

CHAPTER 37

ROBERT R. CLEWIS, “TOWARDS A THEORY OF THE SUBLIME AND AESTHETIC AWE”

In *The Possibility of the Sublime*, Clewis commented on Jane Forsey’s 2007 article on the sublime, and Forsey replied to commentators (see Note on the text).

Below, Clewis recasts his ideas in light of the broader aims of the present volume. He describes features of the objects that paradigmatically incite sublime experiences, characterizes the experience’s phenomenology (what it feels like) and intersubjectivity, and identifies five distinct sources of the pleasures in the sublime.

He uses the terms “aesthetic awe” and the “sublime” interchangeably. This is not too far a departure from traditional use of the terms. Contemporary researchers and psychologists use the term “awe” (or sometimes “aesthetic awe”) to refer to what writers from the history of aesthetics typically discussed under the terms “the sublime” and “sublimity” (and relatives thereof). Although we may wish to depart from tradition *if* we have compelling reasons to do so, it should be noted that there is a long tradition in the English language of using “awe” and the “sublime” in similar ways and contexts, as demonstrated by writings from Elizabeth Carter and William Wordsworth and contemporary authors such as Carolyn Korsmeyer (among many others). Aesthetic awe, in the proposed view, is a subset of awe. The word “aesthetic” is added, in order to distinguish the topic from the kind of awe felt in a religious experience (described, for instance, by Rudolf Otto) or the awe before a prominent or powerful leader (sociopolitical awe), as in the theory proposed by Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt.¹ Due to its status as an “aesthetic” experience, aesthetic awe can be more easily switched off than can other fundamental emotions,² which differentiates aesthetic awe from uncontrollable fear before a great power or threat.

Note on the text

Some of the following ideas appeared in Robert R. Clewis, “A Theory of the Sublime Is Possible,” in *The Possibility of the Sublime: Aesthetic Exchanges*, edited by Lars Aagaard-Mogensen, 45–68. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017. The present chapter is here published for the first time.

“Towards a theory of the sublime and aesthetic awe”

Of late the sublime has been treated in two strikingly different ways. On the one hand, countless analyses in literary studies, criticism, film studies, and art history make use of the term to convey an object’s or artwork’s power to evoke an intense, striking, uplifting response, implicitly assuming that a theory of the sublime is possible, without much further discussion. Likewise, some psychologists study “awe” without digging too deeply into the conceptual difficulties.³ Some film directors are guided by the concept—and, by their own admission, do so with a kind of trusting simplicity. In one of his essays, director Werner Herzog reflects, “The Absolute, the Sublime, the Truth. . . . What do these words mean? This is, I must confess, the first time in my

life that I have sought to settle such questions outside of my work, which I understand, first and foremost, in practical terms."⁴ On the other hand, some philosophers are skeptical that a viable theory is possible. In presenting her arguments for this conclusion, Jane Forsey claims that, "Our current theorizing about the sublime rests on a mistake."⁵ Other scholars have agreed that there appears to be a conceptual problem with the notion of sublimity. "The underlying concern about untheorizability, dispensability, and mere fabrication (i.e., that there's really no *there* there with respect to the sublime) needs to be more directly confronted by aestheticians . . . who propose to retain the concept."⁶ Well over a century ago, E. F. Carritt raised worries about the sublime, at least, about the version proposed by Oxford poetry professor A. C. Bradley, who maintained that sublimity was a species of beauty with the added quality of greatness or power. "We may ask if it [the sublime] is a real class at all or only an unessential concept under which almost any divergences from the central type of beauty . . . are arbitrarily put together."⁷

Although the state of scholarship has certainly been improved by responses to such skeptical inquiring, in particular to Forsey's pressing analysis, I do not think that such probing entails that a coherent and consistent theory of the sublime is beyond our reach. I propose that it is possible to come up with a coherent, even fruitful, theory of the sublime. I do not claim that my proposal resolves most of the theoretical issues, or answers nearly all of the conceptual questions, but I hope it is at least a start—an outline of a compelling theory.

In the following, therefore, I sketch a theory of the sublime that is intended to address the problems raised by Forsey and other writers. Drawing from both historical and contemporary sources, I outline a philosophical account of the sublime response and conceive of it as an "aesthetic" experience, which for the purposes of this chapter, I think of as primarily as a response to something perceived rather than thought or conceived. In focusing on perception, I do not intend to deny that experiences of the sublime might be induced by "great thoughts" (as Longinus put it), mathematical proofs, or the like—in short, intellectual content that is not readily perceived. It is just that it is easier to sketch an aesthetic theory with the perceptual cases in mind.

But, what should we expect from a theory of the sublime? Among other things, a convincing account of the sublime should give an explanation of the kinds of *objects* that elicit the experience, the *structure* of the various kinds of sublime responses, and the *sources* of the pleasures in the sublime. (A useful theory should perhaps also show how the sublime differs from negative emotions like disgust and fear, as well as from allied or related states like wonder and the feeling of beauty, but space allows for only passing mention of such differences.) While recognizing the historical and cultural contingency, and the situatedness, of experiences of the sublime (or "sublimes"), my proposal thus addresses the object, structure, and sources of the pleasure.

My account draws from a theory of imagination grounded in the biological and psychological features shared by human beings, and finds some support in—but is certainly not solely based on—recent empirical research. Readers of the present volume will likely be coming from a diverse set of disciplines, and discussions of empirical research can sometimes strike fellow scholars in the humanities as controversial, so perhaps I should say a word about my discussion of empirical research. To put it as briefly as possible, I think it is desirable if a philosophical theory is at least compatible with the latest scientific findings relevant to the topic in question. I take it as evident that philosophy (theory) and science should, where possible, be aligned, and that a philosophical account of a topic should be consistent with, and not contradict, what scientific findings suggest about that topic. I do not claim science is the only source for developing a philosophical theory and do not base my (provisional) theory of the sublime on science alone, but also have independent philosophical and phenomenological grounds for my views, which are also rooted in the contributions by writers from the history of aesthetics, many of them long forgotten or simply passed over. In other words, I look to empirical research for possible additional confirmation of my views and aim to modify the latter if scientific findings suggest that they should be revised.

The object

As I mentioned in the Introduction to the present volume, there seems to be an unavoidable ambiguity confronting theories of the sublime. The “sublime” can refer to a person’s feelings and experiences, and the term can be applied to the object that elicits those responses. I cannot at present see how the sublime can be adequately theorized without acknowledging and paying careful attention to both of these poles, the subjective and the objective. Reflection on the sublime over the course of the centuries (especially the modern period) recognizes both poles, referring, for instance, to feelings, experiences, and mental states as well as to sublime objects. Accordingly, I will deal with both poles.

No object, technically speaking, is inherently sublime. The sublimity of an object requires someone who experiences sublimity. Yet, the sublime is far from being an idiosyncratic response. In other words, we can speak about qualities or characteristics of objects that paradigmatically elicit the experience. Thus, I propose an approach according to which objects typically possessing certain properties or attributes, and perceived in the right contexts, are paradigmatically disposed to evoke the aesthetic experience of the sublime.⁸

Jane Forsey presented arguments against the proposal offered by Guy Sircello, who attempted to respond to questions he raised about the sublime.⁹ Sircello wanted to find a way to reinterpret what can be called “epistemological transcendence” (i.e., the claim that one has limited epistemological access to a sublime object) in a way that did not entail “ontological transcendence” (i.e., the claim that an inaccessible sublime entity *exists*). Forsey argued—I think convincingly—that Sircello could not avoid this entailment. She identified the heart of the problem as this: “If we focus on the metaphysical status of the sublime object, our epistemology becomes problematic, but if we address instead the epistemological transcendence of a certain experience, we still seem forced to make *some* metaphysical claim about the object of that experience.”¹⁰ In other words, how can we have a fruitful, plausible theory about an object that is inaccessible?¹¹

I need not rehearse her carefully crafted arguments here, for her analysis is clear and can stand on its own. However, I think she is wrong about one point; thankfully, this oversight provides a way out of the various dilemmas she puts forward. She holds that the claim that the sublime is familiar and transcendent is inconsistent or contains a contradiction. This strikes me as incorrect. This is the horn of the dilemma that can be grasped and shown to be false.

Taking a cue from Aristotle, we can say the sublime is familiar and transcendent, just not at the same time or in the same way. An object or event can be familiar at one time (or to some people), yet appear transcendent at another time. In experiences of the sublime, a possibly familiar object (say, the Alps for the alpine mountain inhabitants) can be perceived or imagined in a new light, in a rare moment. This move does not entail positing a metaphysically transcendent object—at least not anything beyond the object created by one’s imagination (as will be discussed in the penultimate section).

