

Reply to Paul Guyer

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

By Robert Clewis

In [his thought-provoking comments](#), Paul Guyer raises interesting questions about revelation as a form of knowledge, the possibility of free as well as dependent sublimity, and the moral sublime as a distinct category of the sublime and as dependent sublimity. I address these issues in turn. Fortunately, Guyer and I appear to be largely in agreement.

On the Experience of Freedom

I suggest in the book's introduction that each kind of sublimity is a non-cognitive experience of a different kind of freedom (pp. 17–18). This term 'revelation' is neither meant in a religious, theological sense nor taken to be a kind of cognition. On my proposal, the moral sublime is an experience of *positive* practical freedom (a capacity to act from a priori moral motives), the dynamical sublime makes palpable *negative* practical freedom (independence of determination by sensuous impulses), and the mathematical sublime discloses transcendental freedom (an ability to act as a first cause in a causal series) insofar as it suspends the time-condition. Sublimity can be a non-cognitive feeling of freedom of this sort only from a first-person perspective, i.e., for a subject and not for others; the aesthetic presentation of freedom via the sublime only works for each of us as feeling (not knowing or cognizing) subjects, and neither for other human beings nor for human beings in general.^[1]

Guyer emphasizes that Kant's conception of making palpable must always be distinguished from a conception of making known in a strict sense, and I agree. I do not consider this disclosure of freedom to constitute an independent source of pure or empirical knowledge. Kant does not think his analysis offers a synthetic a priori cognition of freedom, since on his account such cognition would be impossible (p. 137).

Dependent Sublimity

I am pleased that Guyer discusses my distinction between free and dependent sublimity, and even more delighted that he accepts my proposal, which lies in a precarious position. It lies open to attack both by commentators who overlook *dependent* sublimity, as many scholars do, since after all Kant never uses the phrase, and by those who deny free sublimity, as Guyer used to do on the grounds that the judgment of the sublime necessarily involves a reference to a concept, namely, to an idea of infinitude or freedom of will.

My account of dependent sublimity is modelled on Kant's account of dependent beauty. In a dependent judgment of the sublime, the subject looks at the object as organized or as having ends and goals, hence applying a concept of purpose to the object. For instance, a subject can see the lion in its *power*, the building in its designed extent or *magnitude*, or even the human in its ability to execute *moral* ends. The notion of dependent sublimity helps us understand passages throughout Kant's corpus such as his reference in the second *Critique* to "the strength and swiftness of many animals", which would clearly count as a dependent sublimity (KpV, AA 5:76).

This proposal requires distinguishing between a judgment's *purity* (which it is) and its being *purely* aesthetic (which it is not, since it is combined with a teleological concept of the object). Aesthetic judgments can be incompletely or impurely aesthetic in that they appeal to concepts of ends, yet still possess the features of purity, i.e., the necessary conditions of all pure aesthetic judgments (pp. 98–9, 194). The notion of dependent sublimity also helps us understand the moral sublime, which, given its conceptual content, could not be a free sublimity.

The Distinctiveness of the Moral Sublime

My view is not so much that Kant recognized the moral sublime as a distinct subcategory of the sublime alongside the dynamical or mathematical sublime, as that he could have done so and that one finds evidence of such a notion in his early and Critical writings. I do not think Kant intended to add a category of the moral sublime to his official taxonomy, but that the moral sublime can be identified in his oeuvre as a distinct form. On my reading, the dynamical sublime is a morally-grounded aesthetic response to a non-moral object, typically some powerful natural wonder. The moral sublime is a morally-grounded aesthetic response to objects or representations with moral content, viewed from an aesthetic point of view. Hence in the judgment of the moral sublime the 'object' that stimulates the emotion has a clearer or more evident conceptual content, and this moral and conceptual content is what incites the process that ultimately can lead to an *aesthetic* experience of one's practical freedom or autonomy.

Guyer writes: "I think that including the moral sublime as a subcategory of the aesthetic sublime runs the risk of masking Kant's departure from the conventional thought of his time rather than emphasizing it." I am not sure we ultimately disagree here, for I also hold (as I explain below) that the moral sublime is not a purely aesthetic, but an adherent, dependent form of sublimity. Whereas the moral sublime is adherent, judgments of the mathematical and dynamical sublime can be either *free* or adherent, the theory of the (free) dynamical sublime in raw nature marking Kant's greatest departure from the thought of his predecessors. I do not wish to deny the possibility of free sublimity.

