental states of the actors in the French revolution”, but the attempt to establish a republic based on the idea of reason. Kant’s enlightened observers are enthusiastic about neither the French Revolution nor the revolutionary acts *per se*, but about the moral-political republican ideals that the historical events enact, what they represent for other democracies in the world.

Finally, since moral apathy is likewise related to the faculty of desire, it clearly cannot *be* a sublime experience. Interestingly, Kant says it is sublime in a way far *superior* to that of enthusiasm (KU, AA 5:272). One plausible reading of this passage is that moral apathy elicits sublimity in those who contemplate it. Enthusiasm, on the other hand, would actually be a sublime experience, and in ‘A Renewed Question’, the second section of *The Conflict of the Faculties*, Kant describes it precisely in such terms.

Is it Enthusiasm?

Zinkin concludes: “For Kant, however, this feeling only borders on enthusiasm, since the spectators do not, in fact, feel quite empowered enough to act.” True, Kant does describe a feeling that “borders” on enthusiasm (*die nahe an Enthusiasm grenzt*) (SF, AA 7:85), which would seem to imply that the feeling in question is not actually enthusiasm. I address this objection in the book (pp. 175–6, 214). The term “borders” is mistakenly understood if it is taken to imply that Kant isn’t discussing enthusiasm. Kant refers to “genuine enthusiasm” later in the passage (SF, AA 7:86) and refers to the concept of honour among the old martial nobility as an analogue of “enthusiasm” (SF, AA 7:86). He refers in a footnote to “such an enthusiasm” (SF, AA 7:86n) and employs the language he uses to describe something as sublime: “elevate”, “zeal and grandeur of soul”, and “exaltation”. Kant isn’t simply using the language for rhetorical reasons. He actually restates the third *Critique*’s definition of enthusiasm as “the idea of the good with affect”: “the passionate participation in the good, enthusiasm” (*die Theilnehmung am Guten mit Affect, der Enthusiasm*) (SF, AA 7:86). The feeling in question is not wholly to be esteemed, to be sure, but it is certainly an instance of enthusiasm.

Moral Goodness and Enthusiasm

Zinkin cites Kant’s view that “nothing great has ever been accomplished without enthusiasm”. She writes: “Clewis misunderstands here what Kant means by ‘great’. Clewis thinks that what Kant means by great is what is ‘morally good’.” I am puzzled by this. Perhaps what we are disagreeing about is how to conceive of the moral sublime, so let me restate that, in my view, it is possible for subjects to reflect on moral greatness in an aesthetic play rather than make a moral judgment about the contemplated content. When this occurs, the subject witnesses the achievement of something great, including a supererogatory act, in an instance of what I call the moral sublime. Zinkin is right that these acts can have aesthetic value; however, they do so only as the moral sublime, which can be an affective response to *either* duty-discharging acts or supererogatory acts—I wouldn’t exclude duty-discharging acts from the set of acts that can evoke the moral sublime, though of course Kant cautions against making such acts appear to be extraordinary and too difficult for ordinary human beings to carry out.

Zinkin writes: “[T]he spectators do not, in fact, feel quite empowered enough to act.” If she means that an *enthusiastic* affect helps agents accomplish supererogatory acts, inspiring them to achieve more than is required of them, I have several concerns associated with the phrase “to act”. First, such an agent, *qua* agent, would no longer be feeling the purely *aesthetically* sublime but would have a will determined by the faculty of reason. Enthusiasm, on the Critical view, is an affect and determines sensibility, not the faculty of desire. As a blind affect, it does not merit the esteem of reason. Moreover, there is the risk that enthusiasm will lead us to fail to identify the genuine ground of duty, the moral law.

Let me emphasize that respect in response to the morally good can be felt without feeling enthusiasm. We don't need enthusiasm to have respect and do not always respond to the morally good with affect. For Kant it is possible simply to do the right thing by recognizing the authority of the moral law (cf. VT, AA 8:395n). The feeling at work in moral agency need not and cannot be enthusiasm. Enthusiasm indeed reveals a "tendency and faculty in human nature for improvement" (SF, AA 7:88), which implies that human beings are free, and thus it can play an important role in Kant's system, but it is crucial to keep in mind its negative aspects (cf. pp. 178–83). Even if, as Kant argues in 'A Renewed Question', enthusiasm in response to the establishment of the French Republic can reveal freedom and indirectly contribute to morality by acting as a moral sign that unfolds in the natural order, enthusiasm is certainly not a necessary condition of moral agency (p. 218). All affects as such are deplorable and blind, and may eventually lead us to act in the wrong way or to violate our duties—if they lead to actions at all.

Link to *The Kantian Sublime and the Revelation of Freedom*:

<http://www.cambridge.org/us/academic/subjects/philosophy/eighteenth-century-philosophy/kantian-sublime-and-revelation-freedom>

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