Sircello’s claim or thesis that the object is epistemologically inaccessible—a claim that presupposes what I call the “transcendent” or ineffable strand of the sublime—can be questioned for several reasons. First, it leads to the paradoxes Forsey identified; we can avoid the paradoxes if we drop the thesis that the object is epistemologically inaccessible. Second, the thesis fails to describe adequately or capture the phenomenology of the experience. The necessary emotional element of the experience—how the sublime feels—is noticeably absent from accounts emphasizing that the sublime is epistemologically inaccessible.¹² This point about phenomenology leads to a third reason we should give up the notion that this thesis is an essential part of a theory of the sublime: it seems to be based on a category mistake. The thesis that the sublime is epistemologically inaccessible characterizes the sublime as a failed mode of understanding. It turns the problem of the sublime into an epistemological issue, a matter of truth. Tellingly, throughout his paper, Sircello characterizes the problem in terms of adequation to “reality.” It is likewise revealing that the conference panel at which Forsey

presented an early version of her article in 2005 was called "Knowing the Sublime." The experience of the sublime should be conceived more in terms of play and emotion than in terms of a concern for truth or conformity to reality.

The experience of the sublime should not be conceived as being *of* an inaccessible sublime object. (The grammar of "of" may be misleading us here.) If we want to speak this way (focusing on the object pole), we should claim that an extraordinary experience is of an otherwise ordinary and accessible object: the mountain, volcano, falls, ravine, dam, dome, pyramid, and so on. To put it in psychologically oriented terms, in the sublime the object acts as a stimulus or elicitor of a (rare) mental state and subjective experience.

In contrast to such epistemologically oriented approaches and concerns with adequation, the sublime is better understood in terms of its phenomenological structure, intense emotions and responses (what Sandra Shapshay calls "thick and thin" responses),¹³ and in terms of a play of imagination, as I explain below.¹⁴ I propose that the sublime should be conceived as an intense, *affective* response involving our sensory, perceptual, and imaginative powers.¹⁵ I see this as a genuinely aesthetic account—in a sense of "aesthetic" that is faithful to the origin of the word, *aesthēsis*, in which modes of pleasure (or pain) play a crucial and essential role.¹⁶ As David Hume put it when discussing the aesthetic concepts of beauty and deformity: "Pleasure and pain, therefore, are not only necessary attendants of beauty and deformity, but constitute their very essence."¹⁷

If the sublime is an aesthetic response to an (epistemologically accessible) object, the aesthetic judgment of the sublime, considered as a statement, can take the propositional form "*x* is sublime," as in the actual propositions, "This mountain is sublime" and "This pyramid is awe-inducing." (Silence, too, is a possible response to the sublime object or event, but in that case one utters no statement.) Poets from various traditions (east and west, north and south), from Li Po to Wordsworth, write about and describe their aesthetic responses to paradigmatic elicitors of the sublime such as mountains and waterfalls.¹⁸

The storms, rocks, and crags—the kinds of objects to which the predicate "sublime" typically is applied—are epistemologically accessible. Taking this approach removes the need to resolve the paradoxes generated by phrases such as "painting the unpaintable," "presenting the unrepresentable," or "giving a finite representation of the infinite."¹⁹ Such formulas were favored not just by German Idealists but also iterated in various francophone theories of the sublime in the late 1980s and 1990s. They are also traceable back to certain passages in Kant (from whom Lyotard and Derrida drew inspiration), Schopenhauer (for whom the sublime reveals the world "in itself"), Schelling, and Hegel. Such approaches give rise to the noted problems associated with how we can have epistemological access to a transcendent object or event.

The sublime object or event (concept, thought)²⁰ is experienced as, or perceived in that particular moment of attention, as novel, striking, or rare. The concept of novelty enjoyed a rich and detailed treatment by eighteenth-century writers such as Joseph Addison and Edmund Burke and even twentieth-century American pragmatists like Stephen Pepper.²¹ The point here is not to fetishize the new or novel, but to emphasize that the object or event is experienced in an extraordinary and striking way, almost as if for the first time. Novelty—and related aesthetic qualities such as being striking—can be characterized as contextualized responses produced by an engagement or encounter between the perceiver and the object, including even old or antiquated artifacts. This explains part of the fascination with ancient ruins, and why they sometimes appear sublime. Novelty disrupts habit, which makes things look familiar and renders us indifferent.²²

When the object is perceived as familiar, it is not usually part of a stirring and moving experience, nor is it typically accompanied by an intense feeling of satisfaction. As Joseph Priestley put it: "Whenever any object, how great so ever, becomes familiar to the mind . . . the sublime vanishes."²³ Wordsworth's poetry is likewise instructive: "No familiar shapes / Remained [. . .]; / But huge and mighty forms, that do not live / Like living men."²⁴ As mentioned, no object is inherently sublime. When an object is perceived to be sublime, it is because

The Sublime Reader

that same object is experienced in a different way (at a different time) and seen in a new light. The Alps are obviously familiar to the alpine farmers; nevertheless, I see no good reason to deny that the mountains could sometimes elicit sublime responses in the alpine farmers—just as it can in visitors, tourists, and climbers who are likely to perceive the mountainous forms as novel and striking. The fact that the farmers and inhabitants are already present in the natural environment and attuned to their surroundings may even imply that they are sensitive to new aesthetic experiences beyond the ordinary. As Wordsworth writes,

It is not likely that a person so situated, provided his imagination be exercised by other intercourse, as it ought to be, will become, by any continuance of familiarity, insensible to sublime impressions from the scenes around him. Nay, it is certain that his conceptions of the sublime, far from being dulled or narrowed by commonness or frequency, will be rendered more lively and comprehensive by more accurate observation and by increasing knowledge.²⁵

There may be moments of the sublime when the weather is just right, or when the moon appears in a particular way in the landscape. Likewise, some scenes from Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey* can be considered to be sublime, but they are likely to be viewed with familiarity to any movie house employees who screen the film regularly. While the employees may sometimes feel the sublime in response to such scenes, they need not do so, and they are unlikely do so when they are going about their work, stepping into an auditorium to check the fire exits, or helping late arrivals find their seats. In those moments, they have turned off their focus and are not giving the scene the absorbed attention required for the sublime response. Finally, the massive, magnificent dome or cathedral (pick your favorite example) may be well known to the people who work in the tourist industry that capitalizes on its sublime qualities. Once again, the workers (or nearby inhabitants) may have a sublime response every now and then; the point is simply that, insofar as they experience the object as familiar, the familiarity of the object makes the sublime response very unlikely.

Let us turn to vastness and other qualities associated with the sublime. The “sublime,” I suggest, is paradigmatically predicated of objects or events perceived to be vast, grand, colossal, and/or powerful. Due to its size or might, such an object poses a risk or potential threat to the perceiver. It is thus seen (to use Kant's term) as “contra-purposive,” that is, apparently unsuited for us, or running counter to our interests, be they cognitive or practical. On the one hand, it seems evident that a thing's size or power is an objective property. An object is x many meters tall or wide, or is rated at y gigawatts. On the other hand, size and power can be perceived in different ways, depending on one's perspective—just as with novelty and familiarity. One can be too close or too far to the object or event for the sublime to occur. It is an obvious fact that the distance from which a mountain, storm, or skyscraper is viewed changes one's experience of it.

As an aesthetic attribute, “vast” is a response-dependent term. The circumstances are crucial. Priestley made a similar point: “The ideas of *great* and *little* are confessedly relative.”²⁶ Kant likewise writes that one should be neither too close nor too far to the Egyptian pyramids (having read reports of it by Savary), so that the object strikes one as being the right size to incite the sublime experience.²⁷ The Chinese art theoretician Guo Xi (ca. 1000–1090) made a similar observation while offering instruction to landscape painters. Guo Xi (Kuo Hsi) claimed: “A mountain looks this way close by, another way a few miles away, and yet another way from a distance of a dozen miles. Its shape changes at every step.”²⁸ Thus, the perceiver must find the right distance, the sweet spot, and attend properly to the object if the effect is to be achieved. Not all paradigmatically “sublime” objects will always be experienced as sublime. This is one reason why the sublime is an aesthetic quality or property, rather than either a mathematical or merely physical attribute.