Perhaps Guyer and I draw different conclusions from the same historical evidence. It seems to me that the following fact *supports* my proposal for the moral sublime as a form of Kantian sublimity, namely, that the moral sublime as an aesthetic response to moral qualities in others was clearly recognized by British writers such as John Baillie, James Usher, Alexander Gerard, and Shaftesbury, and German writers such as Baumgarten and Mendelssohn, some of whom were familiar to Kant. Kant recognized the noble sublime (*Edle–Erhabene*) in the *Observations* (Beo, AA 2:209), and I find it more plausible to find a continuum here than a radical break or change of mind. Lord Kames (in *Elements of Criticism*) and John Dennis (in *The Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry*) characterize enthusiasm as sublime or in terms of grandeur, understood as sublimity. Is the fact that the moral sublime played an important role in theories of sublimity before Kant and in the early Kant support for recognizing the moral sublime in his Critical thought, or is it evidence that Kant radically changed his mind? Guyer suggests that my position fails to recognize the distinctiveness of Kant's position, but I suppose our differences reflect how much we wish to emphasize Kant's continuity with his own past and with the aesthetic tradition rather than his break from these.

If it is correct that we can locate the moral sublime in the Critical writings, it is incumbent on my position to explain why Kant did not name the moral sublime explicitly. Perhaps there was too much pressure on his Critical aesthetics for him to have asserted the existence of a moral sublime, that is, a form of merely reflective, aesthetic contemplation based on a determinate concept of the good, for his aesthetics required him to distinguish aesthetic judgment not just from the agreeable but also from the morally good, not just from *below* as it were, but also from *above*, as he states in the opening paragraph of the 'Analytic of the Sublime' (KU, AA 5:244). Kant may have thought that recognizing the moral sublime would have called into question the very aesthetic distinctions that lay at the core of his theory. Yet I do not think that it does. If this is right, we can show how a conception of moral sublimity that is consistent with the Critical aesthetics would look, and in this sense my proposal is reconstructive.

On the historical-developmental point, it may be useful to consider what happens to the other earlier forms of sublimity. The *Observations'* account of the "splendid sublime", in which sublimity is combined with beauty, seems to foreshadow the view of the Critical period that there can be sublimity in art and artifice so long as the product of

genius is tamed by and conforms to taste. Similarly, the Burkean “terrifying sublime” is modified in terms of Kant’s unique theories of freedom, moral autonomy, and practical reason to become that distinctly Kantian form, the dynamical sublime. And in the notes written in the *Observations* (Bem, AA 20:47), Kant refers to something like the mathematical sublime, although the earlier version differs from the Critical conception, which combines a concept of theoretical reason as the faculty of the unconditioned with pre-Kantian theories concerning magnitude and vastness. In each of these instances, the Critical account modifies concepts that already existed in some form in order to reflect Kant’s considered views of nature, freedom, genius, reason, and so forth. This would presumably lead readers to expect the same to be true in the case of the “noble” sublime, which would still be present in Kant’s writings even if he did not officially call it the “moral” sublime.

Moral Sublimity as Dependent

Guyer’s claims that the moral sublime would be a dependent or impure sublimity, that “at the very least, if the moral sublime should count as an aesthetic experience at all, it can only count as an adherent rather than pure aesthetic experience”. I agree. I made a similar point about the moral sublime (which, if I am right, includes enthusiasm described in ‘A Renewed Question’ in *The Conflict of the Faculties*) in section 5.4.1 of my book, ‘Enthusiasm as Dependent Sublimity’. I wrote: “Since aesthetic enthusiasm is based on the idea of the good, for Kant, it is hard to imagine what could elicit the enthusiasm if one abstracted from the good purposes for which the event or object was created” (p. 193).

A concept of the purpose of the object would lie at the basis of the judgment of the moral sublime. I agree with Guyer that if an judgment of sublimity is to be purely aesthetic, a free judgment, it “cannot be triggered by *cognition* of a properly moral *object*, involving a moral conceptualization of that object, whether the object be the moral law itself or representation thereof, the concept of duty, an actual or literary example of moral virtue or heroism”, or the like. The moral sublime would not be purely aesthetic since it involves a determination of the object, a cognition of its moral content, which the subject nonetheless considers in aesthetic play. That is in fact precisely why we need my distinction between free and dependent sublimity. But dependent sublimity is still sublimity.

[1] Cf. Guyer’s argument concerning the “fact of reason”, in P. Guyer, ‘Proving Ourselves Free’, *Akten des X. Internationalen Kant-Kongresses* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), ed. by V. Rohden et al., vol. 1, pp. 115–37.

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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*Robert Clewis is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Philosophy Program Coordinator at Gwynedd Mercy University, USA. He publishes on Kant’s aesthetics and is currently editing a volume on the relation between Kant’s lectures and his published philosophical writings under the title **Reading Kant’s Lectures** (forthcoming, de Gruyter).*

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