Although Burke certainly focuses on physiological and corporeal responses, some elements of his account plainly attend to the features of the object. Burke lists features of objects that in general evoke the sublime: being vast, rugged, massive, and/or powerful. To put it another way, there is a range of multi-sensory qualities or properties paradigmatically involved in the sublime. As Brady puts it in a list that is inspired by Burke's account, "Sublimity involves a range of qualities linked to vastness, enormous size, and power, such as the mysterious, dark, obscure, great, huge, powerful, towering, dizzying, blasting, raging, disordered, dynamic, tumultuous, shapeless, formless, boundless, frameless, and so on."²⁹ (Note that these are not intended to count as sufficient conditions for stimulating an experience of the sublime.) These challenging qualities contrast with the harmony, symmetry, or order that is typically thought to evoke a sense of beauty or to elicit a calm feeling of grandeur.

Before we turn to the subjective dimension of the sublime, it is worth assessing another potential candidate for the paradigmatically sublime object: ourselves. Some theorists claim (or read eighteenth-century theorists such as Kant or Baillie as claiming) that the sublime is, in the end, an experience of ourselves (as sublime, as great). Are we—or some quality deemed essential to us, such as our moral vocation, humanity, minds, or freedom—the sublime objects? This strikes me as implausible, not least for phenomenological reasons. Such a view would seem to entail that reflexivity is an essential part of the experience. However, it is dubitable that reflexivity is essential to the experience of the sublime. I think that the experience *can* sometimes give rise to a self-conscious reflection on the relation between the experiencing self and the object (what Shapshay calls a "thick" response), but it is not necessary. A "thin" response, in which we do not reflect on ourselves, is also possible.³⁰

Empirical and experimental studies give further reasons to doubt that reflexivity is part of the experience of the sublime, and thus to doubt that in the experience we find ourselves to be sublime.³¹ If this is correct, a sublime experience can be *reflective* (a matter of aesthetic contemplation), without being *reflexive* (about oneself), and even if the two can occur together in an experience of the sublime, it is useful to distinguish them conceptually. If so, an observer can apprehend or contemplate aesthetically, without explicitly thinking about herself—that is, without reflecting on her own greatness, rational powers, or agency (Shapshay's "thick" response), or even without thinking of herself in comparison to the vast object or natural environs (as Brady describes).³²

The structure of sublime responses

Above, I claimed that the vast or powerful object is experienced in a particular context, in a setting that allows the object to be experienced as remarkable, striking, novel, and/or rare. I now turn to the elements having to do with the experiencing subject.

In referring to the "structure" of an experience, one could arguably mean at least two things: the *phenomenology* of the sublime, and the *scope* of the experience—the sublime's being shared or intersubjective. Regarding the former, I hold that the object is responded to with intense, agreeable affect or emotion possessing a dual, that is, negative–positive, phenomenology. Related to the latter is the issue of whether the sublime is relative to certain times and places, or instead pan-cultural (or at least cross-cultural), that is, shared by different cultures. I turn to each of these.

First, let me acknowledge two commitments. As can be seen from the foregoing remarks, I follow Shapshay in speaking of sublime responses rather than of a single homogenous response. Yet the various kinds of responses do have something in common: they share a "phenomenological structure." Second, I do not think it is possible to come up with strict principles or laws for evoking the sublime or to give cases such that somebody *must* find some particular object to be sublime.³³

I conceive of the subjective pole of the sublime as an intense, mixed, negative–positive experience. The feeling of being overwhelmed is combined with intense satisfaction. Moreover, certain conditions must be met by the experiencing subject. For instance, the person must be in a safe, secure position. So far, I take these claims about the structure of the experience to be rather uncontroversial, widely recognized by theorists over the centuries, from Kant and Schopenhauer to Brady and Freeland.

Since we are speaking of “phenomenology,” let me explain some jargon. The phenomenological approach holds that in every act of consciousness there is an “intentional object,” which means that there is an object of consciousness (or one might say, *for* consciousness). Forsey raised important questions about whether the feeling of the sublime can be intentional in this sense. If a feeling does not have an intentional object, it cannot be theorized coherently, she reasoned—and quite plausibly. For the feeling would be too undirected and idiosyncratic to be intelligibly generalizable. At most we might be able to report it or, if we were inclined, to write poetry about it. Thus, if we are to theorize a feeling or experience of the sublime, it needs to be demonstrated that the feeling or experience of the sublime has an object of consciousness, in other words, that it is “intentional.” Fortunately, I take myself to have done just that in the previous section. There is an object of consciousness in the sublime: a person is conscious of the physical entity or mental object (e.g., a representation of the mountain, film scene, etc.), which is not epistemologically inaccessible.

The experience of the sublime contains a *negative* moment, in response to the object’s contra-purposive qualities such as vastness or its menacing, dominating power. Theories have expressed this negative component in various ways, as feelings of vulnerability, uneasiness, and discomfort. Yet, unlike these feelings, and unlike loathing and disgust, the sublime has an uplifting and pleasurable side. This is what attracts us to such experiences, and leads us to remain in and prolong them if possible.

Theorists across the centuries, from Shaftesbury and Kant to Brady and Shapshay, generally describe the sublime as having a two-fold phenomenological structure. The possibility that the structure is actually *three*-fold, recently proposed by Chignell and Haltman, deserves to be mentioned. I am not convinced the third moment or step is necessary, but here is how that account goes. The three moments of the experience, according to their view, are initial bedazzlement, an outstripping of the cognitive faculties, and an epiphany (i.e., a life-affecting change of perspective).³⁴ But, aren’t these really two moments in the end? Bedazzlement in front of the object, and cognitive outstripping, can be reduced to one (negative) moment. As for the positive moment, the lasting change of perspective: I agree that there is a positive moment, but am not sure that it should be conceived in terms of lasting impact. While the notion of a change of outlook may capture an element sometimes associated with the sublime or aesthetic awe, it seems better to leave it aside (at least for the moment, in a provisional outline), since it introduces complex, longitudinal elements into the experience. It may very well be true that the sublime experience can “change” us and that we can retain vivid memories of it that live on in us for days if not years, but it is not necessary that it do so. For the sake of parsimony, I will continue to focus on the original (non-longitudinal) experience as paradigmatic. And to account for this, it is sufficient to identify and describe a positive, pleasant element in the experience, above all caused by an expanded imaginative activity accompanying the perception of an object.

One other element of the phenomenology of the sublime I wish to mention, before turning to its intersubjectivity, is the altered perception of time. In the experience of sublimity, time appears to slow down. An altered sense of time perception in the sublime is something that has been studied empirically, and merits further study, but it is interesting to note that writers such as Helen Maria Williams,³⁵ Burke, and Kant independently made the same point.³⁶ Kant seems to have noticed that the sublime involves the sense that time has slowed down or even does not flow (which is perhaps one reason why he thinks that during the experience of the sublime one has a feeling or sensory hint of one’s freedom). He claims that the “subjective movement of the imagination” “does violence” to “inner sense” and thus, by implication, to one’s sense of

time.³⁷ Likewise, Burke maintains that all the "motions" of the soul "are suspended" while experiencing "astonishment" (the passion caused by the sublime).³⁸

I now turn to intersubjectivity. Is the feeling of aesthetic awe a shared and shareable experience? Is its pleasure intersubjectively communicable? Can it be felt in response to the same objects and events—together? And is it pan-cultural? These are important but difficult questions, and I can only begin to delve into them here.

Here it seems useful first to distinguish the *setting* of a subject or experiencer, who may be alone, from the *content* of the experience, which can be one of connectedness, a feeling of interconnection with other human beings.³⁹ Furthermore, we should distinguish both the setting and content of the experience from the implicit claim that others should agree with our judgment. The latter claim—that the judgment that *x* is sublime or awe-inducing has intersubjective validity—is not part of the content of the experience. Rather, it is attributed to the judgment: it is *about* the judgment. I take this to be what is meant by the claim that the experience is "shareable." Under similar conditions, others should agree with us that *x* is sublime and be able to have similar experiences. In Kant's jargon, the pleasure in the sublime has "subjective universality."⁴⁰ In other words, the judgment of the sublime makes a claim to be intersubjective.⁴¹

If the sublime were wholly personal and not communicable, we would be faced with the problems identified by Forsey. (But, as proposed in the previous section, there *is* an object of shared experience.) Although I depart from the over-moralized and reflexive elements in (one reading of) Kant's theory (such as the claim that the sublime must involve reflexive awareness of a moral calling), I follow Kant in asserting that a person making a judgment of sublimity, if asked about it, would think that she intends her judgment to be valid not just for her, but for others as well.

The stereotype that the sublime is felt by a solitary individual is widespread, but, if taken to imply that the sublime experience or satisfaction is not intersubjective, it is also mistaken. The (by now cliché) replications of Caspar David Friedrich paintings such as *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818) on covers of books about the sublime unfortunately seem to promote this misconception. Richard Rorty, like Forsey, adopts this understanding of the sublime, though he has in mind Lyotard's version. Rorty calls the sublime "wildly irrelevant to the attempt at communicative consensus which is the vital force" of common culture.⁴² But such claims about the sublime are surprising for two reasons. First, they seem at times simply to be false, since we do sometimes experience the sublime with others, with friends and family, or in crowds, and discuss and debate what we see or hear. And even when we experience the sublime while alone, we still treat the sublime experience as if it were intersubjectively valid, desire others to agree with us, and so on. ("If you had been there, you would have felt the same thing," we might say to our friends.) Second, such claims are also surprising since the Kantian paradigm of the sublime is prominent and widely discussed, and Kant clearly states that the judgment of the sublime makes a claim to intersubjective validity. On his very influential account, we can be expected to be able to give reasons for our judgments, in other words, to communicate.

One phenomenon in particular brings out the intersubjective aspects of the sublime: a crowd. A crowd of spectators observing a sublime event provides a counterexample to Rorty's claim that the sublime is "wildly irrelevant" to the attempt at communicative consensus. Consider the collective admiration of an extraordinary athletic feat, or musical performance. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht examines sports and athletic competitions admired by fans, who are "in communion with other enthusiastic fans."⁴³ The fans may even be from many different nations, yet feel a similar response. Gumbrecht's reference to being in "communion" is suggestive. Here is not a violent, frenzied, riotous, or fanatical crowd, but a collection of people who could potentially give reasons and grounds for their feelings of admiration and pleasure in response to the displayed events and outstanding feats. The achievements, movements, athletic plays, or events can evoke aesthetic responses bordering on the sublime. "Following an athletic event and feeling united with athletes and the crowd can

yield some of the more addictively uplifting moments of our lives.” Gumbrecht characterizes the sublime in response to “breath-taking . . . events and achievements” as a shared, collective experience, in “people’s memory” as moments “never to be equaled.”⁴⁴ In a crowd, as Elias Canetti observes, the individual feels that she is transcending the limits of her own person.⁴⁵ The loss of identity can be belittling for an individual, who feels lost in the masses. But it can also be uplifting, since the individual feels that she has become part of a greater whole. This negative–positive movement is precisely the structure of the sublime.

I now turn (briefly) to another difficult issue: pan-culturalism. There is some debate about whether the sublime is pan-cultural or not, that is, if it is found across all times and cultures.⁴⁶ The capacity for the sublime would appear to be pan-cultural in that it is grounded in basic biological and psychological features of human beings. At the same time, which particular objects or events elicit them would vary across time and place. Thus, in light of development, habitation, industrialization, encroachment, and the like, Kant may very well have been wrong to suggest that the sublime will be located primarily in natural wonders and landscape (though I myself think we can still feel such sublimity even today). Yet, even if he were wrong about which kinds of things evoke the sublime at any given moment in history, we could still find the sublime elsewhere, stimulated by other objects. The elicitors of the sublime responses change as our experiences and technologies vary. As noted in my remarks on novelty, familiarity is a main antagonist to the sublime in this respect. In short, while recognizing the historical situatedness of particular responses to objects (e.g., mountains), we should be skeptical of claims, made by writers such as James Elkins, that the concept of the sublime is useless since it is *irredeemably* bound by its particular history, its rootedness in eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century thought, and in particular, Romanticism.⁴⁷

This is not to say that the *concept* of the sublime does not have a history. It clearly does. We should be keenly aware of the historical situatedness of the sublime and our responses to the objects deemed “sublime.” Different objects will elicit aesthetic awe at different times. In her widely cited monograph, Marjorie Hope Nicolson documented the development of aesthetic responses to mountains during the modern period.⁴⁸ But this does not entail that the capacity for aesthetic awe is not a basic human ability. Likewise, it seems doubtful that we need to have formulated an explicit concept of the “aesthetic” (or of “aesthetic awe” and “sublimity”) in order to have experiences that we now consider sublime.

In addition, we should be wary of thinking that the western versions of the sublime as presented above all in the writings of Burke, Kant, and Schopenhauer are the paradigms by which to judge the experience. As noted by both Brady and Shapshay, Yuriko Saito maintains that Japanese aesthetic theorists do not make use of the category of the sublime. Allegedly, Japanese writers or artists are interested in the beautiful calm after the typhoon, but not so much in the typhoon. Saito’s claim has been taken to be evidence that the capacity for the sublime is not a basic human one.

This conclusion may be too hasty. First, it is possible that the Japanese response is broader, or more large-scale, than the western one, and that it includes both the typhoon *and* the calm. In other words, this may very well be the Japanese version of the sublime. Second, even if one insists that they are describing beauty alone rather than a combination of beauty and sublimity, Saito’s claim seems to apply more to the sublime configured in paintings and poetry, than to Japanese aesthetic theory. Indeed, the Japanese actor and theorist Zeami Motokiyo (1363–1443) articulates a distinct aesthetic response to Mount Fuji and to *nō* theater that arguably concerns the experience of the sublime (see his contribution to this volume).

Finally, consider an analogous basic emotion: fear. The capacity for fear appears to be pan-cultural. Yet, like the sublime, fear has a history. People feel fear today, yet the objects that elicit it are not the ones that paradigmatically elicited it in the past (ghoblins, spirits, etc.). Fear has a history, but it is also a basic emotion. For these reasons, it strikes me as plausible to hold that the capacity for the sublime is pan-cultural, while the objects or events typically found to be sublime have varied over time and space, that is, with history and geography.

Stretch of the imagination: Pleasures in the sublime

Why do we feel pleasure in the sublime at all, rather than frustration or just a feeling of smallness and insignificance? Several sources can be described. Below, I identify five distinct sources of the pleasure.

1. The stretching, expansion, or intense exercise of the mental faculties, above all the imagination (Aikin, Addison, Priestley).
2. The rising above or release from everyday affairs and concerns (Kant, Schopenhauer).
3. A sense of oneness with the world or finding a home or place in the universe (Schopenhauer), including a moral place or calling (Kant).
4. Engagement of the "fight, flight, or freeze" system, from a safe distance (hence, not inciting actual fear). This promotes a sense of vitality and elicits associated physiological responses (Kant, Burke).
5. Participation in the power or vastness, not of the world or universe as a whole, but of the object (Mendelssohn, Wordsworth).

Each source has some plausibility. Some of these sources may obtain at the same time; they can work conjointly. It seems unnecessary to insist that just one of these is the single, true source of the pleasure in sublime.

Source 1 is partly Aristotelian (or Leibnizian) in spirit. Aristotle claimed that the exercise of an ability or faculty brings pleasure. Accordingly, engaging and stretching the capacity for imagination brings pleasure. (Note that the imagination is here broadly construed and not limited to visualization.) The point is also made by modern writers from both the German scholastic (Leibnizian-Wolffian) and British traditions. In *Spectator* paper No. 412, Addison presents a version of this exercise theory: "Our imagination loves to be filled with an Object, or to grasp at any thing that is too big for its Capacity. We are flung into a pleasing Astonishment at such unbounded Views, and feel a delightful Stillness and Amazement in the Soul at the Apprehension of them."⁴⁹ Sometimes it is not the imagination per se that is said to be expanded or filled, but the mind or mental capacities in general. For instance, Burke writes that in the passion of the sublime (astonishment) the mind is "entirely filled" with the object.⁵⁰ But I think such claims can still be placed under source 1.

As Addison notes, the immense or powerful object is apprehended, even if with difficulty (in fact, such difficulty seems to add to the experience). The object, as we have seen, plays a crucial role in inciting the experience. Mendelssohn gives a version of this exercise theory, too. "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."⁵¹ While not entailing that the object is epistemologically inaccessible, this appeal to imagination still retains an aspect of the transcendent or metaphysical element that many theorists discern in the sublime. For instance Brady, like Shapshay, identifies in the sublime experience a (metaphysically modest) sense of mystery. She emphasizes the role of an expanded imagination: "If we want to keep hold of the transcendental thread in the sublime, we might speak of a type of aesthetic transcendence occurring through metaphysical imagination."⁵²

According to source 1, a ground of the pleasure in the sublime is the striving and stretching of the mental faculties, in particular the imagination. The play of pushing, stretching, and expanding of our capacity for image-making (broadly construed) is a source of the pleasure. As Brady puts it: "The imagination is invigorated in trying to take in a desert landscape, with its never-ending reaches of sand and undulating forms. The emotional response is complex, perhaps a mix of feelings and thoughts related to death . . . and a more exhilarating feeling from the open and endless expanse."⁵³ The imagination is active in generating such thoughts and in taking in the undulating forms and vast expanse.⁵⁴ For all of his talk about the superiority of reason, even Kant clearly states that "the enlargement of the imagination in itself" leads to "satisfaction" in the sublime.⁵⁵

Source 2 trades on the fact that it is pleasant to be relieved from everyday affairs and concerns. Kant at one point gives a version of this, too. “In our aesthetic judgment nature is judged as sublime not insofar as it arouses fear, but rather because it calls forth our power . . . to regard those things about which we are concerned (goods, health and life) as trivial.”⁵⁶ This approach is even more prominent in Schopenhauer. He claims that the person experiencing the sublime rises above ordinary interests in a “will-less” contemplation of objects that are “terrible” or opposed to the will—objects called “sublime.” The person thereby becomes “elevated precisely in this way above himself, his person, his willing,” indeed even “all willing.”⁵⁷ Likewise, the naturalist John Muir writes that “our own little journeys, away and back again, are only little more than tree-wavings—many of them not so much.”⁵⁸ Muir is suggesting that our ordinary endeavors are usually unimportant and inconsequential, when looked at from a distance or in the greater scheme of things. It is agreeable to be free of cares, and we are free from cares when (just for a moment) we feel their relative unimportance. The removal of this burden—a release—is pleasant.

But, one might object, isn't it downright frightening? Doesn't the feeling of the relative superfluity of our everyday concerns lead to the chilling idea of our utter insignificance, the notion that we are just “dust in the wind?” Kant seems to have been aware of this risk. This leads to source 3.

Perhaps drawing from Stoic sources such as Seneca, Kant quickly added that the awareness of our capacity to set and act on goals (specifically moral ones) ultimately redeems us. Practical reason saves us from what existentialists later called nihilistic despair. Kant's claim that the sublime involves a recognition of the powers of reason—a claim emphasized in standard interpretations of Kant—can be understood in terms of this third source of the pleasure. It is a kind of homecoming for reason. According to Kant, such recognition of reason counts as an acknowledgment of the rational being's place in the teleological order of reason.

When it comes to source 3, Schopenhauer diverges from Kant and claims that our contemplation (“pure knowing”) of the world brings us peace. “There arises the immediate consciousness that all these worlds exists only in our representation, only as modifications of the eternal subject of pure knowing” and we see that we are the “necessary, conditional supporter of all worlds and of all periods of time.”⁵⁹

The idea of “oneness” or unity with the world in source 3 may have too much idealistic baggage for some readers. But Schopenhauer (who cites the *Upanishads*) does not back down. “All this . . . shows itself as a consciousness, merely felt, that in some sense or other (made clear by philosophy) we are one with the world, and are therefore not oppressed but exalted by its immensity.” If we are not willing to accept Schopenhauer's metaphysics and epistemology, we might be consoled by the fact that source 3 does not necessarily require these commitments. The source of the pleasure could be understood, more modestly, as the feeling of the dissolving of boundaries in general, or the feeling of unity or oneness, including harmony with morality and finding one's moral calling. Such sentiment appears to be felt during the “overview effect” reported by astronauts who observe our planet, the “pale blue dot” (as Carl Sagan calls it), from outer space.⁶⁰ According to one study,⁶¹ viewing the earth from space has often prompted astronauts to report overwhelming emotion (aesthetic awe) and feelings of identification with humankind and the planet as a whole. They report intense satisfaction or contentment.⁶²

The “world” with which one is in harmony can be understood in a metaphysically modest way, that is, in terms of environments, surroundings, or the earth. We can discern a relatively modest version of the “natural order” in Rousseau's writings. Or, one can locate a version of the notion in the explicitly post-metaphysical writings of Martin Heidegger, especially the later Heidegger. Drawing on the notion of “metaphysical imagination” inspired by Ronald Hepburn, Brady argues that in the sublime we realize we are part of nature and see ourselves as part of that greater whole, or something much greater than ourselves. “The sublime involves an appreciation of natural qualities that precipitate a new, felt awareness of our place in the world.”⁶³

But perhaps one might object not so much to the notion of a world *per se*, but more specifically, to teleology. One might object that source 3 presupposes a teleology that does not exist, and that there is no allotted, fixed place for human beings in the natural order. Joseph Margolis, a pragmatist, conveniently illustrates that it is possible to affirm source 3 while not accepting a fixed, unchanging (objective) teleology. Discussing landscape and landscape art, he writes, "landscape is a sign of our participating in a society's life, belonging, being at home. Hence, the beautiful and the sublime are perfectly valid." But he adds "but their validity . . . is settled internally, so to say, prior to an objective critique."⁶⁴ Those skeptical of a given or fixed teleology may be right. But thankfully, it might not matter much. The source of the pleasure only needs to appeal to the idea that we *think* there is a natural place for us. It does not require there actually to be one above and beyond the one we constitute and create. This leaves open the possibility that such pleasure, unless it is grounded in a meaning that is constituted in the way Margolis suggests, is illusory. And, even if it is illusory, it would not be the first time that a type of pleasure was based on an illusion.

Source 4 requires certain conditions of the viewer, namely, safety and security. The pleasure in the sublime is rooted in our instincts to self-preservation and is related to our natural capacity for fear. We are not so frightened that we no longer feel aesthetic awe, of course—as many theorists (including Kant) have noted.⁶⁵ We are drawn to the vast and powerful (contra-purposive) objects precisely because they elicit the noted stimulating effects. Seen from a biological perspective, the experience is pleasant since the object engages our self-preservation instincts, as Burke noticed. In Kant's terms, the pleasure in the sublime is generated "by the feeling of a momentary inhibition of the vital powers and the immediately following and all the more powerful outpouring of them."⁶⁶ In more contemporary words, the experience involves the release of certain neurotransmitters (e.g., norepinephrine) and is associated with bodily changes (e.g., increased heart rate, higher glucose levels, muscle readiness). John Onians writes, "Several of these reactions . . . make us feel more alert and engaged and so make us feel good. This is why the experience of the sublime may be one we seek and, when we obtain it, that we see to prolong."⁶⁷

According to source 5, the subject "participates" in (to use a Platonic term) or "sympathizes" with (to use an eighteenth-century one) the object or its admirable qualities. For Wordsworth, one puts oneself in a position to share in the object's power or vastness.⁶⁸ As Mendelssohn puts it, "The magnitude of the object affords us gratification."⁶⁹ In another essay, he claims, "The *magnitude* captures our attention, and since it is the magnitude of a perfection, the soul enjoys latching on to this object." The pleasure in the sublime comes from sharing in the "perfections" of the object, such as its magnitude or power. In so doing, we become part of something larger or grander than ourselves. Carritt identifies "positive feelings of union with the object" in A.C. Bradley's account of the sublime, and Carritt himself claims that in the case of a storm or hurricane we "sympathise with the sublime object."⁷⁰ I would add that the pleasures of the sublime generated by one's being a part of and belonging to a large, enthusiastic, non-riotous crowd (in which one at the same time feels a loss of self) can be understood in terms of participation along these lines.

All five explanations of the source of the pleasure have something to offer, but I think the first one (expansion of imagination) is the most fundamental and far-reaching. It also has deep roots in the history of aesthetics.⁷¹

To see that it is the most far-reaching, let us ask: What exactly are we reflecting on? There are several answers, and listing them reveals that the imagination actively contributes to the other sources of pleasure. We may reflect on, or imagine, our freedom from everyday concerns, as in source 2. Or, we may imaginatively reflect on our unity with nature or our sense of purpose, as in source 3. The imagination is active in source 4, too. As Kant suggests, the imagination is expanded when we have the thought that even if an overpowering force of nature could destroy us, we can nonetheless view even life itself as trivial. "Thus nature is here called sublime merely because it raises the imagination to the point of presenting those cases in which the mind can make palpable to itself the sublimity of its own vocation even over nature." "The astonishment bordering on

The Sublime Reader

terror. . . etc., is, in view of the safety in which he knows himself to be, not actual fear, but only an attempt to involve ourselves in it by means of the imagination, in order to feel the power of that very faculty.⁷² Finally, we can imaginatively participate in the object's vastness or power, as in source 5. We imagine what it is like to be that many light years away, or that many billions of years old: we feel a boost in the process. The imagination, in other words, seems to be active in the other sources of the pleasure, and deserves its place at the top of the list. In addition to the foregoing philosophical reasons, there seems to be some (initial and revisable) empirical evidence for the view that the imagination plays a crucial role in the sublime.⁷³

I close this section with a passage that synthesizes many of my foregoing points. In his *Course of Lectures*, Priestley ties together the aforementioned themes of novelty, greatness, and imaginative activity:

Great objects please us for the same reason that *new* objects do, *viz.*, by the exercise they give to our faculties. The mind, as was observed before, conforming and adapting itself to the objects to which its attention is engaged, must, as it were, enlarge itself, to conceive a great object. This requires a considerable effort of the imagination, which is also attended with a pleasing, though perhaps not a distinct and explicit consciousness of the strength and extent of our powers.⁷⁴

Priestley explains the source of the pleasure, giving a version of the “exercise” theory, but he does much more than this. He lists properties such as greatness that render an object disposed to elicit sublimity. He emphasizes the effort and expansion of the imagination. He even conjectures that one need not be reflexively conscious of the source of the pleasure while feeling it (“not a distinct and explicit consciousness”). This conjecture seems quite plausible, and in making it, Priestley employs the tools of philosophical analysis to defend a claim which experimental studies of the sublime (or awe) appear to confirm.

Concluding remarks

Conceiving of the sublime in the foregoing way allows theorists and researchers to sort through, filter out, or simplify the numerous—and often conflicting—theories of the “sublime” (sometimes preceded by an adjective such as “pre-oedipal,” “oedipal,” “urban,” “melancholic,” “performative,” “angelic,” “botanical,” even “excremental”). Many of these accounts are ultimately not about the sublime at all, at least not in any agreed upon and serviceable sense.

At the beginning of this essay, I asserted that a philosophical theory of the sublime should be compatible, if possible, with scientific findings. (I certainly hope this assumption is not read as being “reductionistic”—reductionism and related concepts such as eliminativism deserve proper discussion of their own, and I have not taken a position on such issues here.) In addition, I hope that the foregoing outline or sketch paves the way not only for a coherent theory of the sublime, but also one that is potentially conducive to empirical and experimental studies, if feasible and useful. One does not have to be a proponent of positivism, scientism, eliminativism, or reductionism to recognize this as an additional benefit. In a similar vein, Konečni holds that it is advantageous for the sublime to be conceptualized so as to become amenable to experimental manipulation and measurement of its effects, if possible.⁷⁵ Anjan Chatterjee, a neuroscientist, writes: “What do neuroscientists make of notions such as ‘the sublime’? The sublime is an emotional experience mentioned frequently in aesthetics . . . but one that has, so far, had little traction in affective neuroscience.”⁷⁶ This is an exciting time for empirical research on the sublime. It is also an exciting time for theorists.

Not only might the sublime be fruitfully theorized, but some of this account's main claims or implications about the sublime as an object with certain general qualities could even be tested, or at least used in experimental

settings. The following themes await further exploration: the feeling of community and belongingness during the experience; the sense of connection to humanity and to nature; attitudes toward the universe; the relation between the positive experience in the sublime and prosocial effects; empathy and the sublime; perceptions of space and time; the sublime's distinctness from other emotions and feelings such as beauty, fear, and wonder; the frequency and lasting impact (or not) of the experience; the demographics, habits, and dispositions of those who are inclined (or not) to feel the sublime; the effects of being with others (including crowds) rather than being isolated; moral constraints on the experience; the (negative-positive) valence of the feeling and phenomenology; physiological responses; the degree of self-awareness and reflexivity in the experience; feelings of significance or insignificance and smallness; the roles played by imagination and perception; the ideal distance from the perceived stimulus (when the latter is a physical object); and the properties or qualities of the elicitors of the sublime.

Since I suggested in this volume's Preface and Introduction that some feminist theorists have been critical of the sublime, let me say a brief word about how my proposal might be relevant here. Feminist approaches have understandably tended to be wary of the sublime. For instance, Judy Lochhead warns against letting "such terms as the sublime, the ineffable, the unrepresentable . . . mask sedimented gender binaries that will keep the feminine in the ground."⁷⁷ However, if the sublime is no longer conceived as a response to the ineffable or unrepresentable, then such criticisms might be avoided. Moreover, it is worth pointing out that several seventeenth- and eighteenth-century women authors contributed to theories of the sublime along the lines I have proposed. For instance, Anna Aikin gave a version of the exercise theory and explained the pleasure in sublime-like emotions in terms of an increased imaginative activity.

If feeling the sublime is a basic and shared human experience, even one that might contribute to human happiness and flourishing, it would be desirable to come up with an adequate theory of it. But perhaps there is something at stake beyond the satisfaction of our desire to understand ourselves and our surroundings, or to promote human wellbeing. Although I have not elaborated on this here, a viable theory could perhaps also be used in arguments supporting the conservation and protection of the natural environment.⁷⁸ A coherent theory could put us in better position to justify the recognition, preservation, and restoration of those cultural artifacts and natural wonders that induce sublime experiences.

Of course, I do not pretend to have answered all, nor even most of the pressing, theoretical questions surrounding the sublime, but I do hope to have addressed at least three of the main conceptual issues (concerning the object, structure, and pleasure), thereby outlining a coherent and viable proposal.⁷⁹

Questions

1. Summarize and assess the author's explanation of the kinds of objects that are disposed to elicit the sublime, the phenomenology and shareability of the experience, and the sources of the pleasures in the sublime.
2. Can you think of other sources of the pleasures in the sublime, in addition to the five sources proposed by the author? Explain. Assess whether he could respond that your proposed source could be subsumed under one of the sources he identifies.
3. In your view, what should be the relation between a theory of the sublime and empirical research? What counts as "scientism," and how, and to what extent, should it be avoided?
4. Do you think a theory of the sublime should be about the "ineffable" and unrepresentable? Should we be willing to accept that there are paradoxes raised by such a theory? Should we try to resolve them? Explain the advantages and disadvantages of both sides of this issue.

The Sublime Reader

5. Do you think the experience of the sublime is pan-cultural, culturally situated, or both? Can it be both? Explain.
6. Evaluate the following claim (which the author makes in footnote 30): “When we learn the age of an ancient redwood, that information often plays a role in shaping our aesthetic experience and brings about what I have called an experience of adherent sublimity.” How does knowledge—say, awareness of an object’s background, context, history, or role—shape your experiences of the sublime?

Further reading

- Cochrane, Tom. “The Emotional Experience of the Sublime.” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 42, no. 2 (2012): 125–48.
- Deligiorgi, Katerina. “The Pleasures of Contra-purposiveness: Kant, the Sublime, and Being Human.” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 72, no. 1 (2014): 25–35.
- Forsey, Jane, Joseph Margolis, Rachel Zuckert, Tom Hanauer, Robert R. Clewis, Sandra Shapshay, and Jennifer A. McMahon. *The Possibility of the Sublime: Aesthetic Exchanges*, ed. Lars Aagaard-Mogensen. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017. [This volume contains Forsey’s 2007 article, six essays commenting on it, and Forsey’s replies.]
- Hanauer, Tom. “Sublimity and the Ends of Reason: Questions for Deligiorgi.” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 74, no. 2 (2016): 195–99.
- Yaden, David B., Jonathan Haidt, Ralph W. Hood, David Vago, and Andrew Newberg. “The Varieties of Self-Transcendent Experience.” *Review of General Psychology* 21, no. 2 (2017): 143–60.

Notes

24. Kant, *The Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 129 [Academy Edition vol. 5:245].
25. Burke, *Enquiry*, Part I, Chapter 7, 59.
26. In Kant and Schopenhauer's versions of thick sublime response, these reflections involve a felt recognition of human *rational and moral freedom* that is revealed precisely in the face of vast or powerful natural environments or works of art which threaten the subject either existentially or psychologically, with annihilation or with complete insignificance. Given the transcendental-idealist background for both of these philosophers, one cannot *know* that one is free because freedom belongs to the "supersensible substrate" of nature, or more specifically, to the intelligible character. But insofar as sublime experiences afford a felt recognition (albeit not genuine knowledge) of freedom they are very important systemically.
27. Robert R. Clewis, "What's the Big Idea?: On Emily Brady's Sublime," *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 50, no. 2 (2016): 104–18.
28. Clewis, "On Emily Brady's Sublime," 112.
29. *Ibid.*, 113.
30. Carroll, "On Being Moved by Nature," 170.
31. It is difficult to give a good account of what constitutes an aesthetic experience, but Nanay has recently utilized work in the philosophy of perception to illuminate some key features of these experiences, and I am following him here: "in the case of some paradigmatic instances of aesthetic experience, we attend in a distributed and at the same time focused manner: our attention is focused on one perceptual object, but it is distributed among a large number of the object's properties. This way of attending contrasts sharply with the most standard way of exercising our attention (which would be focusing on a limited set of properties of one or more perceptual objects). In other words, this way of attending is special and I argue that it is a central feature of some paradigmatic cases of aesthetic experience." Nanay, *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception*, 13.
32. Paul Crowther, *The Kantian Sublime: From Morality to Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 162.
33. Crowther, *The Kantian Sublime*, 161.

Chapter 37

1. Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt, "Approaching Awe, a Moral, Spiritual, and Aesthetic Emotion," *Cognition & Emotion* 17, no. 2 (2003): 297–314, 307–08.
2. Vladimir Konečni makes this point in his contribution to the present volume. I briefly discuss the nature of the "aesthetic" in the Introduction to this volume.
3. For instance, in the Keltner and Haidt paper cited in the first footnote above, there is little attention to the possibility that awe might raise *conceptual* questions about its coherence, nature, causes, and evolutionary purposes.
4. Werner Herzog, "On the Absolute, the Sublime, and Ecstatic Truth," *Arion* 17, no. 3 (2010): 1–12, 2 (original ellipsis). Herzog writes that Kant's "explanations concerning the sublime are so very abstract that they have always remained alien to me in my practical work . . . Longinus . . . is much closer to my heart, because he always speaks in practical terms and uses examples" (9). After providing commentary on Longinus, he pulls back: "But I don't want to lose myself in Longinus, whom I always think of as a good friend. I stand before you as someone who works with film" (11).
5. Jane Forsey, "Is a Theory of the Sublime Possible?" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (2007) 65, no. 4: 381–89, 381; reprinted in the present volume. What is questioned (by Forsey) is neither the existence of experiences called "sublime" nor the veracity of the claim that people report such experiences, but that such reports can be theorized about in a coherent and consistent manner. (Forsey also questions whether people can communicate the experience, but in my view this is not the most fundamental point raised by her analysis.)
6. Andrew Chignell and Matthew C. Halteman, "Religion and the Sublime," in *The Sublime: From Antiquity to Present*, ed. Timothy Costelloe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 183–202, 202.

7. E. F. Carritt, "The Sublime," *Mind* 19, no. 75 (1910): 356–72, 357. Although Carritt's analysis is valuable, I do not share his assumption that we should view a theory of the sublime as an attempt to specify the criteria that are sufficient and necessary for membership in a class ("sublime").
8. This line eventually raises questions concerning aesthetic properties and dispositional properties, but such complexities are beyond the scope of this paper. My account is not necessarily committed to what is called "realism" in the anti-realism–realism debate about aesthetic properties.
9. Guy Sircello, "How is a Theory of the Sublime Possible?" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51, no. 4 (1993): 541–50.
10. Forsey, "Is a Theory of the Sublime Possible?" 383.
11. The problem can be seen in the following *modus ponens*. The object is transcendent and inaccessible. If the object is transcendent and inaccessible, it is not possible to comprehend and provide an adequate theory of it. Thus, it is not possible to comprehend and provide an adequate theory of the object.
12. Insufficient attention to the emotional and affective aspects of the experience likewise diminishes the value of some recent theories of the "technological" or "postmodern" sublime, inspired by the work of David Nye and Frederic Jameson. For example, Rowan Wilken, "'Unthinkable Complexity': The Internet and the Mathematical Sublime," *The Sublime Today: Contemporary Readings in the Aesthetic*, ed. G. B. Pierce (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 191–212.
13. See Sandra Shapshay's contribution to the present volume.
14. The history of aesthetics, too, is replete with such accounts. Anna Aikin, Joseph Addison, Joseph Priestley, Thomas Reid, Moses Mendelssohn, and Immanuel Kant all gave versions of it.
15. Other related cognitive faculties, such as memory, may also be activated and stimulated, though I cannot develop this point here. Nor can I investigate the relationship between perception and imagination.
16. Alan Richardson's "neural" or "corporeal" sublime appears to be a quasi-epistemological account, since it is dependent on the notion of exposing perceptual illusions, hence on representing a kind of cognitive failure. However, it is debatable whether these tricks on the mind produce the *intense affective feeling* and emotional experience associated with the sublime conceived as an aesthetic experience. Alan Richardson, *The Neural Sublime: Cognitive Theories and Romantic Texts* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).
17. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, II.i.viii, "Of Beauty and Deformity." References to the *A Treatise of Human Nature* are to the Book, Part, and Section. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).
18. See Clewis, "A Theory of the Sublime Is Possible," 48, for quotations and references. While these examples of sublime discourse are expressions of the poet's sublime experience, they need not necessarily *evoke* the sublime. The latter is not always the poet's aim.
19. Even if the latter phrase avoided self-contradiction, in the end it would still raise the question of the metaphysical status of the "infinite."
20. The notion of an "object" is understood broadly. The class of sublime elicitors in principle includes great thoughts, ideas and concepts, events, artifacts of technology (e.g., the internet), not just natural objects like canyons, ravines, and ecosystems. It includes works of art—music, poetry, architecture, and so on. In the present discussion, however, I focus on non-mental, perceived objects since they are more concrete and readily accessible.
21. Stephen Pepper, *Aesthetic Quality: A Contextualist Theory of Beauty* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1970) 61. As Pepper notes, novelty is not the same as uniqueness. He distinguishes "intrusive" (cultivated) novelty—which an artist might elicit through technique and skill—from "naïve" (child-like) novelty, which arises before we acquire habits. The former is naturally of more interest to aesthetics.
22. In his 1712 essays on the pleasures of the imagination, Addison suggested that the encounter with what is perceived to be new or uncommon plays a significant role in generating the emotional response that we would generally call the sublime.
23. Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla, *The Sublime: A Reader in Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 119.

Notes

24. Note that, contrary to widespread interpretations of the sublime inspired by Kant, Wordsworth refers to these unfamiliar shapes as huge and mighty *forms*. William Wordsworth, *The Portable Romantic Poets*, ed. W. H. Auden and N. H. Pearson (New York: Penguin, 1978), 207.
25. William Wordsworth, “The Sublime and the Beautiful,” in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, vol. 2, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Symser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 349; reprinted in the present volume. Thanks to Emily Brady for clarifying this point.
26. Quoted in Ashfield and de Bolla, *The Sublime*, 119; original emphasis.
27. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), §26, 5:252. References to Kant are to this translation, by section (§) and volume and page number in the Academy Edition of Kant’s collected works.
28. Quoted from Kin-yuen Wong, “Negative-Positive Dialectic in the Chinese Sublime,” *The Chinese Text: Studies in Comparative Literature* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1986), 119–58, 143. See also Guo Xi’s contribution to the present volume.
29. Emily Brady, “The Environmental Sublime,” in *The Sublime: From Antiquity to the Present*, ed. Timothy Costelloe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 171–82, 182; reprinted in the present volume.
30. Shapshay’s thin/thick distinction should not be confused with a related one, my distinction between free and conceptual (adherent) sublimity. The latter is presented in Robert R. Clewis, “What’s the Big Idea? On Emily Brady’s Sublime,” *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 50, no. 2 (2016): 104–18, 111–13; and Robert R. Clewis, *The Kantian Sublime and the Revelation of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 96–108. For instance, when we learn the age of an ancient redwood, that information often plays a role in shaping our aesthetic experience and brings about what I have called an experience of adherent sublimity.
31. Both reflexivity in the sublime and empirical studies are discussed in Clewis, “A Theory of the Sublime Is Possible,” 52–54. See Tomohiro Ishizu and Semir Zeki, “A Neurobiological Enquiry into the Origins of Our Experience of the Sublime and Beautiful,” *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 8 (2014), article 891: 1–10; Michelle Shiota, Dacher Keltner, and Amanda Mossman, “The Nature of Awe: Elicitors, Appraisals, and Effects on Self-Concept,” *Cognition and Emotion* 21, no. 5 (2007): 944–63. The studies’ methods of determining *which* objects are considered sublime (rather than beautiful or ordinary) and of classifying the participants’ feelings are explained in the “methods” sections of the papers. Studies by Ishizu and Zeki, and Shiota, et al., indicate that when experiencers and observers attest that they are experiencing sublimity or aesthetic awe, they report a diminishment of self-awareness (though not necessarily *vice versa*). Moreover, when subjects are reporting that they are experiencing the sublime, the areas associated with the imagination are stimulated and activated. It appears that the perceiver’s imagination is being stretched by the engagement with a vast/powerful object, and that the areas associated with self-awareness are *deactivated*. The latter (deactivation) is in agreement with philosophical theories like Priestley’s that downplay self-awareness in the sublime.
32. Criticizing Keltner and Haidt’s model, Sundararajan emphasizes the elements of self-reflexivity in the experience of awe (she mentions neither the sublime nor sublimity). Louise Sundararajan, “Religious Awe: Potential Contributions of Negative Theology to Psychology, ‘Positive’ or Otherwise,” *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology* 22, no. 2 (2002): 174–97. It would be useful, however, to distinguish self-diminishment and self-admiration in theories of awe (and sublimity), as well as to explore the extent to which a feeling of self-diminishment or smaller self is a kind of self-reflexivity (i.e., whether it must involve explicit attention to one’s own affective response).
33. I here agree with Tom Hanauer, “Pleasure and Transcendence: Two Paradoxes of Sublimity,” in *The Possibility of the Sublime: Aesthetic Exchanges*, ed. Lars Aagaard-Mogensen, 29–43 (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 39 n. 28. This issue raises fundamental questions about the nature of aesthetics that cannot be pursued here.
34. In “Religion and the Sublime,” Chignell and Haltman explain what they mean by “epiphany.”
35. See her contribution to the present volume.
36. Melanie Rudd, Kathleen Vohs, and Jennifer Aaker, “Awe Expands People’s Perception of Time, Alters Decision Making, and Enhances Well-being,” *Psychological Science* 23, no. 10 (2012): 1130–36. See also Robert R. Clewis, David B. Yaden, and Alice Chirico, “Awe and Sublimity: A Belonging-Rising-Imagining Model,” unpublished manuscript.
37. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, §27, 5:259.

38. See Burke's contribution to the present volume, Part II, Section I, "Of the Passion Caused by the Sublime."
39. Some empirical studies seem to suggest that the feeling of the sublime is linked to prosocial behavior. Yaden, Haidt, et al. "The Varieties of Self-Transcendent Experience," 143–60. See also Konečni's contribution to the present volume. The connection between a feeling of connectedness in the sublime and prosocial behavior deserves more attention.
40. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, §24, 5:247. In light of Kant's intersubjective account, well known to Forsey, I remain puzzled by her remark, "I have said nothing so far about an *intersubjective* account of the sublime because there is almost no mention in the literature of this experience being culturally shared or even communicable. The sublime has been described as a wholly personal, even intimate experience without reference to others." Forsey, "Is a Theory of the Sublime Possible?" 387 (original emphasis).
41. Clewis, *The Kantian Sublime*, 15. I give an updated reading in Robert R. Clewis, "The Place of the Sublime in Kant's Project," *Studi kantiani* 28 (2015): 63–82.
42. Richard Rorty, "Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity," in *Habermas and Modernity*, ed. Richard J. Bernstein (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 161–75, 174.
43. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *In Praise of Athletic Beauty* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2006), 206.
44. Gumbrecht, *Athletic Beauty*, 228–29, and 48, respectively.
45. Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. Carol Stewart (London: Phoenix, 2000), 20.
46. In his contribution to the present volume, Konečni adopts the pan-cultural view.
47. James Elkins, "Against the Sublime," in *Beyond the Finite: The Sublime in Art and Science*, ed. Roald Hoffmann and Iain Boyd Whyte (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 75–90; see esp. 75, 87–88.
48. Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963).
49. Richard Steele and Joseph Addison, *Selections from The Tatler and The Spectator*, ed. Robert J. Allen (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1970), 401.
50. See Burke's contribution to this volume, Part II, Section I, "Of the Passion Caused by the Sublime."
51. Moses Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. Daniel O. Dahlstrom (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 195; reprinted in the present volume.
52. Brady, "The Environmental Sublime," 177.
53. Emily Brady, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 201.
54. One might think that the emphasis on the pleasures of the imagination, and on vitality and vivifying mental activity, makes the sublime a form of beauty. But as noted in the previous section, the structure of the sublime contains a negative moment not readily found in beauty. Sublimity is a response to contra-purposive qualities perceived in the object.
55. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, §25, 5:249.
56. *Ibid.*, §28, 5:262.
57. Arthur Schopenhauer, *World as Will and Representation*, translated by E. F. J. Payne (Dover, 1969), 2 vols., vol. 1, 201; reprinted in the present volume.
58. John Muir, *The Mountains of California* (New York: The Century Co., 1907 [1894]), ch. 10, 256.
59. Schopenhauer, *World as Will and Representation*, 205 (for this and the following quote).
60. Carl Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space* (New York: Random House, 1994), 6–7. Sagan moves from describing the earth as a "very small stage in a vast cosmic arena" and "a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark" to a sense of responsibility "to deal more kindly with one another" and concern for our "home."
61. David Yaden, Jonathan Iwry, et al., "The Overview Effect: Awe and Self-Transcendent Experience in Space Flight," *Psychology of Consciousness: Theory, Research, and Practice* 3, no. 1 (2016):1–11.
62. I leave aside the differences between pleasure, contentment, satisfaction, and enjoyment.
63. Brady, "The Environmental Sublime," 176–77.

Notes

64. Joseph Margolis, "The Art of Landscape Reconceived," *International Yearbook of Aesthetics*, vol. 17 (Sassari: Edizione Edes, 2013), ed. Raffaele Milani and Jale Erzen, 21–31, 27.
65. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, §28, 5:262.
66. *Ibid.*, §23, 5:245.
67. John Onians, "Neuroscience and the Sublime in Art and Science," in *Beyond the Finite: The Sublime in Art and Science*, 91–105, 97. For Onians' neurobiological explanations of the source of the pleasure which draw from the work of Zeki, see 97–100.
68. See Wordsworth's contribution to the present volume.
69. Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, "Rhapsody," 145. The following quote is from "On the Sublime and Naive," 195; reprinted in the present volume.
70. Carritt, "The Sublime," 365, 363.
71. Several theories from the history of aesthetic theory and philosophy develop this account of the sublime as a kind of mental (imaginative) stretching, filling, or swelling in response to a powerful or massive object. For passages from Longinus, Addison, Hume, Baillie, Burke, Home (Kames), Duff, Reid, Priestley, Kant, and Lyotard, see Clewis, "A Theory of the Sublime Is Possible," 60–63. In her contribution to the present volume, Anna Aikin also offers a version of the exercise or "expansion of the imagination" theory.
72. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, §28, 5:262; and "General remark on the exposition of aesthetic reflective judgments," 5:269.
73. The inferior frontal gyrus, which is activated in the sublime, "has also been found to be active when subjects imagine future events [...] hence emphasizing the *importance of the imagination* in neural terms, just as it has been emphasized in hypothetical terms in past discussions of the sublime" (Ishizu and Zeki, "A Neurobiological Enquiry," 8; emphasis added). See also Onians, "Neuroscience and the Sublime in Art and Science," 98–99, which emphasizes the role of the imagination in the sublime. For empirical evidence from psychology, see Clewis, Yaden, and Chirico, "Awe and Sublimity: A Belonging-Rising-Imagining Model," unpublished manuscript.
74. Joseph Priestley, in Ashfield and de Bolla, *The Sublime*, 119.
75. Vladimir Konečni, "Aesthetic Trinity Theory and the Sublime," *Philosophy Today* 55, no. 1 (2011): 64–73, 64. Under a family of terms such as "awe," "aesthetic awe," "elevation," and "peak aesthetic experiences," the sublime has been investigated by several independent psychological papers by Jonathan Haidt, Dacher Keltner, Vladimir Konečni, Michelle Shiota, and David Yaden, among many others. Over the last thirty years there has been a considerable amount of empirical work of sublime or quasi-sublime responses elicited by art, but most of these studies focused on music rather than visual stimuli or linguistic phenomena (e.g., narratives, poetry). I take the existence of these studies to be another reason to frame a philosophical theory so as to include *works of art* in the class of possible stimuli of the sublime. On music's stirring effects, see the studies listed by Konečni (in "Aesthetic Trinity Theory" and his contribution to this volume) and also Jeanette Bicknell, *Why Music Moves Us* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
76. Anjan Chatterjee, "Neuroaesthetics: A Coming of Age Story," *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* 23, no. 10 (2010): 53–62, 59.
77. Judy Lochhead, "The Sublime, the Ineffable, and Other Dangerous Aesthetics," *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 12, no. 1 (2008): 63–74, 72.
78. See the contribution by Emily Brady in the present volume.
79. The author is grateful to many individuals for comments and/or discussion, including but not limited to: Emily Brady, Alice Chirico, Elanna Dructor, Abigail Friel, Norbert Gratzl, Tom Hanauer, Rebecca Gullan, Vladimir Konečni, Cornelia Kroiss, J. Colin McQuillan, Patrick Messina, Lara Ostaric, Amanda Pirrone, Amanda Wortham, and David B. Yaden.

Chapter 38

1. Recent extended work on the sublime in philosophy includes Paul Crowther, *The Kantian Sublime: From Morality to Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989); Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla, eds., *The Sublime: A Reader in*